Old theories and new approaches: Evaluating Freda Adler’s theory of low crime and its implications for criminology

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Abstract
Many years ago, Freda Adler (1983) sought to explain the full variation of crime rates through the notion of synnomie. Although Adler’s research was incomplete and somewhat flawed, it drew attention to low crime societies as the subject of criminological research. In this article I critically revisit Adler’s ideas in order to encourage a more methodologically rigorous approach to researching low crime societies. The main issues this article addresses are the assumption of ‘low’ crime and the meaning this label entails, the implications of ‘norm cohesion’ and the need for an alternative approach when studying ‘low’ crime. I conclude with implications for criminological research in the hope that this will invite future inquiry into matters that lie outside the traditional criminological gaze.

Keywords
comparative criminology, crime rates, culture, low crime societies, synnomie

Introduction
Criminologists have spent relatively little time explaining why some nations have much lower crime rates than others. Marshall Clinard (1978) was one of the first to investigate this issue in his work on Switzerland. He concluded that certain structural characteristics, such as an older offender age group or a relatively small, decentralized municipal structure, were primarily responsible for Switzerland’s low crime rate. Five years later, Freda Adler (1983) included Switzerland in her qualitative study on ‘nations not obsessed with crime’, only to repeat Clinard’s conclusions, that Switzerland—and other similar nations—presented unique examples of social order. Shortly thereafter, Clinard and Adler were
highly criticized by Danish criminologist Flemming Balvig (1988) for being narrow, unsystematic and US-centric. He argued that, from a Scandinavian point of view, Switzerland’s crime rates were not low at all and that the picture of crime depends on social constructions of problems and non-problems.

Balvig’s (1988) main point was that criminology does not serve itself well by creating a dominant, high crime, primarily US research base. He contended that Clinard’s observations of ‘remarkable’ occurrences—such as leaving doors unlocked—were not at all unique to Danish, or Scandinavian, eyes. From an American point of view, Balvig argued, most of Western Europe would have been seen as ‘remarkably’ low crime societies. Even within the United States, the focus remains on big city, high crime areas. One wonders how Clinard would have explained the ‘cities with little crime’ within his own country. John Braithwaite (1989a: 129) described this narrow criminological gaze as a major weakness of the discipline:

Criminology has not done very well at explaining why some societies, some periods of history, some types of people, some types of cities have higher crime rates than others. The failure to explain has meant that criminologists have had little of use to say to policy makers. The failure to explain is linked to a weak commitment to theory in criminology.

The study of low crime, in short, is important to understand the entire range of variability in crime and theory.

When Adler asked, over 20 years ago, why do some nations have much lower crime rates than others? her answer was ‘synnomie’; the opposite of anomie. Similar to Durkheim’s concept of social solidarity, synnomie was defined by Adler (1983: 158) as ‘a congruence of norms to the point of harmonious accommodation’. Adler’s notion of ‘synnomie’ as we shall see, is incomplete and somewhat flawed. However, the significance of her research is not in her theory per se, but in its attention to the study of low crime societies. As mainstream criminology continues, for the most part, to overlook such places it is time for a re-evaluation of Adler’s work, its assumptions, empirical evidence and methodology. What, for instance, is a ‘low crime’ (and subsequently ‘high crime’) society? Does Adler’s theory of low crime fall into the same trap of many other criminological theories, failing to consider the opposite end of the spectrum (i.e. high crime societies)? How can we test a theory when the outcome is something that, by definition, does not exist?

A macro-social theory of crime

Adler sought to explain crime rates in 10 ‘low crime nations’: Ireland; Switzerland; (then) East Germany; Bulgaria; Japan; Nepal; Peru; Costa Rica; Algeria; and Saudi Arabia. Such countries revealed an assortment of social, political and economic characteristics. They ranged from homogenous to diverse populations, democratic to socialist political orientations, civil and common to Islamic law systems and sparse to dense population concentrations. Since these descriptive data told her little about why some nations maintained low crime rates, Adler turned to qualitative methods to explore social and criminal justice characteristics that might contribute to this phenomenon. Through interviews with
officials and a review of secondary literature, she found several underlying commonalities that she labelled ‘synnomie’.

