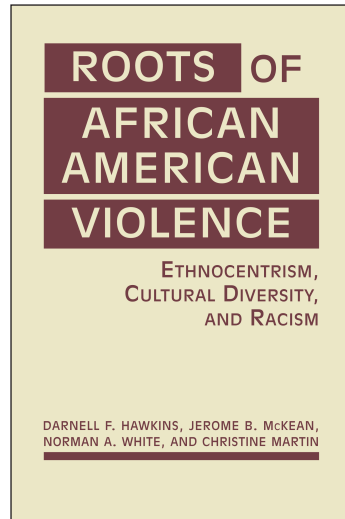# Roots of African American Violence: Ethnocentrism, Cultural Diversity, and Racism

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Exploring the Roots of African American Violence

As our title suggests, this is a book about violence in African American communities. The question driving our theory-making venture is rather straightforward: What accounts for more than a century of higher than average rates of homicide and other criminal violence among blacks when compared to other ethnic and racial groups in the United States? But, in the pages that follow, we also tell a story of crime and punishment that is not limited to the black community alone, and that is not exclusively an analysis of homicide rates and trends. Instead, we seek to show the ways in which the story of group disparities in rates of crime and violence is part of the much broader story of our nation's ethnic and racial divides.

Substantial disparities in rates of crime and punishment across America's diverse ethnic and racial groups have been well documented. That documentation, however, has not gone uncontested. It has spawned an ongoing debate among crime analysts regarding the imprecision of crime measures and, thus, the extent to which they can be used to assess the group differences they are said to reveal. Although we accept and incorporate within our work much of the essence of that critique, what we have written reflects our belief that group disparities require explanation. The reader will find that what we have written reflects the views expressed by Pepinsky and Jesilow (1984) and Bohm and Walker (2006)—that much of the study of crime in the United States is shrouded in myth and stereotype. But we also believe that only through careful examination of all of the evidence on ethnic and racial disparities can we determine the causes of these disparities.

Our work is propelled by the fact that, despite being informed by data from official sources, self-reports, and observational studies that

show much higher rates of crime and violence among African Americans, those engaged in the study of crime and society have been slow in answering the call for, and have had only limited success in, specifying causes. If success is measured by the development and promulgation of fully articulated and well-tested theories specifically designed to explain group rather than individual differences, social scientists are found wanting. While one may dispute the precise reasons for this state of affairs within the crime research enterprise, the lack of forward progress in explaining intergroup disparities in rates of crime has not gone unnoticed. Griffiths (2013); Hawkins (1983, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2003); Hawkins, Laub, and Lauritsen (1998); Jaynes and Williams (1989); Kubrin and Weitzer (2003a, 2003b); LaFree (1995); Reiss and Roth (1993); Sampson (2012); Sampson and Lauritsen (1997); Sampson and Wilson (1995); Short (1997); Sowell (2005); and Unnever and Gabbidon (2011) are only a few among those who have called for greater explication of observed differences.

The absence of theory designed specifically to explain ethnic and racial differences is puzzling and paradoxical in many ways. Those involved in Hirschi and Rudisill's (1976) "The Great American Search [for the] Causes of Crime" have had at their disposal a vast storehouse of crime data. Also, more recently, they have had at their disposal an impressive array of advanced analytic tools and statistical modeling techniques that have been put to use in exploring those data. Through the use of such methods and models, it was anticipated that researchers would move quickly beyond the stage of mere accumulation of data showing ethnic and racial differences in rates of criminal offending and victimization to begin to explain them. That is, the result would be the promulgation of a fully articulated theory designed specifically to explain such differences.

