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Book Review: A Theory of African American Offending: Race, Racism, and Crime

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***A Theory of African American Offending:
Race, Racism, and Crime***

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Routledge

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Review

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Unnever and Gabbidon begin their important text by making the following observation:

Our basic assumption is that a theory of African American offending must be derived from the lived experience of blacks as they negotiate living within a conflicted racially stratified society. We further assume that the past and present lived experiences of African Americans have created a shared worldview that is unlike those that inform whites or other minorities.
(Unnever, Gabbidon, 2011, p, 1)

Such a powerful opening seeks immediately to confront a number of generally held assumptions about the theorizing and study of crime and criminal behavior. Perhaps the most obvious conclusion that the authors' reject from the very onset of their text is the possibility for a general theory of crime. If the understanding of crime and criminal behavior is to be predicated or understood from the lived-experience of those involved in crime creation, than we must also include the specific social context from which these behaviors emerge, and which are inseparably implicated in this meaning-generating process

A Theory of African American Offending: Race, Racism, and Crime attempts then to study the phenomenon of crime from the social reality of African Americans living within a culture of anti-black racism. The authors argue that the unique experience of being black in America requires the need for a specific theoretical focus that studies crime from the vantage of that heritage. The authors' contend: "Blacks in America have had and continue to have unique lived experiences that are not shared by whites or by other minorities" (Unnever, Gabbidon, 2011, p. 4). Though it could be argued that other social groups, depending on the specific historical moment, have had some "taste" of objectifying social experiences, no group has been so negatively objectified as African Americans.

One need not search too hard to find any number of examples to prove this point. The recent murder of Trayvon Marin helps to reveal not only the depth of this American problem, but also provides a powerful example justifying the need for an African American Theory of Offending. It will be recalled that Martin was murdered after being pursued by an individual who believed that Martin "looked suspicious" and was intending to commit some type of crime. However, the real "marker" used to determine his criminal intent and the certainty of his "guilt" was the fact of his blackness and not the appearance of any outward behavior that could be legitimately construed as criminal. Stated more simply and in agreement with the authors observation: no social group has had to contend with the simple fact that the very color of one's skin has become synonymous with criminal behavior and criminal intent.

In their attempt to situate their call for a black criminology and the need for an African American Theory of Offending, the authors provide what they identify as the "African American world view of crime."

"We argue this this world view has been shaped by racial dynamics largely outside of their control. Thus, our theory assumes that African Americans, unlike any other ethnic group (e.g., whites) or other ethnic minorities (e.g., Hispanics), have a unique racial lens that informs their beliefs and behaviors especially as they relate to the salience of race and how racism impacts their lives in the US."
(Unnever, Gabbidon, 2011, p. 27)

Most important in this observation is the recognition of the specific ways in which the socio-historical and psycho-socio perspective and experience of the individual provides the "conceptual" frame of reference by which the world becomes meaningful. It also fundamentally rejects any attempt to minimize or ignore the powerful role played by social context as this relates to the phenomena of crime.

The authors' discussion begins with their recognition of the African-American world view and then explores how the social experience of African-Americans relates to the issue of African-American offending and ends by exploring the ways in which their approach differs from other theories of criminal offending. In describing the theoretical foundation of their theory they state: "In short, our theory of African American offending is race-centered; that is, it locates the cause of offending in the lived experiences of blacks residing in a conflicted racially stratified society—the United States" (Unnever, Gabbidon, 2011, p. 183).

The authors also address the potential charge of “overpredicting” African-American offending based on the assumptions of their theory. However, this concern is easily addressed based on the fact that the process of racial socialization is a fluid one that is not experienced in the same way by every African-American living in the United States. The experience of sex bias or religious bigotry is not experienced in the same by all individuals who experience this phenomenon and neither is the issues related to racial discrimination experienced by African-Americans.

In fact, if specific theoretical fault is to be found in this text, it is related to the failure to include a more complex grounding of the important insights described by the authors. What is really being offered in this text, or at least what appears to be offered based on the bias of my own theoretical point of reference, is a phenomenology of African-American offending that can easily account for the specific perspectival meanings that emerge for a given individual, along with the realities of one’s lived-experience that can be described as being-in-the-black-as black.

Though it may be unfair to critique a text by criminologists for not situating their theory within such a specifically philosophical frame of reference, none the less, phenomenology provides the perfect theoretical approach by which to explore not only the specific aspects of individual experience with the ways in which social existence helps to influence or affect the meaning for human existence. The experience of being African-American within an ethically conflicted social context fundamentally informs not only one’s relationship to world, but to self and others as well. As such, the influence of those social factors that are outside of the individuals control, remain potentially mitigating but cannot be viewed as a reflex or mechanism that guarantees a specific response; the complexities of individual lived-experience theoretically precludes such a reductive conclusion, which the authors have done well to avoid.

What this text powerfully exhibits is the need for criminology to refrain from attempting to continue to seek out a generalized theory of criminal offending. Though we share a social world, our experience of that world is very different and predicated upon a variety of complex relationships that are simply not generalizable in any convincing way: a fact that is nicely explored by the authors as this relates to differences among African-Americans as a social group. The differences in the social existence of African-Americans are powerfully affirmed by the authors concerning the need for a specific theory of African American offending. But this text is not only informative to African-Americans and their social experience; rather, this text helps to recognize the more general need of approaching the study of crime from the lived-experience of those who are involved in that life style.