



Crime and socioeconomic conditions: Evidence for non-cultural domain specificity in evolutionary forensic psychology

James Goodman

Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre, NSW Dept. of Corrective Services, Australia

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ABSTRACT

In disagreement with the explanatory utility of niche-construction in crime–culture interaction, this article reviews a variety of evidence for non-cultural domain specificity in criminal behavior. However, this review does subscribe to Durrant and Ward’s integrative framework for evolutionary theory in criminology. Moralistic self-deception is implied in Black’s self-help theory of social control, and is argued to facilitate victimization while maintaining social norms. Strong empirical evidence of social control in reliable criminal responses to cues of economic conditions, policing and community relatedness is clearly related to domain-specific theories of criminal behavior in evolutionary forensic psychology. Domain-specific interaction between individual differences and socioeconomic complexity can possibly be mistaken for cultural processes, where game-theoretic and information-theoretic interpretations of social interaction provide insight into evolutionary-recurrent features of complex socioeconomic processes in human society. The review concludes that there is indeed support for a productive integration of theory between evolutionary forensic psychology and the interdisciplinary field of criminology.

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1. Introduction

Dual-inheritance proponents [Ward and Durrant \(2011\)](#) essentially argue that the complexity and variability of the human socioeconomic environment is beyond the explanatory grasp of evolutionary psychology in crime and justice studies. For instance, the field has not yet explained the contribution value of inherited cultural practices in shaping the social environment, a relation with crime that has been long contended in the social sciences. Although Ward and Durrant’s niche-construction framework may inform investigation in developmental interaction between cultural processes and criminal behavior,

such an approach will have “less emphasis on discrete mental modules, and more on the facilitative influence of social and cultural capital” ([Ward & Durrant, 2011](#)). The inherited social environment can certainly influence the development of criminal behavior. However, it is also possible that many evolutionary-recurrent aspects of socioeconomic complexity are mistaken for cultural processes in such instances.

In disagreement with their downplay of domain specificity and the utility of assigning cultural processes in explanations of criminal behavior, crime is instead argued to be explainable by interaction between the perception of socioeconomic problems, and heritable differences in victim preferences. Despite an underlying focus and assumption of computational mechanisms in criminal behavior, this discussion does subscribe to Durrant and Ward’s overall argument for an integration of evolutionary theory with theory in the

E-mail address: goods.jl@gmail.com.

multi-disciplinary field of criminology (Durrant & Ward, 2011, 2012). In reviewing evidence from a variety of fields, a number of empirical developments in social control appear to support such an approach, as do several game and information-theoretic interpretations of social interaction dynamics, in direct relation and relevance to domain specificity and core theory in Evolutionary Forensic Psychology.

2. Social control and resource scarcity

In social control theory, anti-social behavior is argued to be lower in a more socially cohesive community (Durrant & Ward, 2012). As social cohesion increases, individuals adopt social norms to a greater extent, and are thus more likely to personally resist engaging in anti-social behavior such as crime (Durrant & Ward, 2012). On the other hand, material resources and social status are inseparable in human society. Evolutionary psychology predicts males will depend more on both to reproduce, and thus unambiguously supported by sex differences in crime statistics (Duntley & Shackelford, 2008). Despite no clear relation between these two approaches, recent empirical work has successfully employed social control to identify relations between economic perceptions and violent crime rates (Rosenfeld, 2009), as well as in strong negative correlation between policing effort, community relatedness, and overall crime (Kummerli, 2011). These works indicate support for both social control and domain specificity, and can be clearly related to the theoretical framework of evolutionary psychology. Before approaching such insights, moralistic self-deception (Gorelik & Shackelford, 2011; Lu & Chang, 2011a,b) is argued to facilitate moralistic victimization in Black's self-help theory of social control, and maintain social norms at the same time.

2.1. Exploitation and moralistic self-deception

Black (1983) observes that many acts deemed criminal in industrialized nations are socially acceptable ways of regulating social conflict in traditional environments, where, without recourse to a law enforcement body, the protection of one's interests by direct or indirect force is a personal responsibility. As a result, "self-help" violence in social control (Black, 1983) is more of a consequence than a choice where a policing entity is lacking: in illegal markets, such as the drug trade, stolen goods, gambling and prostitution, self-help can often represent the main instrument of conflict resolution (Rosenfeld, 2009). Black argues that many aspects of self-help in underground markets and low socioeconomic demographics have a strong moralistic motivation, and bear a striking resemblance to hunter-gatherer social control: action classified as criminal by the law may not necessarily be viewed as criminal by the perpetrator, who may in fact hold a strong conviction of righteousness about the act (Black, 1983). Although self-help would imply crime is in the eye of the beholder, Lu and Chang (2011a,b) can explain this as moralistic self-deception in criminal behavior, where criminal behavior is defined in evolutionary psychology by Buss and Duntley (2008) and Duntley and Shackelford (2008).