Echoing Hirschi and Rudisill, Sampson and Lauritsen (1997, 311) suggested during the late 1990s that "research on race and crime has become a growth industry in the United States." Thus, the lack of progress toward fully explaining the linkages between race and crime cannot be attributed to a lack of scholarly activity. Whether one considers the current growth industry they described or the broader longer-term enterprise described by Hirschi and Rudisill, there has been no lack of research and inquiry. Much midnight oil has been burned, reams of paper consumed, careers established and enhanced, and political elections won and lost through the production and utilization of work designed to explain why and at what levels individuals commit crime and why race and ethnicity seem to matter. Nevertheless, nearly two

decades into the twenty-first century, the criminological research enterprise devoted to the study of race, ethnicity, and crime can rightly be characterized as data rich, but theory starved.

In the absence of holistic theory, what has been the nature of the work done to date within criminology and allied disciplines? We suggest that regarding their theoretical frames, most past and recent scholarly works within criminology tend to utilize (1) popular classic criminological theories of crime causation, many of which have not been tested or do not appear to be applicable to the study of ethnic and racial differences; (2) theories imported from other social and behavioral science disciplines that are thought to show some promise for explaining ethnic and racial group disparities in crime, but for which the verdict is out as to whether they are actually capable of doing so; (3) theories designed with the intent of accounting for race and ethnic differences but instead have often found currency within criminological and social science circles for reasons other than their ability to do so; or (4) no apparent theory at all, or alternatively, implied or presumed theoretical frames embedded within or inferred from informative but largely quantitative analyses of race disparities in rates of offending and victimization.

Throughout our book, we engage in a line of discourse that is designed to help readers better understand the nature of the seeming paradox of scant theorizing amid a plethora of data showing ethnic and racial disparities. We believe that crime analysts must strive to take new approaches to the study of the nation's now well-documented disparities in rates of criminal violence. The work we describe in this book aims for such innovation. Toward that end, what we have written defies in numerous ways the theoretical, conceptual, and analytic orthodoxies that have shaped the study of ethnicity, race, and crime among contemporary social and behavioral scientists. Our theorizing effort defies such orthodoxy in the following ways.

• Our discussion is as deeply rooted in the study of race and ethnic relations in the United States as it is in the criminological study of racial disparities in rates of crime and violence. In our view, the study of racial disparity in crime is inextricably linked to the study of intergroup relations across lines of race, ethnicity, culture, and social class.

• Our analysis of the paradox we have noted is grounded in the sociology of knowledge and science. That is, we assess not only the known "facts" about group differences in rates of crime but also examine with a critical eye the social, institutional, and ideological forces

that have shaped the accumulation of the facts that are said to constitute that body of knowledge.

• Our analysis is grounded further in an attempt to use history to guide our understanding of group differences in crime rather than follow the decontextualized and often ahistorical approaches now quite commonplace in the criminological sciences.

• In comparison to past work on the subject, our approach emphasizes the importance of variations in offending *within* those groupings commonly designated as African Americans and whites. We contend that largely ignored in past investigations of race and crime have been identity-based and affinity-linked alliances that take place *within* those culturally diverse groupings labeled as "races" in the United States. We propose that a better understanding of those intrarace dynamics is vital for any effort to explain what are presumed to be racial differences in rates of crime and violence.

• Finally, our writing is guided by the presumption that the study of the causes of crime cannot be separated from societal responses to it, and to those persons or societal groupings who wear the label of "criminal" (Hagan 2010).

Criminology as a Social Institution: The Search for Meaningful Theory

More than half a century has passed since Gerard DeGre (1955) proclaimed that all of the sciences, from astrophysics to biology to chemistry to geology to sociology, have one trait in common: they are all *social institutions*. Thus, regardless of whether they are labeled in modern times as natural or social sciences, all modes of scientific inquiry and the theories and methods they embody are products of the social contexts in which they emerge. Scientific worldviews and research findings are also time-stamped in the sense that they bear the markings of the historical period during which they were operative. Science itself, like other aspects of human culture, is often beset by biases and misconceptions that can lead to false turns, blind alleys, misconceptions, and distortion of facts. They can also lead to ill-advised and harmful social policies.

