
Crime and Human Nature is a remarkable book which resurrects Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, William Sheldon and other fallen stars of criminology and invests them with a new respectability. Yes, Wilson and Herrnstein assert, the evidence is in, and mesomorphs are constitutionally predisposed to crime. As a third generation mesomorph, your reviewer feels it proper that he declare an interest in this matter.

Criminology has always been something of a conspiracy against mesomorphs, in Australia no less than elsewhere. Your reviewer laboured for years at the Australian Institute of Criminology under the yoke of the ectomorph Biles and the endomorph Clifford. What a relief it was to move to ANU where mesomorphs are treated with understanding and tolerance. If, and I say if, mesomorphs are more criminal, it is only because of the labelling they suffer at the hands of criminologists, the degradation ceremonies of having their torsos displayed in books such as that of Wilson and Herrnstein, naked apart from the tiny triangular cloth which covers their quaint genitalia.

The temptation in reviewing the work of genuine conservatives like Wilson and Herrnstein is to continue in a manner not very different from the above paragraph where barely credible alternative sociological explanations are posited for barely credible constitutional and individualist accounts from the book. It is a temptation I shall resist, because this book is the most comprehensive assault yet in a battle to shift the intellectual balance of power in criminology.

The Sun Sets on Sociology

Prior to World War II, when the Gluecks were in their heyday, psychology was the dominant discipline within criminology. Post-war, with accumulating evidence of the failure of psychology to deliver the goods through rehabilitation, the psychologists were pretty much routed by the sociologists led most conspicuously by Sutherland and Sellin. By the end of the 60s, strain or opportunity theorists (Merton, Cloward and Ohlin, Albert Cohen), cultural deviance descendants of Sellin such as Wolfgang, and differential association disciples of Sutherland such as Cressy, were the intellectual leaders of criminology, who were being joined by a new generation of labelling theorists. Even today, criminology remains the only area of public policy where sociology is the most influential discipline. This never has been true in Australia and New Zealand where law has consistently provided most of the influential intellects. Internationally, however, most of the perceived advances in our understanding of crime come from sociology.

Yet sociology in the 1980s is generally a discipline in decline. This reality is compounded by three tendencies within criminology which could easily make Wilson and Herrnstein's book the watershed which usurps sociology with a new psychologism and a new biological determinism.

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The first tendency was the British assault on the primarily American sociology of the 60s under the auspices of the National Deviancy Conference. Taylor, Walton and Young’s (1973) *The New Criminology* was the most influential criminological work of the decade. During the 1970s, this critical theorizing lent enormous vitality to the sociology of deviance; the criminological action became even more focused in sociology departments. But by the 1980s, the radical deviancy theorists, having laid waste much of positivist sociological criminology, had tended to move on to other things, leaving precious little by way of an ongoing alternative tradition of research.

Secondly, the opportunity theorists of the 60s came to be seen as discredited by the failure of the American War on Poverty programmes, and similar successors. Even though the War on Poverty was not in fact about reducing poverty but was concerned with fostering equality of opportunity, sociological criminology was seen to have been discredited in the same way as had been the psychologists of rehabilitation.

Thirdly, positivist sociology came to be increasingly dominated by theories with a psychological bent — control theory (Hirschi, 1969), and ironically, differential association.

And so the stage is set for Wilson and Herrnstein to resurrect the Gluecks as the real heroes of the history of criminology.

The “Facts” about Crime

The book deals fairly systematically with what the authors see as the facts which are well established about crime. It is perhaps some tribute to criminology that criminologists as different as Wilson and Herrnstein and myself can at least agree on this much. Putting aside the sensitive issue of mesomorphy, yes the empirical research does show quite consistently that criminals are disproportionately male, 15-25 years of age, residents of large cities, residentially mobile, children of parents who were convicted criminals, associates of peers who engage in crime, young people who do poorly at school, of low IQ, heavy users of alcohol or heroin, weakly attached to their parents, and from families which lack both warmth and discipline.

We even agree that for most types of crime the poor and blacks (at least in the United States) disproportionately engage in crime.