So far, research in evolutionary psychology gives a strong indication that human behavior is a discrete repertoire of specific solutions, designed for a finite variety of evolutionary-recurrent problems in the domains of social status, resource ownership, and mating. Evolutionary forensic psychology holds that most crime across cultures will reflect conflict in these domains (Duntley & Shackelford, 2008), where such conflict is the result of a co-evolutionary arms race between exploitation and victim defenses (Buss & Duntley, 2008; Duntley & Shackelford, 2012). Of the three classes of resource acquisition strategy available to an individual, criminal behavior can be generally classified as the exploitative acquisition of a fitness benefit from a victim (Buss, 2012). This can result in a co-evolutionary arms race between exploitation and anti-victimization, selecting for adaptations to perceive cues to exploitability (Buss & Duntley, 2008, Homicide Adaptation Theory, Duntley & Buss, 2011), and victim adaptations

to prevent and mitigate exploitation (Victim Adaptation Theory, Duntley & Shackelford, 2012). Therefore, aside from victim defenses, it follows that "self-help" in crime can be viewed as criminals helping themselves to exploitable victims. The problem here is, if criminal law is consistent with culturally universal perceptions of crime and moral righteousness, then why would a criminal believe that he or she has acted rightly?

Moralistic victimization can be reconciled with social norms by the adaptive utility of moralistic self-deception. Given a co-evolutionary arms race between deceivers and the deceived (Trivers, 1976; von Hippel & Trivers, 2011), self-deception is held to minimize the possibility of deception-detection by reducing cognitive load and "tells", as well as in mitigating the significant retribution costs that are associated with detection (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). In moralistic self-deception, Lu and Chang (2011b) determine that moral self-concept and self-deception are positively correlated, particularly in individuals who are high in self-consciousness. Individuals can also become more moralistic given a larger number of observers, indicating utility in deception performance when facing a higher probability of being detected (Lu & Chang, 2011a). Therefore, in one shot interactions or ongoing interaction, moralistic self-deception can solve a number of problems for an individual employing exploitation: by deceiving oneself that a victimization strategy is right, one can be motivated to execute or continue the strategy, and also maintain a convincing moralistic facade to deceive relevant observers such as victims, peers and community members.

A nuanced example can be found in a scenario-based study by Wilson and O'Gorman (2002), who determine individual differences in emotions and actions for ownership norm violations, with males more likely to respond violently to a norm-breaking event. When discovering a valuable find while trespassing on a gold claim, the "subjects who were not embarrassed about trespassing also felt comfortable despite being confronted by the owner, were not sorry about trespassing, and still felt cheated despite their status as trespasser" (Wilson & O'Gorman, 2002). This configuration would seem to be specifically designed to expropriate the resources of others. However, moralistic self-deception in exploitative behavior would not necessarily be completely present in some, and completely absent in others: variation in its engagement can also be argued to result from interaction between intrinsic differences in victim preferences and extrinsic differences in the socioeconomic environment, where an increased engagement of moralistic self-deception can facilitate exploitation in conditions that make victimization more adaptive. Although poverty has long been associated with crime in general, there has been little success in identifying specific economic relations, with the very notable exception of a somewhat recent development.

2.2. Resource scarcity, property crime and risky behavior

Rosenfeld (2009) employs Black's self-help theory to guide a statistical analysis of possible relations between the crime rate and the business cycle, and determines that change in the U.S. homicide rate has an indirect, significant dependence on change in the Consumer Sentiment Index, from 1970 to 2006. A more pessimistic collective perception of economic conditions has a significant causal effect on change in acquisitive property crimes involving burglary, motor vehicle theft and robbery, by increasing the demand for stolen goods (Rosenfeld, 2009). Where Rosenfeld reasons that self-help violence will be used to enforce social control in underground markets for stolen goods, change in acquisitive property crime does indeed have a significant causal effect on homicide rates: "even if only a small fraction of underground transactions leads directly or indirectly to violence, they can result in sizable increases in homicide rates" (Rosenfeld, 2009). Property crime thereby "mediates the relationship between collective economic perceptions and homicide" (Rosenfeld, 2009), where poverty, worsening economic conditions, thieving and violence go hand in hand.

An increased perception of resource scarcity is therefore determined to have a significant causal effect on violent conflict, where

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