The study of ethnicity, race, and crime bears all of the markings of DeGre's social institutions. It exhibits many etiological twists and turns— and often unforeseen consequences. And many of these twists and turns have arisen from outside of social science as much as they

have from within that research enterprise. Criminology provides a classic example of the interplay between internal and external forces that determine the ways that racial and ethnic criminal differences are socially constructed and the kinds of explanations that are offered for them. In the discussion that follows, we will show that many of the responses to what is considered "crime" in the United States are in essence responses to the nation's immense ethnic and racial diversity and the historical legacies associated with it. Criminologists in the United States, unlike their European counterparts, have faced the challenge of developing theories designed to explain differences in crime and punishment seen within the majority white population but also crime and punishment among a postcolonial, postslavery assortment of peoples of color.

By providing the reader with a more contextualized and historicized discussion of the topic at hand than is found in many contemporary renderings, we acknowledge that the paths we take to achieve these objectives are at times circuitous. But, we believe that by following the etiological pathways we have chosen to tread, the reader will be rewarded with a much richer and more nuanced understanding of ethnic, racial, and other group-level differences in crime and punishment in the United States than those found in the extant literature. Therefore, the ideological hurdles one encounters in confronting the nation's color line have figured prominently in efforts at theorizing in response to evidence of racial disparities.

Quantitative Analysis and the Search for Theory

Ironically, the paradox of robust findings of group differences in crime and violence alongside a paucity of theory aimed specifically at explaining those differences may also be linked to methodological considerations. It may be rooted in the ascendancy of quantitative methods and statistical modeling within the social sciences during the last half century. It is true that all theory-making, and all science, is ultimately grounded by necessity in the kinds of data accumulation and analysis these quantitatively oriented research paradigms embody (e.g., see Zuberi 2001). However, while skilled data analysis can be just as useful for the devising of theory as for the testing of theory, many of the trends within the study of crime during the last half century appear to militate against the translation of numbers into a viable theory.

For example, the increasing subdisciplinary specialization found within the study of crime and society is often associated with narrowed

and specialized approaches to data analysis. The methods themselves often tend to drive the topics of interest within the study of crime and society rather than being guided by or carried out in search of a plausible and well-thought-out theory. This increasing specialization has often served to create a body of scientific research in which there is an overabundance of enumerated trees that prevent analysts from seeing the theoretical forests of which they may be a part. Obviously, this broad brush cannot be applied to the whole of the criminological enterprise. Much effort has been made, as we will show in Chapters 2 and 3, to link theory and method and to offer potential explanations for ethnic and racial differences.

Indeed, it is the firm grounding in crime statistics that has led crime analysts to make appeals for the greater explication of the individual-level, situational, contextual, environmental, and structural forces that may drive observed ethnic and racial differences. Thus, while we have criticized the discipline's failure to produce holistic explanations for ethnic and racial differences in crime and violence, the findings from the numerous studies that have utilized an assortment of analytic and statistical modeling have not been useless. Often these carefully crafted quantitative analyses have shown that many of the quasi-theoretical and meta-theoretical assumptions and presumptions embedded within them, including those based on seemingly commonsensical and plausible notions about the etiology of crime, do not seem to account for the large ethnic and racial differences observed. Despite this flaw, there has been some forward movement in the effort to pinpoint the causes of the large racial gaps we see, even if only through the processes of attrition and elimination.

Also, the explanatory powers of quantitative analyses utilized to test some of the most popular extant theories have demonstrated deficiencies in their ability to account for racial and ethnic differences. For example, findings of unexplained variance when attempting to account for the persistence of high rates of nonviolent crime and criminal violence among African Americans often seem to open the door to more retrogressive and partly racist explanations for racial differences. In that, unaccounted for variance not rightly attributed to structural sources has erroneously and tacitly or explicitly been attributed to race-linked criminality. The likelihood of a drift toward racialist/racist explanations is increased by the fact that findings from many of the most popular and frequently used analytic models appear to suggest that the widely touted effects of economic deprivation alone do not seem to account for observed racial differences in many instances.

This fact has tempted some scholars to ground their explanations in perceived race- or class-anchored defects of character, morals, personality, and biology.

