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Book Review: The Study of Violent Crime: Its Correlates and Concerns

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Mire, S. and Roberson, C. *The Study of Violent Crime: Its Correlates and Concerns*. Boca Raton, FL Taylor and Francis. (2011). \$90.95 (Hardback), ISBN 9781439807477.

Everyone “knows” that “stranger danger” is a real threat to the safety and well-being of every man woman and child in the country, right? We also “know” that your friends and family are the safest people to be around, regardless of the circumstances. These are notions that we are taught when we are young, stay with us into adulthood, and shape the way we think about violent crimes and the people that commit them. But is this way of thinking necessarily based in truth?

In *The Study of Violent Crime: Its Correlates and Concerns*, Scott Mire and Cliff Roberson seek to address the disconnect between perception and reality regarding violent crime in America. Mire is a former assistant professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. During his time in academia he has authored several academic articles and co-authored two textbooks. Roberson is an emeritus professor of criminal justice at Washburn University in Topeka Kansas. His extensive works include authoring or co-authoring over 50 books and texts on legal subjects.

Mire and Roberson begin their book with some welcome clarification of terms. Chapter one is devoted to defining what it is they are referring to when they use the word “violence” and also defining the different types of violence discussed in the book. This enables the reader to remain in sync with the authors when they discuss important concepts regarding the study of violence.

Chapters two and three are the most salient chapters with regard to addressing perceptions versus reality as to the prevalence of violent crime and long-term trends of violent crime in the U.S. and in Europe (chapter two) and the conditions that are the most likely to contribute to a high occurrence of violent crime (chapter three). Chapter three is interesting in that Mire and Roberson discuss well documented correlates of crime, poverty, substance abuse, low education, and abuse/neglect, but they also add one of their own – values.

The authors explain the need to include values as a main correlate by stating that “societies largely governed by material possession will experience a long-term erosion of the basic foundation from which happiness is attainable.” (p.48). The basic foundation to which the authors refer is never defined, so it is impossible to know exactly what is meant. Regarding the relationship between values and violence, it is described as “complex” with “many mediating variables that can influence

the cognitions and actions that propel on toward or away from violent responses.” (p.48). No examples of the potentially mediating variables are provided, again making it impossible to know what the author’s intent. One other point that is important to note regarding the argument to add values to the main correlates. While the authors state “evidence does support a relationship.” (p.48), that evidence is not referenced.

Chapters four through seven focus on various perspectives on the causation of violent behavior. Chapter four focuses on that the authors label as the sociological aspects of violence, and provides a summary of theories set forth by Durkheim, Merton, Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin, Hirschi, Sutherland, and others. These summaries are short and provide a basic overview of several well-known theories. In the same fashion, chapter five summarizes what are labeled psychological and psychiatric approaches to understanding violence. Beccaria, Bentham, and Freud and their contributions to the understanding of violence are summarized. The chapter also includes summaries of emotional problem theories, mental disorders, sociopathic theories, social learning theories, and a far too brief discussion of PTSD.

Chapter six is similar in structure to the previous two chapters and discusses biological factors and their relationship to violence. Lombroso and Ferri are discussed, as are various body-type theories. There are short (two paragraph) discussions of premenstrual syndrome and chromosomal abnormality, but there is no discussion of the developments in the fields of genetics or brain chemistry and any possible relationship they might have to violent crime. Instead the chapter includes an argument against the use of biological factors as a predictor of violent behavior.

Exposure to violence and the link to violent behavior is the focus of chapter seven. Exposure to violence first-hand by being a victim of or a witness to violent actions are discussed as are exposures to violence in the media, such as video games, song lyrics, television, and the movies. The second half of the chapter consists of excerpts from briefs filed by both the California state attorney general and software developers in *Video Software Dealers Association v. Schwarzenegger* (2009) regarding the arguments for and against limiting the sale of certain video games.

Chapters eight, nine, and ten are straightforward and provide definitions of the various violent crimes, discuss gang violence and hate crimes respectively. Chapter eleven, however is more closely related to chapter three and seems out of place. Chapter eleven is dedicated to the proposal that shame *causes* violence. The authors point out that not everyone who experiences profound shame commits violent acts, but they

do postulate that for violence to occur, shame must be present. This is a bold position to take considering the lack of empirical evidence cited to support it.

The final two chapters of the book provide a synopsis of the history of using punishment as a deterrent to violent behavior, and a very brief discussion of victims and victimology. Chapter twelve traces the development of legal punishments for violent crime up to the inquisition, then skips ahead to the mid twentieth century with a discussion concerning the time periods during which rehabilitation policies gained popularity and the eventual change to more retributive policies for offenders gained favor. The final chapter discusses victimology theories and includes brief descriptions of Mendelsohn and Von Hentig. What is missing is any discussion modern theories such as routine activities theory or the opportunity model of victimization.

There is not a final chapter in which the authors make a definitive statement concerning their stated goals for the book and what they feel was accomplished by its writing, which it sorely needs. Some bold claims were made in this book and it would have been useful for the authors to provide a "big picture" summary to explain how the various pieces of the book fit together with the goals of the book.

For me, the bold positions taken in the book, values as a main correlate of violence and shame as the direct cause of violence, distract from its overall utility. This book addresses the myths regarding the nature of violent crime quite well, and provides the reader with useful albeit brief summaries of many of the theories regarding violent crime. I can see this book being appropriate for course work at the upper end of undergraduate studies or the beginning of graduate level study, depending upon the structure of the course for which this book would be intended to be used.

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