

The Perversion of Criminology Matthew Robinson, Appalachian State University

Introduction

The word *perverse* has several related meanings. One is “turned away from what is right or good.” Another is “obstinate in opposing what is right, reasonable, or accepted.” And another is “arising from or indicative of stubbornness or obstinacy” (Merriam-Webster, 2012b). To some degree, each of these definitions can be used to describe the field of criminology.

Criminology is an academic discipline that I now commonly define as “the mostly perverted study of mostly perverted behaviors.” Starting with the latter point about mostly perverted behaviors, criminologists earn their livelihoods studying some of the worst behaviors on the planet—things like murder, rape, and other behaviors that do great harm to other human beings. These are behaviors that violate rules and laws (and thus are not *right or good*), that are typically not *reasonable* or *accepted* in society, and that often stem from one person’s *stubbornness* or *obstinacy*.

Over the years, I’ve learned that you can only deal with these behaviors for so long before they start to wear on you. I remember my major professor asking me, almost two decades ago, why I would want to study crime for a living. He asked, “Don’t you know this is the worm’s eye view of the world?” My response was, “Well, what about you?” He said if he had to do it all over again he would have chosen a different field, perhaps the neurosciences (I find this quite ironic given that this particular field is one of the most ignored areas of study by criminologists, even though it has the potential to help us understand why people engage in the wide range of perverted crimes that occur every day in America and around the world) (e.g., see Walsh, 2008).

But what about the claim that criminology consists of “the mostly perverted study” of these behaviors? Here I mean that our studies too are typically perverse—perverse in the sense that most of what we do is also not *right* or *good*, and when confronted with this reality, we are often quite *stubborn* and *obstinate* about it. Here is an example: Every time I review the program of the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), one of my common reactions is, “Oh look! Another test of low self-control theory!” Or “Someone else has tested social learning theory!” And there are literally hundreds of these kinds of papers every year. At this conference (and all the rest of them), we gather by the thousands to share with others our studies, and the great bulk of what we do has already been done, again and again and again, ad nauseam. This was true even in 2011, where the conference theme was “Breaking the Mold: Innovations and Bold Ventures in Criminology.”

Instead of breaking the mold and being innovative and bold—instead of embracing necessary changes such as using inter-disciplinary approaches to more fully understand human behavior, integrating our existing theories to more fully explain criminality, and reaching out to legislators with our findings to actually influence criminal justice policy—we instead just continue on our current path, testing the same limited and disciplinary theories in mostly the same ways, completely isolated from the real-world of criminal justice policy. When you consider that professional criminologists get paid very generous salaries—mostly via tax-payer dollars—to conduct these mostly meaningless studies, this seems perverse indeed.

Ask yourself these questions: Do we really need another test of low self-control theory or social learning theory? Don’t we already know, from thousands of previous tests, that crime tends to be committed by people who are impulsive and who have been influenced by deviant peers and bad parents? How do findings from such studies help us better understand criminal behavior? How do they help us more successfully influence

criminal justice policy? How do they help us bring about crime prevention programs based on all we already know?

The simple answer is that they don't. And yet, we continue stubbornly and obstinately on the same path, year after year, writing and publishing papers about the same topics in the same way, papers that will never be read by the vast majority of people on the planet. In reading Robert Agnew's *Toward a Unified Criminology*, I get the sense that he would agree with much of this assessment of our field for he convincingly argues that the discipline of criminology is fragmented, stuck in the past, and ineffective. Agnew, known mostly for his own classic theory in the field—general strain theory—clearly lays out the problems with our discipline and offers a way forward to overcoming them.

Agnew's Main Argument

Agnew's main argument pertains to criminological theory, that part of criminology that aims to explain human behavior generally and especially criminal behavior. Scores of theories have been developed within the field, a multi-disciplinary academic discipline influenced by sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, biology, and other fields of study. Agnew claims that each and every one of these theories is supported by *some* evidence and that each is thus *partially* true. In spite of this, criminology remains divided because of its disagreements about which theories are (most) true and which are (most) false. Agnew claims that the "division has hurt the field and the larger society" by making it impossible to provide a full understanding of the etiology of criminal behavior and to suggest logical and effective crime prevention implications to policy-makers (p. 5).