According to Adler (1983: 130–3) low-crime societies witnessed considerable popular support for the criminal justice system and exhibited a ‘strong family system’ supplemented by religious, educational or ‘community’ institutions. She argued that ‘above all, the family’ in these nations was the most important tool in preserving and maintaining low crime, even though other institutions could also act as a ‘surrogate’ family (Adler, 1983: 130). The crime control function of these social organs was to ‘transmit and maintain values by providing for a sharing of norms and by ensuring cohesiveness’ (1983: 130).

In short, Adler attributed low crime primarily to cohesion and shared values. Societies existed on a progressive scale ranging from synnomie to anomie. High cohesion of norms facilitated the effectiveness of ‘collective conscience’ in maintaining social order whereas low cohesion of norms lead to social problems (Adler, 1995). As societies progress, according to Adler, solidarity weakens; different groups and values emerge, some dominating others. During this process, traditional institutions that provide collective norms and bonds, such as the family and religion were also weakened, thereby diminishing the effect of the ‘collective conscience’.

A critical evaluation of synnomie

Previous researchers have already recognized the ‘shaky foundations’ (Braithwaite, 1989b: 84) of Adler’s analysis and conclusions (see also Balvig, 1988; McCullagh, 1996; Beirne and Messerschmidt, 2006). However, the point is not to return to her work merely to criticize it. Instead, it can be used to make broader points about cross-cultural research. In particular, Adler’s study demonstrates the need to assess critically how criminologists interpret ideologies, meanings and assumptions in comparative accounts of crime.

Ideology and meaning: the example of traditionalism

A substantial limitation to Adler’s research that shadows her theorizing and subsequent conclusions sprang from her unproblematic and often undefined use of the concept of ‘traditionalism’. Though she did not specifically tie traditionalism to synnomie, it was implicit in her view that shared norms and values maintained informal social control despite forces of development and modernization. In this sense, ‘traditionalism’ appeared as an ideal set of values that had largely been lost to social change (see Souryal, 2001). Such a view resonated with the anthropological idea of the ‘noble savage’, where western scientists, amid wars and genocides, considered foragers as ‘vestiges of original human innocence from which the rest of human society descended into chaos’ (McCall and Shields, 2008: 5).

Adler mentioned traditionalism in several contexts. Some nations maintained a ‘traditional family life’; others a ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ judicial culture; Algerian ‘citizens are urged to uphold old traditions’ (Adler, 1983: 121–2); Japan is ‘one of the most traditional societies, clinging to ancient faiths and time-honored codes of behavior’ (Adler, 1983: 123). It is unclear exactly what these ‘codes of behavior’ or ‘old traditions’ entailed, but it is clear that Adler considered them to be positive. She did not attempt to unravel
the varying social meanings and ideological roots of such broad social concepts. We are then left to speculate (or worse yet assume) that the role of traditionalism must be functionally equivalent across cultures.

In fact, Inglehart and Baker’s (2000) analysis of World Values Survey data suggests that several of Adler’s nations were dispersed across the traditional/secular dimension. They defined ‘traditional’ values as low tolerance for abortion, homosexuality and divorce, preference for male-dominated social institutions, strong religious beliefs and the overwhelming authority of the family (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). East Germany, Japan, Bulgaria and Switzerland clustered towards the secular side of the scale, while Peru and Ireland—the only other two of Adler’s nations in the analysis—clustered as more traditional. Other nations considered to have very high rates of crime, group near Adler’s nations (i.e. South Africa and Philippines near Peru), calling into question the relationship between traditionalism and crime, as well as the intrinsic appeal of these values.

In their comparison of the Amish and the Japanese, Kidder and Hostetler (1990) show how traditionalism can be an ideological and political tool used by elites to obscure those actions which contradict professed cultural beliefs. When national governments hesitate to publicize adverse crime statistics that may reflect on the moral state of their society, it is reasonable to assume government officials would similarly aim to present a favourable picture (van Dijk, 2008). At the very least, official data must be considered as only one perspective on the order and functioning of a society (King and Wincup, 2007). Of course this censoring also occurs in qualitative and ethnographic research (see for example Wardhaugh, 2007), however government officials may have a particularly strong economic and ideological need to maintain a positive national reputation.