These critiques of data-driven theoretical analyses seem to open the doors to reconceptualization and rethinking of current theories that their null findings have engendered. However, true theory builders among mainstream criminologists have been few. Apart from some attempts at the refinement of extant data-driven models, reviews of the social science literature reveal that few fully elaborated theories aimed at accounting for race differences have appeared. And those that have appeared have not been in response to the seeming failure of most past models and extant theories to fully account for group disparities.

Ethnography and the Search for Theory

Beyond statistical modeling and mainstream criminological theories, an additional reservoir of both explicit and implicit theory has also been tapped in attempts to explain racial differences in crime, including crimes of violence. It comes from a research tradition that is often seen as the polar opposite of the quantitative modeling studies we just described. These include a now voluminous body of work done by anthropologists and sociologists who employ ethnographic, participant observational, and field studies to describe the social lives of a diverse range of populations and a wide array of social behaviors among them. While crime and antisocial conduct are not always the primary targets of their data-gathering and analyses, their work has been consulted in the search for a plausible theory.

Understandably, of great interest to crime analysts attempting to explain crime rates in the United States have been those past and more recent ethnographic studies of those populations displaying the highest rates of crime. These include older and more recent ethnographic studies of (1) the Latino rural poor (Lewis 1959, 1968); (2) disadvantaged urban white ethnics (Whyte 1943); (3) inner-city African Americans in Chicago (Anderson 1978, 1990, 1999; Suttles 1968; Venkatesh 2000, 2006, 2008; and (4) residents of both urban barrios and black ghettos in the city of Los Angeles (Rios 2011). In the wake of the upsurge in rates of violence among urban black and Latino youths during the 1980s, the more recent of these studies have been widely cited and the earlier ones consulted for their insights into the race-crime conundrum.

For many who take on the task of explaining ethnic and racial differences, the takeaway message from the ethnographic literature has

been a tendency to focus on the etiological significance of "subculture" as an explanation for varying crime rates. That is a line of theorizing and explanation to which our theory directly responds. For now, we simply note that in response to ethnographic studies, many quantitative data analysts have attempted to incorporate within their statistical models various measures associated with conceptions such as the subculture of poverty, the subculture of violence, the code of the street, and so on. In highlighting and attempting to measure these kinds of constructs, criminologists have also reached back to consult the much earlier nonethnographic, more theory-driven work on the topic of crime and culture, such as that of Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) and Curtis (1975), who sought at that time to develop an integrated theory of the causes of crime with a focus on group differences.

Subcultures of poverty and violence have come to be seen as the driving forces behind high rates of crime and violence among the urban poor. Many of the numerous quantitative analytic models of crime rates and patterns that have been conducted since the early 1990s now contain among their choice of variables those measures seen as allowing for a testing of the causal effects of these subculture constructs. That work is ongoing. But, despite decades of such qualitative analyses, the utility of the subculture construct for predicting and explaining crime rates and patterns remains the subject of much debate. The very notion of a subculture of poverty has been hotly contested for nearly a half century. And the utility of such newer constructions as Anderson's (1999) "code of the street" has been both supported and questioned (Berg and Srewart 2009; Brezina et al. 2004; Brookman et al. 2011; Drummond, Bolland, and Harris 2011; Jones 2008; Matsuda et al. 2012; Parker and Reckdenwald 2008; Stewart, Schreck, and Simons 2006, 2010; Stewart and Simons 2006; Taylor et al. 2010).

At the same time, it is clear that the more recent ethnographic studies have made valuable contributions to the study of race and crime—and to a better understanding of high rates of African American violence. By continuing a much older research tradition and infusing it with more discussion of race difference in many instances, they have opened the door to potentially new ways of thinking that could lead to greater numbers of and more refined and holistic theories of race and crime. Toward that end, they have already helped to stimulate efforts by contemporary researchers and theorists to rediscover earlier work within sociology and criminology that has offered more ecological and place-centered approaches to the study of race and crime. Further, there has been a movement among contemporary scholars to extend this work and

examine the personal ecology of individual lives within the context of often racialized and economically distressed communities (Loeber and Farrington 1998, 2001). This represents an intersection of research traditions that we will explore in more detail later in this work.