According to Agnew, the divisions begin with the assumptions that underlie our theories, assumptions that deal with: 1) a basic definition of crime (e.g., what behaviors should be subjected to study in the first place?); 2) whether or not human behavior is determined by factors beyond our control (i.e., determinism) or the result of our own

choices (referred to by Agnew as "agency"); 3) whether fundamental human nature is such that we act out of self-interest, concern for others, or as a result of all that is written on our "blank slates" through environmental experiences; 4) the nature of society (i.e., is it characterized by consensus or conflict?); and 5) the nature of reality (i.e., can objective reality even be experienced or is everything constructed by humans and thus subjective in nature?). Agnew devotes a chapter of *Toward a Unified Criminology* to arguments that revolve around each of these assumptions and ultimately reaches the same conclusion: there is evidence in support of all sides of each argument.

Agnew's review of a voluminous amount of research shows that each of the supposedly conflicting assumptions underlying our criminological theories enjoys some degree of empirical support. For example, Agnew concludes that most people do agree on what kinds of behaviors should be considered crimes and especially serious crimes (as suggested by mainstream criminologists), but that critical criminologists have a valid point when they assert that the most dangerous acts are generally not illegal and thus largely ignored by criminologists (p. 14). An example discussed by Agnew is deviant acts by corporations (p. 109). His integrated definition of crime would allow criminologists to study any blameworthy harm that either is condemned by the public or sanctioned by the state (p. 37).

Research also shows that human behavior is influenced by factors beyond our control (as suggested by deterministic or positivistic criminologists) but that people also have some choice over how they behave (as suggested by rational choice theorists), especially when it comes to deliberate behaviors such as crimes. His conclusion is that humans possess "bounded agency," meaning they can and do exercise some control over their behaviors within limitations created by environmental experiences, some of which we are not even aware (p. 52). And he shows that agency or choice is more common when individuals are motivated to change their behavior, when they believe they actually can

change their behavior, when they have the resources to make change, and when they live in environments that are not conducive to crime (p. 70).

The logic on which such assertions rest is on *interaction* rather than *causality*. This means that criminal behavior is not *caused* by factors beyond our control or even *caused* by the exercise of free will (i.e., agency) but instead is made more likely in certain situations and contexts. This is the argument I too made in my *integrated systems theory* of antisocial behavior (Robinson, 2004). The goal of that work was to identify and discuss the numerous factors that put people at risk for antisocial and criminal behaviors and to show how they interact to increase the likelihood or probability of these behaviors. Such an interdisciplinary approach actually draws the risk factors out from all major criminological theories and in essence leaves the theories and theorists themselves behind in favor of identifying those things that make crime more likely to occur so that it can be prevented (Robinson & Beaver, 2009).

Such an approach is no small undertaking since “criminologists are selective in their focus, considering certain potential causes but ignoring others ... based on the academic disciplines in which criminologists were trained” (p. 73). Agnew shows that one criminologist might ignore a field of study entirely just because he or she was not educated in it. This point is ironic given that it comes from a scholar whose work itself has illustrated the drawbacks of what I have called *disciplinary myopia*—not being able to see outside of one’s own academic discipline. Agnew is most well-known for extending strain theory beyond just financial strains (Merton, 1938) to include other sources of strain, including losing something of value, having opportunities blocked, and experiencing any noxious or negative stimuli (Agnew, 2001). Agnew’s general strain theory essentially boils down to the idea that frustrations of all kind can produce aggression, a hypothesis long posited by psychologists. Yet, it took the discipline of criminology 50 years to evolve strain theory beyond financial strains to other sources of frustration.

Today, general strain theory is enormously popular, producing dozens of tests every year (Agnew, 2006). Scholars tweak the theory and try to extend it, even as Agnew himself has moved away from it toward a more general and integrated theory of crime (Agnew, 2005). So, the founder of general strain theory has demonstrated that the sources of criminal behavior are far more complex than those found in the theory, yet criminologists continue to more heavily focus on general strain theory as opposed to Agnew's general theory (or the numerous other integrated theories recently developed in the field) (Farrington, 2008).