Where we disagree is on what most of these “facts” mean. For Wilson and Herrnstein, these are facts about “human nature”, but for incorrigible sociologists such as myself, they tell us more about the way societies tend to be organized than about human nature. But more than that, while we can agree that the research does consistently support these “facts”, some of them can be accounted for by the systematic bias of criminological research in excluding white-collar crime. Initially, Wilson and Herrnstein seem to deny that white-collar crime is real crime by limiting their focus to “predatory crime”, which is never defined. We know that predatory crime includes murder, theft, robbery and incest and that it excludes price fixing and political corruption. The latter two types of offences are excluded because “in many countries these actions are not regarded as criminal at all” (p 24). I know of no country with a criminal law which does not prohibit political corruption. Perhaps Wilson and Herrnstein mean that while bribery is a criminal offence, in many countries bribery is not regarded as a serious offence. While there is some international variation in tolerance of bribery, as there is for all offences, Scott and Al-Thakeb’s (1977) study showed both bribery and price fixing to be strongly disapproved offences which a majority of citizens interviewed in the United States,
Britain, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Kuwait thought worthy of prison sentences longer on average than those recommended for motor vehicle theft and other types of larceny over $100. Contrary to Wilson and Herrnstein’s suggestion that price fixing is something criminal only by American standards, the United States sample in the Scott and Al-Thakeb study was relatively less punitive on the price fixing item. United States respondents rated it as deserving half the duration of imprisonment as rape, while for other countries the recommended punishment for price fixing was much the same as for rape.

Wilson and Herrnstein also make much of Graeme Newman’s (1976) classic study *Comparative Deviance* to sustain their narrow view of “predatory crimes”. How can they have failed to notice that Newman’s survey included questions on two white-collar offences: “A person puts government funds to his own use” (appropriation), and “A factory director continues to permit his factory to release poisonous gases into the air” (factory pollution). In India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy and Yugoslavia, respondents recommended longer prison terms for appropriation than for robbery (“A person forcefully takes $50 from another person who, as a result, is injured and has to be hospitalized”). The United States sample was again the exception here, with robbery being responded to slightly more punitively than appropriation. However, the average prison terms recommended for robbery were higher than those for factory pollution in all six countries. In part, this was due to considerable proportions of respondents recommending fines for factory pollution. Such responses were recorded as zeros for the averaging of recommended prison terms. Those respondents who did prefer imprisonment as the appropriate sanction recommended heavier average sentences for factory pollution than for robbery in five of the six countries. For the Indian and Iranian samples, factory pollution was rated as more “serious” than robbery.

In these and a great many other studies empirical criminology has demonstrated that Sutherland’s conventional wisdom about the lack of community resentment over white-collar crime is probably wrong (see Braithwaite, 1982 for a review). It was perhaps excusable for James Q Wilson in his 1975 book to justify the exclusion of a consideration of white-collar crime with: “it also reflects my conviction, which I believe is the conviction of most citizens, that precatory street crime is a far more serious matter than consumer fraud, antitrust violations . . . .” (Wilson, 1975: xx). Against the background of the research of the past decade on public attitudes to white-collar crime, we can only say that this may be the conviction of James Q Wilson, but it is not the conviction of “most citizens” in his country or ours.

If they had not arbitrarily excluded white-collar crimes from their concept of crime, it would have been much harder for the authors to conclude that low IQ and “impulsiveness” are causes of crime, for example. One of the annoying things about the book is that the authors do not maintain the integrity of their own definition. Thus, when it helps to establish the robustness of the association between race and crime, we are treated to the observation that for white-collar crime, “it is often forgotten that blacks are overrepresented among persons arrested for most of these offences to about the same degree that they are overrepresented among persons arrested for burglary, larceny, and auto theft” (p 462). This overrepresentation of blacks is accounted for by offences like welfare and credit card fraud which do not meet Sutherland’s definition of white-collar crime in any case.

Wilson and Herrnstein might contend that low IQ would be part human nature of crime even if white-collar crimes were included because the latter are comparatively few in number. Without rehearsing the entire white-collar crime literature here, it suggests that the reverse is true. To take just one example,
without counting state enforcement, the two leading federal occupational health and safety agencies in the United States (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Mine Safety and Health Administration) impose fines for approximately a quarter of a million offences by companies each year. Since most white-collar offences involve multiple offenders, we can see how including just one area of regulatory enforcement can have a marked influence on how we see the “human nature” of criminals. This juxtaposition becomes more dramatic with larger, if less serious, areas of white-collar crime such as tax offences or weights and measures offences.

