

## Book Review

***A Theory of African American Offending: Race, Racism, and Crime.***  
by James D. Unnever and Shaun L. Gabbidon. New York, NY: Routledge,  
2011. 267 pp. (ISBN: 978-0-415-88358-0), \$35.95 (paperback).

It took courage to write a book that attempts, on the most basic level, to explain the disturbing fact, that “African American men—about 6 percent of the population of the United States—account for nearly 60 percent of the robbery arrests in the U.S.” (p. xv). Unnever and Gabbidon, criminologists with more than 40 years of combined academic experience and more than 100 peer-reviewed articles to their combined credit, have impeccable credentials to address this issue. This is Unnever’s second book and Gabbidon’s tenth. The theory of African American offending that they develop in six chapters and an epilog relies heavily on the single premise that African Americans in the United States have a unique worldview conditioned by centuries of racial oppression and racial subordination. The persuasiveness of their arguments depends heavily on the degree to which the reader agrees with this premise.

The first chapter is the authors’ justification for the need for a theory of African American offending. This theory is anchored in statistical evidence demonstrating the contemporary racial disparities in the American criminal justice system but includes a short historical sketch of the persistent and violent racial subordination of African Americans through chattel slavery, Jim Crow, geographical concentration, and criminal justice injustices. Despite the promise of the early work by W. E. B. Du Bois that sought to establish criminological explanations in the lived experience of African Americans, the development of a black criminology before this book has been neglected. While acknowledging the development of race neutral criminological theories as a significant improvement over racially biased genetic explanations, the authors survey the deficiencies of social disorganization theory, social control theory, the general theory of crime, strain theories, social learning theories, and Afrocentricity and parcel out the contributions each of these can offer to the authors’ theory of African American offending.

In the second chapter the authors attempt to argue that African Americans have a unique, peerless, and inimitable worldview anchored in their historical racial struggles and confirmed by personal experience and current events. At its core, this worldview affirms that race matters, that racial prejudice and discrimination are inevitable, and that the United States “continues to be a systematically racist society” (p. 27). Evidence to support the

existence of this worldview are most persuasively associated with public opinion surveys that indicate that African Americans perceive that the criminal justice system is unjust and that African Americans perceive that racial discrimination continues to exist in the 21st century. However, the authors do not appear to realize that the findings of public opinion polls are not conclusive evidence in support of their basic premise. Without addressing the variability of perceptions among African Americans, the authors cannot speak convincingly to the potential homogeneity of an African American worldview.

The third chapter is an extended literature review of research that suggests that African American offending is rooted in the perception of criminal justice injustices. The perception of injustice delegitimizes the law, produces an emotional reaction (i.e., shame, anger, defiance) consistent with offending, and weakens socialization experiences that inculcate respect for social norms. It is at this point that the reader may begin to see some inconsistency in the authors' argument. If "there are minimal differences among African Americans in their perceptions of criminal justice injustices" (p. 65), then how is it that only a minority of African Americans offend? The second half of this chapter addresses this question, but not in a fully satisfactory manner. They suggest that the minimal differences have failed to measure the degree of injustice perceived, that variations of place matter (e.g., economic disadvantage increases offending), that dispositional orientations toward defiance matter, and that gender matters. This degree of variability within the African American worldview related to criminal justice injustices is a serious challenge to the authors because heterogeneity of an African American worldview undermines the foundation of their argument and concluding theory.

Racial discrimination, pejorative stereotypes, and stereotype threats are the focus of the literature review in chapter 4. These lived experiences lead to an increased probability of offending by eroding the strength of ties between African Americans and White-dominated institutions (schools and employers), and by producing negative emotions (hopelessness-depression and anger-defiance). The negative impact of racism and racial stereotypes culminate in the criminal Black man stereotype, a White social construct that expects the worst in behavior and disposition for African American men. As in chapter 3, the authors end the chapter attempting to explain variability of gender and place in African American behavioral responses to racial subordination.

The fifth chapter explains how racial socialization can buffer against the negative reactions to racial discrimination. African American families may prepare their children for criminal justice injustices and racial discrimination by instilling a sense of racial pride (cultural socialization) and developing coping skills for encountering bias; however, the promotion of mistrust of Whites and the promotion of egalitarian values may actually hinder this buffering effect. Despite the length of this chapter, the conclusions are somewhat equivocal in the reviewed literature. Racial socialization can clearly be of

significant benefit, but gender, place, the role of the African American church, and the individual's internalization of a racial identity are clearly confounds worthy of additional research.

The theory of African American offending that is presented in chapter 6 denotes three causal factors leading to African American offending: their worldview, the perception and/or experience of criminal justice injustices, and the perception and/or experience of racial discrimination and pejorative stereotypes. These three causal factors may be mitigated or exacerbated by family racial socialization that determines the extent to which the perceptions and experiences of injustice and racism produce negative emotions and weaken social bonds, factors that have been associated with increased likelihood of offending. The last half of this chapter addresses issues of gender, place, ethnic immigrants, and colorism, and the concluding epilog is an excellent monograph on the deleterious impact of environmental racism (lead poisoning) on African Americans.

In the *Introduction*, the authors explain that this is the first book in over a hundred years to attempt a comprehensive and race-based theory of African American offending. As such, it is an excellent but flawed beginning. Few are likely to challenge the importance of the history of racial subordination to the contemporary African American worldview or the manner in which this history provides context for the perception and/or experience of racial discrimination and criminal justice injustices. I am less convinced that it is accurate for the authors to assert continually that this worldview is unique to African Americans. The historical traumas imposed on Native Americans, for example, rival the African American victimology, and I believe the authors might find references to that literature useful in supporting their argument in a future edition of this book.

The authors carefully address the importance of place and gender in each of the four concluding chapters but do not include place and gender in their final theoretical model. The omission of these factors in the final model is troubling because of the substantial evidence presented by the authors, suggesting that these are important factors in offending. I am equally concerned that there was no mention of male African American lifespan development during adolescence and young adulthood because African American offending is so heavily concentrated within these age groups.

I recommend this book for forensic social workers who enjoy theory and who are willing to form their own conclusions regarding the applicability of theory to their practice. The authors do not explicitly address implications for practice, but I believe that chapter 5 and the review of racial socialization might be a fruitful read for anyone working with African American families.

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