Part of this is owed to the fact that most criminologists have not been trained in academic disciplines such as biology, genetics, neurology, and so forth, and instead follow the "taken-for-granted" approach where sociological and psychological theories of crime and their assumptions are internalized by new students through socialization by mentors and other scholars (p. 8). Agnew himself has broadened his theoretical approach to integrate some of these academic disciplines into a more complex theory of criminal behavior, and he again addresses the issue in this book.

To this point, most criminologists are obstinate and stubborn. They refuse to learn even the basics of genetic and neurological sciences, which makes it impossible for them to extend the ability of their mostly social-psychological theories of crime to more fully explain criminal behavior. As Agnew asserts, criminological theory today only has modest explanatory power.

It should be pointed out that Agnew's use of the term *cause* in the text is perplexing. Throughout the book, he argues that sources of behavior are numerous and complex, and that they interact with each other to impact behavior. Yet, he then he lays out what he calls the individual-level *causes* and macro-level *causes* of criminal behavior (pp. 160-161). A cause is "a reason for an action or condition" (Merriam-Webster, 2012a). It is more than

mere correlation as a cause requires a meaningful relationship, time-order sequencing, and a lack of spuriousness (Robinson, 2004). The argument Agnew makes is essentially anti-causal, suggesting instead that human behavior is driven by a wide variety of different factors that interact to make it more or less likely depending on the circumstances.

He even writes: "Most causes generally increase the likelihood of crime, but the causes do not always lead to crime" (p. 163). The example he provides deals with experiences with material deprivation (i.e., strain). Agnew lists crime as but one of six possible responses to strain, and thus other contingencies help determine whether strain leads to crime. This is not a true cause and effect relationship and thus the term *cause* is not appropriate. At the end of the book, Agnew shows he agrees, writing that, although most criminologists assume that factors have "linear, additive, and lagged effects on crime" in fact "there is sometimes good reason to assume that some effects are nonlinear, interactive, and/or contemporaneous" (p. 200).

This may seem like a small matter, but I've argued elsewhere that one of the major problems with criminological theory is the assumption that criminal behavior is *caused* by anything when in fact all the available evidence we have suggests human behavior is far too complex to be considered the result of causal influences ; instead, certain kinds of behaviors are made more or less likely based on scores of factors coming together and interacting in various environments (Robinson, 1998). Talk about an assumption that criminologists have wrong!

In *Toward a Unified Criminology*, Agnew also addresses another issue about which criminologists are obstinate and stubborn—the issue of basic human nature. All of us have encountered criminologists who believe wholeheartedly in social learning theories. Such theories assume that children are born good and must learn to be bad through interactions in close groups setting with friends and families (Akers, 2009). And all of us know

criminologists who fully believe in the opposite view of human nature—posited by social control theories—which suggests that children are born bad and must learn to be good through interactions in close groups setting with friends and families (Goode, 2008). There are criminologists who refuse to even consider the possibility that theories with such opposite assumptions about human nature can be integrated (Hirschi, 1989).

In my criminological theory classes, students examine the assumptions of social learning and social control theories and usually come to the immediate realization that both sets of theories are really saying the same thing—that human behavior is learned. Specifically, social learning theories suggest that bad behavior is learned, and social control theorists suggest that good behavior is learned. Since the theories do not make opposite assertions, it ought to be possible to integrate them.

On the issue of whether children are born good or born bad, Agnew suggests the answer is both. He shows that, at birth, children are self-interested (an extreme and “bad” type of self-interest is selfishness) but simultaneously they are also socially concerned (an example is empathy, which is found even in infants) (p. 100). Agnew shares evidence demonstrating that humans across the life course are at times self-interested but also often socially concerned, and “partly blank slates” (because environmental experience does impact us). Here, the evidence shows that yes, people do often strive to pursue their own interests (as suggested by theories such as rational choice, low self-control, and social control), but they also have a strong tendency to act in response to pressures that result from being concerned with others in society (as suggested by strain theories). Finally, people are also obviously impacted by their social experiences (as suggested by social learning theories).

While it is admirable that Agnew gives credence to each of these approaches and shows that they are really not incompatible, I think he is mistaken to conclude that “there is

much evidence for the assumption that people are blank slates" (p. 85). The idea that, at birth, humans are like a blackboard on which nothing is written and thus what people become is entirely based on what is written on them (i.e., learning from experience), is false. Yes, it is true that experience matters greatly, as Agnew shows repeatedly through the text, but experience does not *determine* outcomes such as criminal behavior in isolation from other factors. Further, people are born with writing already present on their slates, meaning people are born with certain propensities including the propensity for aggressive and violent behaviors (Rafter, 2008).