There is of course absolutely nothing wrong with having a theory of a subset of crime. So long as a theory of rape is described as a theory of rape rather than as a general theory of crime, that’s fine. But this is Wilson and Herrnstein’s greatest failing; they present as a general explanation of crime something which could not be sustained if confronted with the totality of the patterns of crime in society rather than with a class-biased subset of criminal behaviour.

The Essential Theory

Wilson and Herrnstein are to be congratulated for being more explicit about their theory than are most criminologists. Chapter 2 succinctly sets out the theory, and some of the later chapters on substantive issues are beautifully linked back to this theory chapter. Others seem to bear almost no relationship to it.

The theory is essentially one of crime as choice. Crime is the choice made by offenders when it is perceived as having consequences preferable to doing something else. The larger the ratio of the net rewards of crime to the net rewards of non-crime, the more likely is crime. The net rewards of crime include a balancing of such things as the likely material gain from crime and social approval from peers against pangs of conscience or social disapproval of onlookers. The net rewards of non-crime brings in, for example, the remunerativeness of legitimate work as an alternative way of using one’s time to illegitimate work, and the desire to avoid future punishment.

The Wilson-Herrnstein theory is not one of simple calculative reward-cost because they see important roles for classical as well as instrumental (or operant) conditioning. Pangs of conscience are one of the most important punishers of crime; they basically accept Eysenck’s (1973) formulation that “conscience is a conditioned reflex”.

Here is where so much of the constitutional basis for crime comes in. “Persons deficient in conscience may turn out to be persons who for various reasons resist classical conditioning — they do not internalize rules as easily as do others” (p 49). This is one basis for IQ as a correlate of crime. People whose constitution makes them low on conditionability will be both slow to learn (low IQ) and slow to develop a classically conditioned conscience. Criminals are people with automatic nervous systems that respond more slowly and less vigorously to stimuli.

The rewards of crime are more immediate than the rewards of non-crime, it is argued, so persons who, even with a strong conscience, commit crime, may be persons who have difficulty imagining the future consequences of present action. Again, unintelligent people may have trouble with such imagining. Alternatively, highly impulsive persons may discount very heavily even those consequences they can foresee, and thus resist the instrumental conditioning that might lead them to choose non-crime over crime.
Gender

Wilson and Herrnstein painstakingly review the twin studies which lead them to conclude that criminality is in considerable measure inherited. The strong tendency in all societies for women to engage in less crime than men is also seen as having a biological basis. Greater male aggression precedes socialization practices which might explain it, though the authors concede that this conclusion does not explain massive gender differences in property offending. Here they turn to primary drives which flow into the definition of sex roles: “The underpinnings of the sexual divisions of labor in human society, from the family to commerce and industry to government, may not be rigidly fixed in the genes, but their roots go so deep into the biological substratum that beyond certain limits they are hard to change. At least until now, the gender gap in serious criminal behaviour has fallen outside the limits of change in the sexual divisions of labor” (p 125).

Their failure to come to grips with alternative accounts of the gender gap in offending deserves a book length response. Wilson and Herrnstein conclude, rightly I think, that the evidence suggests that “most women commit crimes for essentially the same reasons as most men.” (p 124). By this I believe they mean that the same control, opportunity, personality, and differential association theory variables that are correlated with male delinquency, have rather similar correlations with female delinquency (Jensen and Eve, 1976; Johnson, 1979; Hagan et al., 1979; Shover et al., 1979; Smith, 1979; Thornton; 1982; Canter, 1982; McCarthy and Hoge, 1984; Segrave and Hastad, 1985; Elliott et al., 1985). While women may commit crime for the same reasons as men, they are less exposed to those reasons. Weak attachment to parents and having friends who are delinquents are correlates of male and female delinquency, but girls are less likely than boys to be weakly attached to their parents, to be unconcerned about the respect of their parents, to have delinquent friends. Dependency on the family for approval may surely in turn be a part of the nurturant, socially integrative role into which girls are socialized from very early in life. It is logically flawed to assume that variables which are similarly correlated with male and female delinquency cannot explain gender differences.

The gender chapter is one where there is a failure to make a link with the general theory. It seems implied that females are not less criminal because they have higher IQs or lower impulsiveness. The suggestion seems to be that the gender gap is biologically determined but in a way which is unspecified and unrelated to the general theory.