It is surprising then that Adler did not attempt to distinguish rhetoric from reality in her account of socializing practices or social institutions. In her discussion of ‘education’ in then-Soviet satellites Bulgaria and East Germany, for example, she merely reiterated official declarations without raising any questions over the ideological and psychological significance of such training: ‘Classes are free for all types and degrees of learning ... Groundwork for the development of good social habits and a keen sense of responsibility, organization and a collective responsibility is laid’ (Adler, 1983: 38, on Bulgaria). Although access to formal education expanded in many communist states after the Second World War, an unequal distribution of services among the working classes, rural areas and women persisted (Connor, 1975; Dölling, 1991; Kenez, 2006). In any case, ‘education’ does more than simply inform, it socializes populations into expectations of the role of the State and the community and, under any form of governance, will usually reflect the interests of those in power (Akers, 2009; Staar, 1982).

Adler’s work reveals not only the care criminologists must take in interpreting official discourse on ideologically charged topics, but also the difficulties inherent in examining concepts across cultures and geography. Adler only interviewed English-speaking officials. Yet, as others have noted, ideas converge and diverge across countries (Melossi, 2000). Words do not always mean the same thing everywhere (Karstedt, 2001; Newburn and Sparks, 2004; Tonry, 2007). Nelken (2009: 305) provides an example of the Dutch term gedogen, as a concept ‘not readily translatable into English or any other language’. In English gedogen is often translated as ‘tolerance’. Yet this translation fails to encapsulate the Dutch penal philosophy that punishing all illegality is fruitless in achieving an
orderly society, thus promoting the use of non-judicial measures when possible (Uitermark, 2004; Nelken, 2009).

Adler’s mono-linguistic analysis—surely still a common failing of much Anglo-American criminology—raises profound questions about the explanatory value of many of her key concepts. In particular, her failure to define ‘traditional’ and ‘traditionalism’ weakens the theory of synnomie, since all other social control mechanisms appear to hinge on the preservation of pre-existing ‘traditional’ institutions and practices. What are these values, institutions and norms that are supposedly so dynamic in integrating opposing cultural beliefs yet so stable throughout dramatic changes in political, economic and social structure? How have these particular nations managed to avoid the modern societal progression towards anomie? For that matter, are these nations truly unaffected by macro-social processes of change? These questions ultimately cannot be addressed by interviewing officials, and require a multifaceted socio-historical approach in order to capture the longitudinal processes of societal transformation.

**Social change and the assumption of low crime**

Since Adler’s work was published others have sought to refine her idea of synnomie. Buendia (1989), for example, included it in his cross-cultural model analysing crime in urban centres. He postulated that the relationship between synnomie and modernization was not simply a negative one but rather a complex two-way interaction between ‘traditional’ and modern forces. In his view, formal law can erode the strength of traditional institutions while drawing heavily on traditional values and acting to reinforce them. Buendia’s comprehensive study of eight cities brought into question the level of crime and cohesion in one of Adler’s sites: San José, Costa Rica. While Buendia examined only one city in Costa Rica, he nevertheless found evidence that community crime prevention, cohesion and trust in the criminal justice system were all weaker than Adler had realized. Buendia’s findings have important implications for Adler’s theory of low crime societies. Social and economic changes brought about by globalization in the past three decades may have had a substantial impact on crime (Findlay, 1999; Sheptycki, 2008). Therefore a reassessment of the original 10 low crime nations is needed in order to ascertain the effect these global forces have had on social institutions and crime.