Agnew himself acknowledges this, both in his general theory as well as in *Toward a Unified Criminology*, when he discusses the influence of genes and brain function on behavior. For example, he writes: "Studies suggest that genetic inheritance plays a substantial role in explaining variation in ... traits [such as empathy, conformity, and self-interest], as well as in the major dimensions of personality more generally" (p. 105). We are born with our genes and thus we are not born as a blank slate. True, genes only impact behavior as they interact with environmental factors, and the impressive human brain—so capable of growth and change—also play a large role in whether behavior is prosocial or antisocial, as Agnew himself points out (p. 106). So, Agnew seems to contradict himself by concluding there is evidence that humans are born as blank slates even as he provides evidence that we are not.

Agnew even addresses the issue of *temperament*, defined in the book as "individual differences that appear from birth onward, remain relatively stable across the lifespan, and presumably have a strong genetic or neurological basis" (De Pauw, Mervielde, & Leeuwen, 2009) (p. 100). Yet, he misses the opportunity to utilize personal experience to show how temperament is proof that we are not born as blank slates. For example, I have raised two children of my own, and both were vastly different from birth. One was a more difficult baby but grew into a child who loved to read and speak from a very early age. The other was a

much easier baby but grew into a child who was not as interested in reading and speaking until much later. Both were raised in very similar environments in nearly identical ways (e.g., both were read to in the womb and every night as babies and toddlers), yet they remain quite different. These two children were born different.

Yet, Agnew's conclusion is sound. Learning plays a large role in human behavior, including criminal behavior, and thus Agnew stresses that this reality must be included in any effort to integrate criminological theory and unify criminology. As one example, Agnew asserts that "the general inclinations for social concern and self-interest are specified and modified through social learning" (p. 112), which is to say that experience helps us to know in what situations and contexts it is most appropriate to be socially concerned and/or self-interested.

The last two sets of supposedly conflicting assumptions are, to me, the least important ones addressed in the book. On the first issue, Agnew concludes that American society is characterized by both consensus and conflict, and that important decisions of policy-makers are made in the process of an intense competition where the powerful usually win (p. 138). Anyone who has an hour to spare can examine basic literature from academic disciplines of legal studies to see that this is fair conclusion.

On the second issue on the nature of reality (whether reality can even be experienced), Agnew concludes that reality exists and can be experienced, but that it often is interpreted differently by different people, meaning that perceived reality often matters as much if not more than actual reality (p. 186). I question including this discussion at the end of the book because, throughout the book, Agnew has relied on studies of objective reality to reach conclusions regarding each of the other assumptions of criminological theory. That is, were Agnew to conclude that objective reality does not exist, it would have been odd for him to then conclude that it does not exist. I also don't think the whole

discussion adds much to the book anyway, other than the point that “behavior is influenced by both subjective views and objective reality. Individuals base their actions on their views, even if such views are mistaken. But at the same time, the real world imposes constraints on action and influences individuals in ways that they are unaware of or misperceive” (p. 186).

Agnew’s Conclusion

Agnew concludes: “In brief, we live in a complex and variable world. The assumptions that underlie particular crime theories and perspectives are overly simplistic, each reflecting only a part of this world. As a result, each theory or perspective typically has some support, but falls far short of providing a complete explanation of crime.” Agnew attributes this in part to “the very different assumptions” of each approach that “make[] it impossible to integrate them—so that criminologists might better explain crime and advocate for its control” (p. 194).

For me, Agnew’s book satisfactorily settles the argument that the perceived differences in assumptions are not as real or as significant as imagined and argued by criminologists housed in different theoretical camps. Thus, that which needs to be done to create interdisciplinary and integrated theories that fully account for criminal behavior can now be done. The main barrier to this work, in my estimation, is what makes criminology so perverse—the stubbornness and obstinance of most mainstream criminologists to embrace those necessary changes laid out in this essay. Hopefully this book will be widely read and embraced by (especially young and new) criminologists so that a unified criminology will soon come to exist.

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