Our theory of race and interpersonal violence also highlights the importance of culture, cultural differences, and culture conflict to explain the ethnic and racial disparities seen in rates of crime in the United States. It builds upon some of the insights gained from work done within the subculture traditions within the social sciences. But, as the reader will also learn, our discussion of the nature and the role of culture leans much more toward traditional anthropological frames than toward criminological and sociological ones.

Moving Beyond the Notion of Subculture

Though relied upon within a wide array of the social sciences, the concept of culture and its relevance for the study of crime often remain ill-defined and elusive (Kornhauser 1978; Kubrin 2015; Kubrin and Wo 2016). Given our use of the idea as a guiding conceptual frame within the theory we propose, let us briefly examine the complexities that lead to those conceptual deficiencies and their relevance to the study of ethnicity, race, and crime. The notion of culture informs our work in several ways. We build upon a long-standing but still emerging tradition within criminological theorizing that has been labeled "cultural criminology." Hayward and Young (2004, 259) describe this approach to the study of crime by noting,

> Above all else, it is the placing of crime and social control in the context of culture; that is, viewing both crime and the agencies of social control as cultural products—as creative constructs. As such, they must be read in terms of the meanings they carry. Furthermore, cultural criminology seeks to highlight the interaction between these two elements: the relationship and the interaction between these two elements.

With this cultural criminology frame as a conceptual and analytic guide, we take issue with some of the central tendencies found within the subculture analytic frame. We contend that much of the extant work within this tradition appears to divide the social world into cultural-analytic dichotomies, such as mainstream versus peripheral, dysfunctional versus functional, or order/ed/ly versus disorder/ed/ly. We contend that while these make for useful heuristics, they often result in a

kind of good culture versus bad culture view of US society. On the other hand, the more globally oriented, quasi-anthropological, and cultural relativity view of the social world to which we adhere takes a different approach. We view human social groupings as operating on a relatively level playing field regarding those attributes that make for differences and attributes defined as cultural. Our theoretical conceptions described throughout this book include a conceptual balancing act that seeks to make evaluative judgments regarding the social consequences that derive from group interactions without resorting to a priori negative labeling of the cultures that appear to shape the contours of those interactions.

Having described the theory-making needs that now confront the criminological enterprise and the challenges those pose, we conclude with a brief summation of our theory.

• Ethnocentric impulses linked to group-level identities, affinities, behaviors, and other dimensions of culture characterize life among humans throughout the world and are a defining feature of human social organization.

• Within-race ethnocentric group identities and behaviors have been downplayed in both public and scholarly discourse in the United States despite much countervailing evidence that attests to their salience and social relevance.

• The adherence to modernity and assimilationist narratives that discount the existence of ethnocentrism has resulted in a body of social theory that largely ignores the ways that the social and social psychological forces derived from ethnocentric impulses and conflicts affect ethnic and racial differences in criminal violence.

• African American communities, especially within the urban context, are comprised of distinctive but largely unacknowledged demographic groupings that share common and hisoricially grounded cultural characteristics, traits, and patterns of behavior. The socio-emotional affinities that bind them are linked not only to their racial identities but also to more localized places of origins within the United States. Ethnocentric intergroup conflict among those diverse affinity groupings has been an enduring, but often ignored, feature of life in Black America.

• Intrarace, ethnocentrism-driven conflict as a contributor to heightened levels of noncollective, interpersonal violence has also been an enduring but underexamined feature of the social lives of Americans of European heritages and possibly Americans of other races as well. Hence, the broader sociocultural, demographic, and ecological forces that produce patterns of intergroup relations conducive to interpersonal violence in the United States are race neutral. But, historically systemic

racism in the United States has set in motion social forces that (re)configure and amplify those forces in ways that contribute to the excess of violence found within black communities.