Age

The book does a much better job of linking the association between age and offending to the theory in a way that is quite persuasive:

The rise in crime in childhood and early puberty accompanies the awakening of major sources of reinforcement for delinquent behaviour — money, sex, and peers who value independence of, or even defiance of, conventional morality. At the same time, the growing child is becoming literally, as well as psychologically, independent of powerful adults (parents etc) who might enforce conventional standards. Given energy, strength, potent new sources of drive but few legitimate means of consummation, a lack of economic and social skills, and peers who are similarly vigorous and frustrated, the adolescent years are destined to foster a rise in delinquency. (p 146)

Some account is also provided of young people as more impulsive.

Intelligence

Systematic blindness to competing views and data is at its worst with the analysis of intelligence. IQ is a consistent correlate of delinquency, and if we restrict the
debate to juvenile delinquency we largely avoid the problems posed by white-collar crime. But IQ differences between offenders and non-offenders are not so enormous, and Wilson and Herrnstein are unpersuasive in discounting that these differences may be largely accounted for by a greater propensity for unintelligent crooks to get caught or to admit their crimes to an interviewer, or by the propensity for intelligence tests to be biased against blacks, Hispanics, the poor, and others disproportionately represented among offenders.

The authors concede that the work of Hirschi and Hindelang (1977) shows IQ to explain virtually no variance in delinquency after controlling for poor school performance and attachment to the school, but then proceed to ignore what they have conceded. Beyond the Hirschi and Hindelang review, Menard and Morse (1984) have shown that the school-failure-delinquency association is itself almost totally explained by institutional practices such as negative social labelling.

In short, the evidence seems convincing that there is no causal link between IQ and delinquency. Rather, IQ is the basis for social selection into life experiences (rejection by the status system of the school, transmission of expectations of failure in the wider status system based on occupation) which increase the attractions of kids for such alternative sources of status as can be provided by delinquent peers who have been similarly rejected by the status system of the school. This interpretation fits the data much better than the diminished capacity of unintelligent people to see what is wrong with their offences, the IQ-impulsiveness, and IQ-conditionability interpretations in which the authors put greater store.

Wilson and Herrnstein do not totally dismiss the institutional practices of schools as causes of crime, they simply relegate them to lower importance than grander biological forces.

At times the authors draw a very long bow on IQ as an explanation for crime. After commenting upon the extraordinary differences in crime rates between the United States and Japan by reference, for example, to David Bayley's (1976) estimate that the risk of being robbed was 208 times greater in the United States than in Japan, the authors suggest that one explanation might be the (rather modest) tendency for Japanese to score higher on IQ tests than Americans. While rejecting, without explanation, the views of those who account for high Japanese IQ scores in terms of Japanese culture, Wilson and Herrnstein mercifully do concede that IQ would not “account fully for the large difference in crime rates between Japan and the United States” (p 456).

Cultural bias is also rejected as an explanation of lower black IQ in the United States. Low IQ is accepted as one of the possible partial explanations of higher black offending rates (along with other constitutional characteristics of blacks such as a greater propensity to mesomorphy), as also are explanations based on economic deprivation, deficiencies in black family life and a black subculture of violence. Treatment of the literature critical of the latter two traditions is thin.

Families, Schools, Communities

The chapter on families is stimulating, and the major conclusion was both integrated with the general theory and well supported by the evidence: families which prevent delinquency are neither permissive nor authoritarian, but authoritative — they provide discipline within a continuum of love.

If the rules are consistently enforced by parents whose approval the child values, then the experience of conforming to the rules will itself become pleasurable and the prospect of breaking them a source of anxiety. In this way, the impact of conscience is enhanced. (p 239)
A parallel finding is made on schools: schools which at the same time provide an environment of warmth and discipline will produce fewer delinquents. Apart from a discussion of streaming, there is no systematic discussion of the question whether, consistent with an association between school failure and delinquency, there may be less delinquency in schools which have less failure for poor performers designed into them.

