Researchers provide evolutionary explanation of crime

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In their new book, "Evolutionary criminology: Towards a comprehensive explanation of crime," Dr Russil Durrant from the Institute of Criminology and Professor Tony Ward from the School of Psychology employ evolutionary theory to explain criminal behaviour.

Common criminological explanations such as the psychology of

offenders, their developmental history and the social structure in which they are embedded are important, the researchers argue, but they don't tell the whole story. Instead, an approach that recognises both biological and cultural evolutionary processes is needed in order to explain patterns in offending.

"If we want to understand why men are much more likely to perpetrate crimes than women, why offending peaks during late adolescence and early adulthood, and why crime is often related to the experience of social and economic disadvantage, then we need to consider the selection pressures faced by our species in ancestral environments," says Dr Durrant.

"Around 90 percent of homicides are perpetrated by males and most of those are directed against other males. We argue that humans largely follow a pattern of sexual selection similar to what we see in other mammalian species." He says this includes males competing for access to status and resources which in evolutionary terms would have led to increased reproductive success.

"It is important to recognise, however, that there is nothing inevitable about male violence—although risk-taking and fighting is one way that males obtain status, there are alternative routes that separate us from other mammals, such as demonstrating skills, valuable knowledge and prosocial behaviour," says Dr Durrant. "It would make sense, then, to focus on policies and programmes that enable males to pursue status through non-violent means."

Early social environments have a strong impact too, he says. Young children who are exposed to dangerous and unpredictable environments will adapt their behaviour rapidly in anticipation of an unsafe future. "This is a period where individuals will shift their behavioural strategy to one that involves more risk taking and competition," says Dr Durrant.

"This makes early intervention crucial, in order to shift individuals along more pro-social pathways."

Although frequent media coverage of crime can tend to make us think that violent and antisocial behaviours are rife in society, humans are actually a remarkably cooperative and prosocial species, says Dr Durrant. This reflects a long evolutionary history of living in small groups where antisocial behaviour is punished by group members.

"Crime rates vary dramatically across time and space," notes Dr Durrant, "which means that understanding the cultural evolutionary processes that shape norms regarding violence and antisocial behaviour is essential for the development of policies that can help us to reduce crime."

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