



# A unified crime theory: The evolutionary taxonomy



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## ABSTRACT

Multiple scientific disciplines have weighed in with different viewpoints regarding the origins of criminal behavior among human beings. What is lacking, however, is a framework capable of uniting the theoretical viewpoints into a single overarching perspective. The current article offers such a framework. Drawing on a variety of influences, we argue that many types of crime can be understood in the evolutionary context of human life history. Along these lines, we present a framework capable of explaining different patterns of criminal offending both at the individual level as well as the macro-level. Although the current article offers only a starting point, the way forward in the study of crime should involve a multi-disciplinary, multilevel explanatory framework. The evolutionary taxonomy we propose represents a step in that direction.

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## 1. Introduction

Researchers working within several academic fields have devoted entire careers to investigating what causes humans to break the law (or more generally, to violate social norms; *Daly & Wilson, 1988; Ellis & Hoskin, 2015*). The result is a glut of empirical research coupled with numerous theoretical expositions addressing the origins of criminality. Some of the proximal level explanations have fared well in terms of organizing and explaining observations related to criminal behavior (*Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Moffitt, 1993*). At the heart of the issue, though, is not whether existing theory can account for some of the variance in criminal behavior; some theories clearly accomplish this. The more pressing issue is whether any of the current theories unify the numerous (and often disparate) factors that correlate with crime. Without a unified framework, substantive scientific progress remains elusive (*Cullen, 2011*).

## 2. The unification of criminological thought

Perhaps the key initiative of scientists is to organize consistent patterns of data from the natural world and to make them “fit together” (*Reynolds, 2006*). Physicists, for example, search for a unifying “theory of everything” capable of uniting quantum theory and Einstein’s work on relativity (*Greene, 2003*). What would a unifying theory of crime look like given the lack of reliable principles akin to universal laws when predicting human outcomes? Such a theory would likely be complex, but a unified framework might be approximated by integrating multiple disciplinary viewpoints and by the use of evolution by natural selection as an organizing force.

With the above points in mind, we can consider the features of a unified framework for explaining crime. Above all, it would be capable of organizing several well-established lines of research (*Ellis & Hoskin, 2015*). First, there are consistent race differences in aggressive, violent, impulsive and criminal behaviors (*Beaver, DeLisi, et al., 2013; Felson & Kreager, 2015; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Krohn, Gibson, & Thornberry, 2013*). A unified theory must account for these differences. Second, there are consistent sex differences across many measures of criminal behavior (*Campbell, 1999; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001*). Men cross-culturally display greater violence than women (*Campbell, 1999; Ellis & Hoskin, 2015; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Pinker, 2002; 2012; Wilson & Daly, 1985*). These differences are not disputed, yet researchers continue to debate whether, and the extent to which, biological and social processes are causal (*Pinker, 2002*). A unified theory must adequately explain the observed sex differences in crime.

Third, criminal behavior is age-graded (*Cullen, 2011; Ellis et al., 2012; Moffitt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993*). Delinquent and criminal behavior escalates around the time of puberty and then decelerates in the early to mid-20s (*Farrington, 1986; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003*). Fourth, a small proportion of the population develops temperament and conduct problems very early in development, perhaps even during the first year of life (*Moffitt, 1993; Tremblay, 2000*). These individuals are at risk for a lifetime of very aggressive and violent antisocial behavior, engaging in acts ranging from theft and fraud (*Moffitt, 1993*) to sexual assault (*Boutwell, Barnes, & Beaver, 2013; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Quinsey, 2002*). The evidence is compelling that there are different developmental profiles in offending patterns for individuals in the population (*Moffitt, 1993, 2006*).

Fifth, there are genetic influences across virtually every human outcome (*Moffitt, 2005; Polderman et al., 2015; Turkheimer, 2000*), including antisocial and criminal behavior (*Barnes et al., 2014; Ferguson, 2010; Rhee & Waldman, 2002*). Genetic factors generally account for about half of the variance in antisocial behavioral outcomes (*Rhee & Waldman, 2002; Turkheimer, 2000*). The environment (and measurement error) accounts for the remaining variance. A unified theory must account for the heritable variation in crime (and crime related

outcomes). Sixth, consistent variation exists across geographic areas (neighborhoods, census tracts, etc.) for measures of crime (*Sampson, 2012; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997*). Aggregate level variation in criminal behaviors has received attention from sociologists and criminologists (as well economists and psychologists), yet there has not been a consistently supported explanation for why certain areas report more disadvantage, disruption, and illegal behavior. A unified theory must account for such observations at the macro level.

In summary, what is needed is an effort to cross the multiple lines of inquiry outlined above. Yet the social sciences have moved glacially in this regard, and have largely failed at presenting a series of testable ideas that could unite these six bodies of research (though see *Ellis & Hoskin, 2015* and *Rebellon, Barnes, & Agnew, 2015* for some progress toward this goal). What remains needed is a mechanism for uniting research on race differences, sex differences, age and developmental differences, genetic influences, and neighborhood influences on antisocial and criminal behavior.

## 3. Promising solution

The lack of unity can be traced to the fact that for decades certain lines of research were censored from the study of crime (see also *Barnes et al., 2014* for a discussion of the most recent attempts at a form of censorship; *Wright et al., 2008*). Evolutionary biology for example, has struggled to gain true traction in the discussion of the origins of criminal behavior. There are important exceptions (*Boutwell, Barnes, Deaton et al., 2013; Boutwell, Franklin, et al., 2013; Buss, 2006; Buss & Duntley, 2011; Ellis, 1988; Ellis & Hoskin, 2015; Lalumière et al., 2008; Mishra and Lalumière, 2008; Wilson & Daly, 1985, 1997; see also Camilleri, 2012; Camilleri and Stiver, 2014*). Yet, mainstream theories of crime causation (which originate within the field of criminology by criminologists) are generally silent on the idea that selection pressures across millions of years of evolution could have shaped the qualities of modern offending behavior (*Quinsey, 2002*). Evolutionary research regarding the origins of aggressive behavior has also moved slowly in terms of incorporating modern criminological research.

These areas are not at odds with one another and can be unified in a straightforward manner. The current theoretical contribution offers a new perspective in explaining a corpus of findings from criminological, psychological, ecological, and biosocial research into the origins of criminal behavior. To extract larger patterns from existing lines of evidence we draw heavily on critical insights from evolutionary biology. Specifically, our theory is intended to be inherently multi-level; first, at the ultimate level it describes the selection pressures that may have yielded the qualities embodied in modern offending. Insights gleaned from *Rushton’s (1985a; 1985b) Differential-K* theory offer an organizing framework. *Rushton’s (1985a)* application of life history theory to human differences has fared well at organizing the correlations of a host of human outcomes into a coherent evolutionary framework (*Figueredo et al., 2006; Nettle, 2010; Rushton, 2000; Wang, Kruger, & Wilke, 2009*). Second, at the proximal level, our approach is couched in the developmental tradition of psychological research. *Moffitt’s (1993)* dual taxonomy represents the backbone of our theory at the individual level. Presently, *Moffitt’s (1993)* work offers one of the most robust explanations of antisocial behavior (*Moffitt, 2006*). By combining these two levels of theory into one statement, we propose an evolutionary taxonomy capable of uniting myriad findings about the nature of criminal behavior, at the aggregate and individual levels.

## 4. Life history & *Differential-K* theory: a brief overview

Life history theory describes the inherent “tradeoffs” that exist in nature between parental investment and mating investment (i.e., reproductive output) (*Rushton, 2000*). Qualities like accelerated physical development carry with them the qualities of diminished investment in offspring who tend to die relatively early. This can be contrasted

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