

## Back on Track: Asking and Answering the Right Questions

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**D**espite the obvious and repeated failures of biopsychocriminologies, looking at and inside individuals for the causes of crime persists as the politically more tolerable and economically more rewarding (for grantsmen) alternative to the kind of theoretical and empirical work featured in this symposium. Instead of looking for what is wrong with people, these researchers are looking for what is wrong with society—and why. Once again the causal importance of contextual factors and social forces is being investigated and demonstrated. To theorists who have perceived and posited causal linkages among structured inequalities, social conflicts, and the definition as well as the occurrence of crimes, such research deserves the highest priority. These are indeed welcome contributions because they are asking the right questions. Now let us consider the answers they offer.

When the early Chicago researchers found correlations between poverty and rates of crime and other “social pathologies” within the city, they invoked the concept of social disorganization to explain the association. Instead of the poverty determinism often attributed to sociological criminologists then and now, the Chicagoans suggested that the relationship between poverty and crime depended on whether a neighborhood was effectively organized to cope with its problems. Avoiding the tautological pit into which the early social disorganization studies tended to fall, Bursik and Grasmick (1993) focus on the key question whether the effects of economic deprivation on crime are indirect, as implied in early social disorganization theory, or direct, as proposed in more recent ver-

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sions. Their findings strongly support the indirect causation explanation but also reveal that economic deprivation also has a significant direct effect.

To account for their results, Bursik and Grasmick reformulate social disorganization theory to recognize the influence of external institutional actors. The basic argument is that the effect of economic deprivation really is indirect after all, mediated by a neighborhood's capacity to get help from outside sources. Crime is more of a problem where "private" and "parochial" controls are not augmented by "public" controls. Put another way, a neighborhood unattractive to outside interests is likely to have inadequate resources for dealing with crime and consequently is more prone to the spiral of decay described by Skogan (1990).

My question at this point is, What does it take to attract outside help? Bursik and Grasmick anticipate a social disorganization model integrating private, parochial, and public controls that will explain how transneighborhood networks help neighborhoods to control crime. But such a model will not tell us why some neighborhoods have networks while others do not. To answer my question, another theory is needed—one that explains why some neighborhoods have better external connections than do others.

Sampson and Laub (1993) pick up where Bursik and Grasmick leave off, in that they assert at the outset the need for a macrostructural perspective to explain variation among local units, instead of looking for external connections to explain what happens within local units. Their specific objective is to explain county-level variations in postreferral decisionmaking by juvenile courts. Expectations derived from conflict theory, drugs and crime studies, and urban poverty research are brought together to hypothesize that racial "underclass" poverty and inequality are associated with a perceived threat to the middle class, which results in greater control activity by the courts and more punitive controls for blacks and drug offenses. As expected, racial inequality and underclass poverty are significantly related to juvenile court processing activity and to generally tougher treatment of blacks.

Lacking measures of perceived threat, Sampson and Laub could not directly test for the effect of their key theoretical construct. Nonetheless, the "more tightly coupled" responses of the juvenile courts to blacks certainly reflects something about how they are viewed. The notion of "symbolic threat" remains a promising starting point for theoretical explanation. But is the threat also real?

In an ingenious bit of theorizing, Sampson and Laub distinguish between threat to the middle class and to the upper class. They suggest that racial inequality and underclass poverty will

be the best predictors when the middle class feels especially threatened, and that a county's wealth will be the best predictor when the upper class feels threatened. Because wealth and the criminal justice resources of a county had little effect on juvenile court processing decisions, the inference is that the upper class did not feel threatened. However, it may also be that "upper income elites" feel less threatened because they are more realistic about the degree of actual threat. Virtually by definition, elites are more alert to intrusions and exposures and are better positioned to take steps enabling them to lead more protected lives. If so, then it may well be that the upper class is not worried because they do not have to be, while the middle class is worried not only by a symbolic threat but also by their greater vulnerability. In any case, much more research is needed to determine the extent to which the threat is symbolic versus real for various groups—including the lower class.

While Sampson and Laub have demonstrated that structural variables affect juvenile justice processing, they have not yet moved on to the next step: a theory that explains not only how county-level structural variables affect control decisions but also how these patterns are shaped by the larger political and economic as well as legal contexts in which control policies are ultimately determined. Adding measures of 1980–90 macrolevel structural changes, organizational characteristics of juvenile courts, and system capacity will extend the model in a highly appropriate direction but will not in itself get at the processes through which such macrolevel outcomes and relations among them are generated.

Myers (1993) confronts most directly the problem of developing a theory as differentiated from a model of contextual effects. Instead of trying to work up from the neighborhood or the county, she uses propositions and research from the political economy and conflict literatures to analyze the impact of economic conditions, labor market characteristics, and racial inequalities on the punishment of minor offenders in early 20th-century Georgia.

Racial differences and similarities in the treatment of offenders clearly depended on decisions made by elites attempting mainly to protect their economic interests. When cheap labor was needed, and the black labor pool was declining, poor whites were sent to the chain gang as short-term laborers (e.g., "Cool Hand Luke"). Against much historical and theoretical speculation, Myers found no support for the view that black-white economic competition leading to racial conflict resulted in increased punishment rates for blacks. On the contrary, increasing racial economic equality was associated with increasing white, not black, punishment rates.

In the early decades of this century, the economic concerns

of elites outweighed whatever concerns they may have had about the black population as a threat. By the time Myers's inquiry begins, Southern elite white dominance had been reestablished over both blacks and poor whites; and the imposition of legal segregation (Woodward 1957) helped greatly to block any inclination toward joint black-white class resistance. So far, so good for conflict theory—at least the instrumental Marxist version: legal controls are created and applied by and for the dominant class. However, the notion that “the ruling class rules” does not explain either the occurrence of conflicts within classes or changes in the direction and forms of social power. A more complex theory of power and conflict is needed that treats power not as a fixed structure but instead as a multidimensional resource, and conflict not as a static description of social relations but instead as the basic social process through which change as well as order is accomplished (Turk 1976, 1977).

Myers suggests that changes occurred because of a general process of state centralization, as bigger elites took over control of offenders from lesser elites. Although other factors such as technological innovation and industrialization undoubtedly also played a role, her reasoning does take us to the core concerns and propositions of social control theory, especially those of the political sociology of crime and law. Definitions of deviance, including criminality, are tied to perceptions of threat (Liska 1992; Turk 1982), which reflect the realities of social differentiation and inequalities. Differences and inequalities lead to real conflicts over real stakes. Whose material and nonmaterial interests will have priority is always decided (though never finally) through conflict at and across various levels of power. Testing and refining such generalizations for specifically delineated contexts is essential if criminology is to make real sense of crime, and if more effective and also humane forms of social ordering are to be achieved. Theoretically and methodologically, the studies considered here are putting criminological inquiry back on the right track.

## References

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