Some researchers have already drawn attention to these effects. Eisner and Killias (2004) revealed homicides against family members were much higher in Switzerland than other Western European countries, and that crime trends showed increases in interpersonal violence over the past 20 years (see also Niggli and Pfister, 1997). McCullagh (1996) reported similar rising crime trends in Ireland, which he accorded to the decline in the strength of social institutions. Peru and Costa Rica ranked in the top half among Latin American nations for homicide, with large increases since the 1970s, which Ayers (1998) argued is due to large-scale economic and social decay in the region. While Japan still maintains low interpersonal crime rates, Leonardsen (2004) drew attention to the rising property crime, unknown level of domestic violence and high corruption. The absorption of the German Democratic Republic into a unified Germany presents a unique post-Soviet case that has also recorded an increase in total, but especially in xenophobic violence (Oberwittler and Höfer, 2005). Transition from Soviet rule has dramatically affected
Bulgaria’s social, political and economic structure, resulting in a significant increase, and more recent, decrease in crime (Bezlov and Gounev, 2005). In Algeria, a post-colonial struggle for national identity divided politics and localities well beyond independence, culminating in the civil war of the 1990s (Charrad, 2001). Saudi Arabia has maintained official records of low crime, but as mentioned earlier (see note 2), it stands accused of regular human rights violations (Wardak, 2005). Finally, Neapolitan (1999) classified Nepal as a low violence nation, yet drew attention to the police beatings and torture, economic inequality, corruption and child trafficking.

If all nations exist on a synnomie–anomie (or ‘traditional–modern’, LaFree, 2005) continuum, what caused societies that were supposedly stable in the face of modernization during the 1970s to become susceptible to macro-social changes? This question cannot be answered because there is a fundamental problem with its accompanying inherent assumption: that the ‘traditional’ societies at the opposite end of the continuum are truly crime-free. The brief evidence reported above problematizes Adler’s portrayal of her 10 societies, and we may question their placement on the synnomic side of the continuum. This issue is not unique to synnomie, however, as most comparative accounts suggest that nations follow a linear path from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’, ‘agrarian’ to ‘industrial’, ‘undeveloped’ to ‘developed’, ‘autocratic’ to ‘democratic’ or ‘savage’ to ‘civilized’ (Clinard and Abbott, 1973; Shelley, 1981; Elias, 1982; LaFree and Tseloni, 2006). Each rests on the assumption that at one end, whichever it may be, crime is low and social life is idyllic. How then, do we determine what is or is not a low crime society?

Defining low crime

Before exploring the various meanings of a ‘low crime society’, it is important to understand how Adler defined the concept. Adler chose her low crime nations based on United Nations arrest rates from 1975–6, with the choices validated by scholars and government officials in the region. The noticeable methodological limitations of that data flowed from their reliance on subjective and possibly ideologically driven opinions to determine what constitutes ‘low’ crime, the use of arrest rates as an indicator and the unacknowledged variation in definitions of crime. Although these may seem relatively straightforward problems that can be solved by more sophisticated worldwide data collection (van Dijk, 2008), they cannot be overlooked as significant weaknesses in a thesis centred on the absence of crime.

The United Nations’ data collection techniques at this time were far from reliable (Neapolitan, 1997). Many nations were (and still are) reluctant to share crime statistics in fear they might reflect poorly on their political leadership (Brodeur, 2007; van Dijk, 2008). In fact, van Dijk reports that this political resistance was a significant factor in preventing Adler from including comparative high crime nations in her research. It is clear that strong ideological influence can affect even more ‘objective’ means of assessing levels of crime. Further, arrest data are often problematic since many reported crimes never lead to arrest (Junger-Tas and Marshall, 1999). Researching ‘low crime’ entails assessing not only why those do not lead to arrests, but also why crime may not be reported. At some point criminologists must acknowledge a certain amount of underreporting and move on, but when a concept hinges on the lack of reported crimes, underreporting becomes a major threat to explanation.
Adler’s use of crime statistics in defining low crime societies may be problematic, but correctable. Many of her limitations stemmed from the fact that this was the United Nations’ first world crime survey, and that the practice was relatively new (van Dijk, 2008). Thus the cross-sectional nature of the data, the use of arrest as an indicator and the low validity of the statistics are somewhat shallow critiques. Yet, there remains the more basic matter of presenting a uniform definition of ‘low crime society’. For instance, how low is ‘low crime’? Is there a threshold where, if crime rises, these societies are no longer thought to have low crime? Or are low crime societies to be considered along the lines of peaceful societies, where there is a near absence to non-existence of violence (Bonta, 1996)? What crimes are included when the label ‘low crime’ is applied? Furthermore, are statistics the appropriate means of identifying low crime societies?