On the surface, many of the refinements and amendments to extant theorizing on race, crime, and interpersonal violence may appear to be mere quibbles regarding the varying degrees of emphasis placed on the factors nearly all social analysts agree to be of vital importance for understanding ethnic and race differences. However, we think that our work offers new and unique insights into these extensively studied phenomena.

On Hidden Diversity Among African Americans

Given the emphasis we place on culture-linked differences among subpopulations of African Americans, it is important to acknowledge that we are not alone in making such claims. Caldwell-Colbert, Henderson-Daniel, and Dudley-Grant (2003) noted the often unacknowledged complexity and diversity of social life in Black America. Like we do, they view such diversity as arising from or correlated with myriad culture-linked characteristics including skin color, ancestry, geographical region, and dialect. Lott (2011) describes African Americans as having a culture within a culture, where she observed generational differences in ideological views among African Americans as well as differences based on socioeconomic status. Others have also noted the need to avoid viewing black communities as undifferentiated wholes. Jargowsky (1996) described hidden economic diversity within black "disadvantaged" urban communities.

Both ethnographers and psychologists have alluded to or described cultural variations among black Americans. Anderson's (1999) accounts of "street folk" and "decent folk" point to cultural differences that are more than markers of social class. Robinson's (2014) ethnographic study highlighted the existence of often unacknowledged rural-urban and regional differences within Black America. Many African American psychologists have also noted the need to move beyond simplistic notions of black communities as comprised of a singular subculture to develop more nuanced descriptions of cultural differences within them (e.g., Boykin [1983] and Jagers [1996]. When discussing violence among urban black males, Jagers, Mattis, and Walker (2003, 304) describe "the complex intersections of culture, class, and race" that lead to "multiple moral communities among urban African Americans." They propose the existence of four racialized cultural identities within

urban Black America, each representing moral cognitions and emotions that prompt or inhibit violence by members of distinct identity groups. In Chapter 6, we incorporate these earlier insights into our theory.

The reader will soon learn of our heavy reliance on Berlin's (2010) informative and well-researched accounting of the African American past. As a guidepost for our work, it proved to be an invaluable resource. His well-researched analysis documents and offers a historical perspective to the kinds of cultural diversity within Black America that our theory presupposes. Like Berlin, we emphasize the need to see *race* as a social construct. By treating both Black America and White America as complex human aggregations in the pages that follow, we seek to avoid the pervasive tendency toward racial essentialism that permeates much public discourse regarding group differences in the United States and beyond. Unlike Berlin, however, we have chosen to make cultural heterogeneity among African Americans the conceptual fulcrum of our work.

Finally, we note the sage words of Oliver Cox (1948, ix), who pointed to the need for a theory such as ours, when he said, "Caste, class, and race are social concepts widely employed in discussions of current social problems, and yet neither the theoretical meaning nor the practical implications of these concepts, as they apply to concrete situations, have been satisfactorily examined." By examining these concepts within the framework of our largely criminological treatise, we cover a vast conceptual terrain that has been explored in much greater detail by others. Although we cite much of that work in support of the claims we make, the need to condense and summarize our findings and the use of time-stamped secondary sources comes at at cost. At times, it means that our discussion conceals the complex, nuanced nature and intensity of the ongoing debates found within those research arenas. To obtain a firmer grasp of the conceptual underpinnings of our work, the reader must examine more of that storehouse of research on conceptions of culture and subculture, ethnic and race relations, homicide, and the histories of Black and White America. As exemplars, we recommend to the reader James Short's (1997) examination of ethnicity and vilolent crime and his (2003) illuminating discussion of ethnic segregation and violence in the United States, which offer exceptions to tendency among criminologists to ignore explanations of ethnic racial disparity. In the intergroup relations arena we recommend Charles Hirschman's (1983) excellent review of the literature on American ethnic and racial diversity. Bates (2006) and Fenton (2013) informed our discussion of the concept of ethnicity.