

International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



Book Review

Roach, Jason and Pease, Ken (2013) *Evolution and Crime*. London and New York: Routledge.

Anthony Walsh

Boise State University, USA

Biosocial criminology is taking the criminology world by storm. Most scholarship in the area, however, has focused on genetics and neurobiology, with the third leg of the biosocial stool, evolutionary psychology, being relatively neglected. Thus, *Evolution and Crime* by Jason Roach and Ken Pease is a much-needed and welcome addition to the growing interest in biosocial criminology. While there have been a number of books addressing the evolutionary aspects of criminal behavior, as far as I am aware, this is the first book entirely devoted to applying evolutionary thought to both pro- and anti-social behavior. The book devotes chapters to many fascinating topics related to criminal behavior, such as a theory of mind, altruism, empathy, violence, and gender differences in criminal behavior.

Roach and Pease provide criminologists unfamiliar with evolutionary theory a thorough grounding in its theory, methods and literature, taking pains to assure traditional criminologists that the evolutionary perspective is environmentally friendly. After all, it was environmental conditions to which ancient organisms adapted and which selected the genetic variants that underlie the characteristics and traits that were adaptive. Roach and Pease take on the various objections to evolutionary thinking that traditional social scientists, creationists, and others have offered, such as the ubiquitous charge that evolutionary accounts are 'just so' stories, and demolish them. They do so with thoroughness and with a dry wit that makes the text very readable. They appear to be making a strong case for evolutionary psychology theory to become a meta-theory for criminology, quoting Theodosius Dobzhansky's: 'Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution' (p. 10).

Of course, biologists carry out the bulk of their work without making reference to evolutionary theory, but it is available to them as a theoretical umbrella enabling them to link their work to other subfields of biology, and as a guide enabling them to understand their work in ultimate-level terms. This is the same service that evolutionary theory can provide for social science in general. Because human beings and their behavior are as much products of evolution as plants and other animals, a

growing number of social and behavioral scientists are 'gaining enthusiasm for a Darwinian framework, which has the potential to tie together the forest of hypotheses about human behavior now out there' (de Waal 2002: 187).

Roach and Pease masterfully illustrate de Waal's contention throughout their book, showing how comfortably evolutionary theory accommodates the sociological, endocrinological, genetic, and neurobiological literature on crime. I was particularly interested in their discussion of empathy and altruism as they relate to crime, as this dovetails with my own recent work (Walsh 2011). Altruism—the active concern for the well-being of others—ties individuals and groups together and is, in many ways, the polar opposite of criminality. Altruism is motivated by empathy, which is underlain by oxytocin, a hormone that triggers the caregiving so vital to a species with altricial young such as ours. Thus, a behavior (altruism), a 'feeling' (empathy), and an hormone (oxytocin), all of which are proximate-level phenomena, can be brought under the ultimate-level umbrella of evolutionary theory that asks about the function of an evolved trait in terms of its contribution to survival and reproductive success.

As much as I loved this book, a review is not a review without some criticism. My first criticism is Roach and Pease's neglect of fear when discussing the evolutionary roots of gender differences in criminal behavior. The authors write that Anne Campbell's 'staying alive' hypothesis is the best 'attempt to account for gender difference in criminality' (p. 66), but ignore her emphasis on difference in fear between males and females. Campbell's hypothesis is ultimately about parental investment, but she takes pains to explain why greater fear in females is a major factor in maternal investment and why it would have been adaptive in evolutionary environments. Fear joins empathy (which Roach and Pease do discuss at length) as the major natural enemies of crime. Empathy is other-oriented and prevents us from exploiting others because of our emotional and cognitive investment in their wellbeing. Fear is self-oriented and prevents one from committing criminal acts out of fear of the consequences to one's self.

The other criticism is their take on the role of the sex ratio in shifting crime rates. Of the many points Roach and Pease make in this book, this is the only one that caused me to think 'Hey; hang on there!' They seem to be saying that a high sex ratio (more men than women) 'increases competition between men and levels of violence increase as a consequence' (p.67). In fact, all the literature of which I am aware points to exactly the opposite; that is, societies with low sex ratios (more women than men) have greater levels of violence. This literature is unequivocal on this (reviewed in Walsh 2014). Low sex ratio societies tend to be unstable, misogynistic, and licentious, while in high sex ratio societies, women are valued as romantic love objects and mothers, male commitment to marriage is strong, and society is stable. Low sex ratios lead to high rates of illegitimacy and divorce, resulting in a large number of unsupervised fatherless children getting themselves into all sorts of trouble on the streets.

Roach and Pease are cautiously optimistic about mainstream criminology's acceptance of evolutionary criminology. However, they don't sound very optimistic when they characterize it as 'a recently fertilized ovum immersed in uncongenial amniotic fluid with a father (traditional criminology) set upon termination of the pregnancy' (p. 104). Given the blizzard of books being published on biosocial criminology and the numerous articles being published in mainstream journals, I am more optimistic since I see

evolutionary psychology as part of a broader biosocial enterprise. Many traditional criminologists with their woeful lack of training in biology and fear of 'hard' science (Cooper, Walsh and Ellis 2010) may resist moving into the twenty-first century ('What? Me retool at my age!'). However, young bucks in criminology who have grown up in the genomic age are apparently willing to welcome the 'auld enemy' into the discipline as a very robust ally. As for the old timers marinated in the Marxist criminology of the 60s and 70s; perhaps Max Planck's famous remark that 'Science progresses one funeral at a time' is appropriate.

In short, this book is a scholarly and often witty introduction to evolutionary thinking as it applies to pro- and anti-social behavior, and a jolly good read that I strongly recommend to all criminologists.

Correspondence: Anthony Walsh PhD, Criminal Justice Department, Boise State University, Boise, Idaho 83725, USA. Email: twalsh@boisestate.edu

References

- Cooper J, Walsh A and Ellis L (2010) Is criminology ripe for a paradigm shift? Evidence from a survey of American criminologists. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 21: 332-347.
- de Waal F (2008) Putting the altruism back into altruism: The evolution of empathy. *Annual Review of Psychology* 59: 279-300.
- Walsh A (2011) *Feminist Criminology Through a Biosocial Lens*. Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press.
- Walsh A (2014) *Biosociology: Bridging the Biology-Sociology Divide*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Press.