Based on a solely statistical standpoint, low crime societies may vary. To illustrate this variation, I ranked nations based on homicide rates gathered from the United Nations and World Health Organization (supplemented by UN or police data) for the year 2004, arguably the most reliable data to use in cross-national studies (Neapolitan, 1997). Ignoring for now the issue of simplifying ‘crime’ to homicide as a representation of overall violence (see Marshall et al., 2009), an interesting array emerges (see Table 1). The first thing to notice is the rather varied selection of low crime societies, ranging from small Pacific Island nations, to Islamic nations to Western European nations. In contrast, the high crime societies are clustered in African and Central and South American regions. This ranking becomes somewhat arbitrary when subsequent contrasts and comparisons are attempted (e.g. how does one compare Japan to South Africa?). Furthermore, the slight differences in low homicide rates suggests, as shown in Table 1, a much wider display of seemingly low crime societies than is to be expected.

If Adler’s regional approach is taken, and low and high crime nations are grouped for comparison by geographical region, a different set of nations emerges (see Table 2). This may be a more sound method of comparison, but it does not solve definitional problems. The definition of ‘low’ becomes increasingly vague in this exercise and the presence of certain nations in the ‘low crime’ category must be regarded with scepticism (i.e. Somalia).

**Table 1.** Ten lowest and highest homicide rates per 100,000 by Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Lowest Country</th>
<th>Rate</th>
<th>Highest Country</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>United Arab</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Micronesia</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Palau</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Lowest and highest homicide rates per 100,000, by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Lowest Rate</th>
<th>Highest Country</th>
<th>Highest Rate</th>
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<td>South West Asia</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
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<td>Jordan</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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<td>Qatar</td>
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<td>6.7</td>
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<td>Nepal</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Europe</td>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East</td>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Bosnia and</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>6.6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Herzegovina</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>West and Central</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>10.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Norway</td>
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<td>Latvia</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Republic of</td>
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<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>Bermuda</td>
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<td>Congo</td>
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<td>North America(^b)</td>
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<td>0.6</td>
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Notes

\(^a\) Regions were predefined by the United Nations.

\(^b\) Only the top lowest and highest were included here because there were only three nations total in the region.


The reliability assurance associated with international homicide statistics quickly becomes irrelevant when other crimes are factored into the comparison. Even a commonly accepted low crime society such as Japan comes under scrutiny when certain ‘hidden’ crimes are considered (Goold, 2004). Issues of reporting, official bias and political ideology again emerge as central issues in assessing low crime societies. Although these are not unique problems for comparative criminologists, the issues seem particularly sensitive for low
crime research because of a rather dominating preference of politicians to appear effective in crime control policies.

Many cross-national researchers accept these variations in definitions and statistical thresholds as little more than the context of their work, but in so doing they risk overlooking the underlying meaning of labelling a certain act as crime. In other words, accepting the status of a low crime society based on a statistical representation of crime assumes that the absence of a count indicates the absence of an actual behaviour. This may be somewhat less of a problem for high crime societies, since it is reasonable to assume a certain count represents the same amount of acts, however they may be defined. In contrast, there is no way to ascertain whether a criminal act did not occur with any certainty. Indeed, the absence of a statistic may be due to many reasons other than the absence of an act, including the inability to detect behaviours, the unwillingness to police certain populations for behaviours or the conscious decision not to label certain behaviours as illegitimate (Riches, 1986).

The latter example is of particular importance to this article. If synnomie and low crime societies are to be interpreted via the state of norms within their social contexts, then researchers must be careful to examine the qualitative content of such shared beliefs. The norms dictating appropriate social behaviour may vary from society to society, and crime statistics are often incapable of accounting for these applications of the legitimate/illegitimate label. Thus we cannot assume based on crime statistics that acts that may be considered criminal are not occurring within a certain society based solely on the absence of a number. Further, if criminologists place norm cohesion at the centre of low crime research, then they must examine more deeply the roles of norms in each society.