The treatment of the impact of community characteristics on crime displays major gaps in the authors’ knowledge of this literature. The major conclusion is: “Most of the variation among individuals in criminality can be accounted for by personal traits, family socialization and (perhaps) school experiences”. The evidence that socio-economic status of the area in which individuals live makes a substantial contribution to their criminality net of their personal socio-economic status, much of the evidence on differential association and crime, and the evidence which is earlier discussed on the strong association between city size and crime and residential mobility and crime, is all seemingly ignored in this conclusion.

Everything you wanted to know about Crime but were afraid to ask

Wilson and Herrnstein struggle diligently with the contradictory and methodologically abysmal literature on labour markets and crime without ultimately being able to make head or tail of what it means for their theory. There is a chapter on the effect of television and the mass media on crime which somehow seemed out of place in the book, another on heroin and alcohol, another on historical trends in crime, and more. The book thus amounts to one of the most comprehensive treatments in existence on most of the major issues in criminology.

I have criticized the authors above for gaps in their knowledge and grasp of the literature, and there are many other places I could have done so. For example, it is incumbent on me to say that almost no account is taken of Australian and New Zealand criminological research, and there are many places where work done in our part of the world would have cast a different complexion on some conclusions. This is not an unfair criticism since the book sets out to establish the causes of crime in human natures that are invariate across cultures. Apart from references to the work of Cambridge criminologists, citations to the work of non-American scholars is almost non-existent. While these are not unfair criticisms, they are uncharitable, as one cannot but stand in awe of the vast literature Wilson and Herrnstein have covered.

Wherever one stands on their conclusions, these authors deserve our admiration for their courage in taking on such a sweeping challenge. This is a book which critics must take seriously. It is powerfully argued on so many fronts. By and large it devotes lengthy treatment to alternatives which see the explanation of crime as lying other than in human nature. It will be given credibility in many quarters because it reads as a balanced account.

In short, it is a book which should be read by anyone who is seriously interested in criminology. The authors are no doubt embarrassed by the claim on the dust cover that it is “the most significant social science study of the decade”. That it is not. But it may become one of the handful of genuinely influential contributions to criminology in the post-war period. Irrespective of where they are coming from, I doubt if any fair minded criminologist could read this book without changing to a slightly different perspective on some issue treated in the book.
What is to be done?

Wilson and Herrnstein are pessimistic about rehabilitation programmes as means of reducing crime because they cannot see how such programmes can change the ratio of the net rewards of crime to the net rewards of non-crime. This pessimism extends to behaviour modification programmes which are seen as capable of changing this ratio within closed institutions, but in difficulty in extending such effects to the wider world. This part of the book was impressive.

Not so impressive was the highly selective review of the literature, which led the authors to conclude that one way of changing the ratio of the net rewards of crime to the net rewards of non-crime is to increase the probability of imprisonment. A little cross-cultural perspective might have been applied to the failure of the United States' already extraordinary heavy use of imprisonment compared to other countries. Then with so many black mesomorphs running around, I suppose high crime rates are inevitable.

One conclusion I found provocative, and ultimately, to my surprise, perhaps persuasive, was on human history and crime:

Crime rates in the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century declined faster than can be explained by dropping birth rates, owing, we think, to intense efforts to inculcate an ethic of self-control ("Victorian morality"), and rose faster in the twentieth century than can be explained by higher birth rates, owing to a shift from that ethic to one emphasizing self-expression. Crime rates are unusually low in nations such as Japan where the norms inculcated by the family (and the general culture) emphasize obligations as much or more than rights and where families transmit a sense of collective responsibility for behaviour. (pp 526-7)

Thus, while Wilson and Herrnstein see a great deal of the variance in crime as explained by constitutional factors, they do see some hope for correcting the deficits with which criminals are born:

An impulsive person can be taught greater self-control, a low-IQ individual can engage in satisfying learning experiences, and extroverted mesomorphs with slow autonomic nervous system response rates may earn honest money in the National Football League instead of dishonest money robbing banks. (p 66)

Your reviewer must say that he found this the most offensive sentence in the book. Following Wilson and Herrnstein's advice, your reviewer is one mesomorph who did decide to struggle against his biological inheritance by helping pay his way through university working on weekends as a second-rate professional rugby league player. As a short mesomorph, my experience was, as always, that it was the endomorphs who were my greatest oppressors, until one day the boot of an endomorph came out of a scrum to end my programme of rehabilitation.

REFERENCES

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THE MESOMORPHS STRIKE BACK