**The ‘norm’ in ‘norm cohesion’**

The main tenant of synnomie is the idea that shared values and norms, reinforced through social institutions, create a harmonious environment discouraging norm violations (Adler, 1983, 1995). One would assume that these norms are non-violent, and govern social interactions in a co-operative, non-confictual manner, as in Bonta’s (1996) ‘peaceful societies’. However, Adler’s lack of in-depth analysis of specific norms combined with the inegalitarian implication of so-called ‘traditional’ values in low crime societies brings this assumption into question. Furthermore, ‘cohesion’ or ‘shared values’ are terms that have been used often in low crime (Komiya, 1999; Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000; Leonardsen, 2004) and neighbourhood studies (Sampson et al., 1997; Flint and Robinson, 2008), but are somewhat lacking in analytical depth.

Fehr and Gächter (1998: 854, emphasis in original) define a social norm as ‘(i) a behavioral regularity that is (ii) based on a socially shared belief how one ought to behave which triggers (iii) the enforcement of the prescribed behavior by informal social sanctions’. One would logically assume that low crime societies consist of like behaviours that stem from non-violent beliefs that are reinforced through the involvement of everyone. On the surface, this view fits nicely with the above-mentioned perspectives. However, once again questions arise: What behaviours? Where do these non-violent beliefs come from? What do non-violent beliefs consist of? How do informal actors engage in sanctioning without resorting to the use or threat of violence?
Low crime and related literature (see, for example, Sampson et al., 1997) imply that norms and values are inherently related to group cohesiveness, with a particular emphasis on ‘trust’ (Shapiro, 1987). Trust is an essential concept that appears across disciplines when investigating social interactions (Bonta, 1996; Sampson et al., 1997; Fehr and Gächter, 1998; Chan et al., 2006). Although many criminologists assume an inherently positive quality in generalized and interpersonal trust, some research indicates that the relationship between trust and crime may be more complex than presumed. As a macro-social concept, ‘trust’ can be an indicator of social capital, normative cohesion, social ‘distance’ and community strength (Putnam, 2000; Halpern, 2001). Trust and distrust can be directed at (and received from) individuals, groups, authorities, politicians, society as a whole, social institutions and laws. Trust can be general and specific, simultaneously inclusive and exclusive (Nelken, 1994). Among these various meanings and definitions, the theoretical mechanisms of trust are unclear in relation to crime.

In Japan, for example, comparative researchers have noticed that levels of generalized trust are significantly lower than in western nations (Miller and Kanazawa, 2000; Miller and Mitamura, 2003). This seemingly contradicts the common characterization of Japanese society as orderly due to a highly trusting and collectivistic culture (Adler, 1983; Bayley, 1991; Fukuyama, 1996). However, when one looks closer at Japanese social structure, it is clear that trust—as a concept that requires vulnerability in reference to another’s actions (Nelken, 1994)—is irrelevant due to a socialized and structured assurance that others will behave responsibly (Miller and Kanazawa, 2000). In other words, since the Japanese spend most of their lives in long-term, close-knit relationships, there is little concern or need for people outside their in-group (Komiya, 1999; Miller and Kanazawa, 2000; Leonardsen, 2004). Thus levels of generalized trust tell us very little about Japanese social order on the surface, and are inadequate in representing the character of social relationships within a society.

Sorting these complexities requires the use of qualitative inquiry. Norm cohesion may be essential to upholding shared behaviours, but the behaviours and beliefs on how to maintain this co-operation and cohesion differ drastically. In addition, generalized trust—often assumed central to positive social interactions—can be irrelevant and even discouraged.

This complexity problematizes the study of low crime societies since researchers would like to attribute general concepts of social order—such as norm cohesion or co-operation—with these unique societies. As Balvig (1988) rightly pointed out, these nations are only exceptional from a highly contrasting perspective (i.e. American). However, synomie is not entirely ineffectual in explaining the absence of crime and indeed the qualitative inquiry into each nation’s socio-cultural environment is a good step towards figuring out how certain norms flourish or erode in certain contexts. As previously mentioned, this may have a great deal to do with political influence (see, for example, Fox, 1996, on the development and sustainment of social capital in Mexico). Most importantly, criminologists must investigate which norms are key to maintaining peaceful co-operation. In order to do this, we must reconsider the inherent ‘goodness’ attributed to certain norms and increase the precision by which we detect and observe such beliefs. For low crime societies in particular, where the outcome variable (i.e. co-operative behaviour) is unmeasured by standard data, criminologists have to be particularly careful in drawing
conclusions about links between norms and behaviours. Precisely because the behaviours under discussion—any behaviour not deemed criminal—have not been measured.

How then should researchers measure something that, by definition, does not exist? Contextual socio-historical comparisons can illuminate similarities in social and cultural meanings, norms and institutions, but observing low crime on a macro-level for purpose of comparison is more difficult. Without relying on potentially biased officials or crime statistics, determining the level of crime within a society requires information gathering from numerous governmental, non-governmental, media, sociological and anthropological sources (Marshall et al., 2009).

**Researching low crime**

Researchers of low crime are faced with the problem of trying to measure law-abiding behaviour by the absence of a numerical count. Adler (1983) faced the same difficulty when conducting traditional correlation analyses of social statistics with a crime indicator. Since the methodological problems have already been discussed, the next move is to consider a different approach. Specifically, what is being measured? Can we be certain that the presence of the new low crime indicator means the absence of criminal behaviours? Finally, if the absence of crime is so common, how do researchers obtain an accurate measure of such behaviours?

Perhaps the simplest answer is not to measure crime levels at all. Similar to the dynamic concepts of trust, informal social control, cohesion and traditionalism, crime often cannot be accurately represented by a number. On the cross-national level in particular, crime statistics—often limited to homicide data—are a rather one-dimensional portrait of deviance and rule-breaking within a society (Marshall et al., 2009). Marshall and her colleagues (2009) recently criticized the frequent use of homicide data in comparative research, arguing that international data are incomplete, unreliable, superficial and conceptually narrow. Indeed, running correlational analyses and developing theory on the basis of such data seems erroneous.

However, a key component in targeting low crime societies and understanding how they change over time is to (quite obviously) know the level of crime. So how do researchers reconcile these seemingly endless limitations to theory construction, assumptions, methodology, definitions and data? One possible solution is to turn away from the large-scale, cross-national comparison of crime and focus on groups of nations with similar social, political and economic structures (Nelken, 1994). For example, Cavadino and Dignan’s (2006) investigation into the relationship between punishment and a nation’s political economy uses the highly imperfect measure of imprisonment rates as only an initial guide to compare punitiveness. Instead, they focus on nations with similar socio-political characteristics in order to build a typology to explain patterns of penalty. Importantly, Cavadino and Dignan do not restrict themselves to explaining an indicator (i.e. imprisonment rates), but allow for a broader meaning of punitiveness that more effectively captures the portrait of penalty within each society. In consequence, more complex and informative patterns emerge.

Following Cavadino and Dignan’s approach, researchers could select a group of ‘traditional’ countries with the expectation that lower levels of crime will be one of
the accompanying characteristics. A typology would illuminate the different roles of traditionalism in relation to a society’s political, economic and social structure, while allowing for diverse cultural meanings of crime and control. In doing so, multiple sources of both qualitative and quantitative data must be explored: media accounts; non-governmental and international organization reports; victimization surveys; and anthropological and sociological evidence.7

The qualitative approach discussed here does not preclude the importance of using social statistics to decode patterns of order and disorder within societies. Yet as Balvig and others noticed, crime statistics can lead to exaggerated or misguided conclusions if not grounded in a solid theoretical and contextual base. It is the reliance on these statistics in research designs and the acceptance of them as an unproblematic reality that consequently weaken theory in criminology. The main point is that criminology can benefit greatly from problematizing the use of crime and social statistics and turn to alternative and integrative methods in order to illuminate human connectivity and behaviours. In this sense, I am echoing Donald Campbell’s (1998: 35) call for ‘a disputatious community of “truth seekers”’ in social science research, wherein ‘old beliefs are to be systematically doubted until reconfirmed by methods of the new science’ (see also LaFree, 2007).

Conclusions

In the cross-national literature, low crime societies are portrayed as unique and unconventional in a world where crime is the norm (Garland, 2000). Adler’s (1983) research showed that these societies were not definitively different in any sense other than in the character of their social relationships. Indeed, low crime ‘societies’ can be found everywhere, from nation-states to tribes to counties to neighbourhoods, proving that low crime is not merely an anomaly or the ‘negative case’, but simply the other end of a spectrum that criminology rarely takes into consideration. However, as this article has demonstrated, many definitional, theoretical and methodological issues remain when attempting to understand the relationships and mechanisms that underlie these social concepts.

The label of ‘low’ and ‘high’ crime society becomes convoluted when researchers start the process of site selection for comparison. Not only do low crime societies lack a definitive definition, but high crime societies also seem to be equally mislabelled. For instance, the United States, often considered a high crime society (Garland, 2000), pales in statistical comparison with nations such as South Africa or Jamaica (see Table 2). Flemming Balvig (1988) made the point that, from an American point of view, many European nations can be seen as low crime societies. Conversely, from a Jamaican point of view, the United States is conceivably a low crime society. Thus instead of ascertaining the level of crime within a society for purposes of general comparison, researchers should target specific socio-cultural characteristics in order to determine their theoretical relationship with patterns of crime. In addition, the pervasive role of political ideology must be considered when investigating both the production of knowledge about crime and the emergence and persistence of norms and values within a society. By doing so, we may begin to unravel the interwoven mechanisms that affect social interactions.

This article did not intend to provide solutions to all questions posed, but rather to stimulate thought about the rigour of criminological inquiry using the problem of synnomie and low crime societies. The reliance on aggregate social statistics, the assumptions
about ‘good’ norms and the use of traditional methods of analyses are not necessarily bad practices in social science. However, sometimes it is helpful to re-evaluate certain suppositions and consider alternative approaches to well-known questions. Clinard and Adler pioneered this path by asking why some societies apparently do not commit crimes. I would argue this could not be answered without also asking: ‘Who says they do not commit crimes?’

Notes
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1. A similar question was posed by Travis Hirschi (1969: 34) in Causes of Delinquency asking, ‘Why don’t we do it?’ instead of ‘Why do they do it?’ However, in Adler’s macro-social perspective, the question may not be ‘Why don’t they do it?’ but rather, ‘Why don’t they record it?’
2. De Rivera (2004) distinguishes between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ peace, wherein the former refers to the absence of war, murder and civil disorder and the presence of justice, equality, democracy and tolerance. Negative peace, in contrast, flows from ‘traditional’ crime control mechanisms. In this case, the absence of war and murder is accompanied by inequalities and injustice. Few nations are able to accomplish positive peace; perhaps the closest examples may be found in Norway, Sweden and Finland, where social order is preserved through an historical reputation of egalitarianism and tolerance (see Pratt, 2008a, 2008b). Such places stand in opposition to Saudi Arabia, where official statistics declare a nearly crime-free society, but arguably at the cost of oppressive crime control tactics (Wardak, 2005). In short, the persistence of ‘traditional values’ is not always positive.
3. Furthermore, recent research has presented compelling evidence that crime rates in former Soviet states were significantly higher than officially reported (Pridemore, 2001; Stamatel, 2008).
4. This doubt as to whether nations present accurate portraits of their crime problems may however be indicative of a form of ethnocentrism. Assuming crime is a problem everywhere based on politicization and normalization of crime in the United States and the United Kingdom (Garland, 2000), does not necessarily mean crime is the norm elsewhere (Nelken, 2009).
5. It is important to make the distinction here between explaining low crime rates and explaining the absence of crime in a society. While low crime rates, as explored earlier, may be more a product of political manufacture, the reality of low crime is expected to stem from the content of norms and the extent of social control within the society. The two explanations however, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as the example of political ideology and traditionalism demonstrate above.
6. It is important to note that Adler does not specifically refer to trust, however studies on social cohesion, norms and informal social controls commonly incorporate trust as a component of functioning social relationships (e.g. Kearns and Forrest, 2000).
7. Of course these are not the only alternatives, as increasingly sophisticated statistical models are being used to map social networks among vast types of relationships, exchanges and interactions (Handcock and Raftery, 2007), as well as providing links between micro-level individual actions and macro-level characteristics (Sampson, 1991; Sampson, 2006).

References


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