

LIFE / SOCIETY & CULTURE / SOCIAL ISSUES

Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king? Part 3

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A life behind bars

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In the first article on Wolfgang ([Ritter, 2014](#)), the results of [Cao, Adams and Jensen's \(1997\)](#) test of [Wolfgang and Ferracuti's \(1967\)](#) black subculture of violence theory were reported. They found that white males express significantly more violent beliefs in justifiable or retaliatory situations than black males, and that being black does not predict violent values, in contrast to what Wolfgang and Ferracuti had asserted. Two decades earlier, in 1972, social psychologist, Blumenthal (in [McConnell, 1974](#), p. 96), conducted a survey of almost 1400 American men that revealed in-depth attitudinal differences between blacks and whites that predict approval for, and justifications of, violence. Americans have long approved of the symbols of masculinity associated with violence: the hard-riding, fist-fighting frontiersman who used his gun in "calm disregard of laws against killing people." She found that men who identified with the "Wild West"

concept of justice also approved of the settlement of conflicts with armed violence.

Many American white males who said they were opposed to violence actually approved of police shooting blacks or students, whether the dissidents were involved in riots or merely nonviolent protests. Asked the same question, blacks recommended lower levels of violence for social control, perhaps because they were more likely to see themselves as the victims (**Blumenthal, 1972**). When it came to altering oppressive or discriminatory social practices through protests, however, blacks were three times more likely than whites to say “some deaths” would be required. One conclusion about these results is that blacks were more willing *to die for a cause* - and whites more willing *to have police kill them*. Support for violence is dependent upon whether one identifies with persons or groups committing aggression; negative views toward violence depend upon identification with the victims, or empathy for them. Police violence, in the guise of curbing lawlessness, was perceived as “violence justified by the circumstances,” or even as “*nonviolent* actions.” Those who worked for civil rights were perceived as committing “violence against the government.” Blumenthal (in McConnell, 1974, p. 97) concluded that it was apparently “easier for these men to change their definition of what constitutes violence than . . . to change their attitudes about the acceptability of violent behaviors.”

Kahn (1972) also interviewed a national sample to determine what people, and varying subgroups, considered as violence. Among whites, 68 percent did not define the shooting of looters by police as violence, but 87 percent defined looting itself as a violent crime (in **Jones, Hendrick & Epstein, 1979**).

A more complicated picture, but with similar results, emerged when the same sorts of questions were posed by **Baker and Ball's (1969)** National Commission Report on mass media and violence to teens and adults. Comparing violence in the actual world to the television world, researchers found the majority of both blacks and whites did not approve of severe or stranger violence - the predominant form of violence on television. The norms espoused by a majority of Americans of both races were virtually at polar opposites of those contained in the televised world. Few blacks or whites had had significant experience with violence as a victim, witness or assailant; therefore direct personal experience could not be, and was unlikely to become, a source of learning about severe violence. The only generally approved use of high level violence was for legally constituted authorities - police or judges - and the highest proportion believed that this should be confined to occasions when legally permitted.

However, there were class and **race** differences: Those with higher income and more education approved of police use of violence more than those with lower income and less education. And, whites approved of police violence more than blacks. Interestingly, whites, in

middle to upper-status occupations, law enforcement or military were playing 9 out of every 10 killers on television, but 30% of murders were interracial. The televised world was a cold world of largely unpunished strangers, where whites were the primary aggressors. When whites killed, their murders were depicted as legitimate. When minorities killed, they paid for their murders with their own lives (Baker & Ball, 1969).

It is probable that one of the main reasons President Johnson convened social scientists and criminologists and asked them to design a “war on crime” based on what was known at the time was the sudden rise (and then decline) of urban riots. Long and thoughtful articles were written about the social context of the crime commissions (e.g. **Finckenaue**, 1978) that clarify these points: (1) The conservative call for “law and order” was a code word for racial issues, morality and urban decay. (2) We know this primarily because the calls preceded any evidence of an actual rise in crime. (3) Barry Goldwater was the first in a long line of politicians to make crime a political issue, one readily confused with lawlessness and civil rights. And (4) the urban riots of 1964-1968 were the first riots in American history - and there were many more than most people realize - to be instigated by blacks (**Graham & Gurr, 1969**).

Obviously, many acts included in riots are crimes, regardless of the rioters’ motives. Still, it was of great interest to the researchers to determine the demographics (e.g. socioeconomic status) of those most involved in the rioting as well as their reasons. Criminologists have long debated, without actually testing, whether more crime is committed by those living in abject poverty or those disappointed when their hopes for a better life - their rising expectations - are frustrated. The surveys help to answer this question: those at the very bottom of the economic ladder played no role at all in the riots. Their interest in politics is generally nil. Those doing better were most active, but those who were doing the best of all tried to *control* the rioters. When blacks were interviewed in the post-riot days of the late 1960s, they explained what they wanted - and it was neither white wealth nor vengeance. In other words, it was not the satisfaction of individual desires or acts of self indulgence. Their complaints were listed as follows: An end to police brutality, incivility, unfairness. Supporters of the riots believed that racial tension would decrease because whites would be more sympathetic to their plight and help them once they learned of the conditions of their lives. The constant theme that emerged from the surveys after the riots was “anger at discrimination, yet basic trust in America” (***The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society: President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, 1968***, p. 135).

In an upcoming Wolfgang article, we will compare Wolfgang and other criminologists’ presumptions about crime and criminals with what we can learn from history. In particular the recurring themes of history that show the relationship of violence to state power, how power is unleashed from the top, the elites or the middle class, and how force moves downward, until it

strikes racial and ideological minorities. These are the people blacks put their trust in. What they eventually received was first place in line for the massive industrial complex, the prison system.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king? Part 2](#)
- [Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king?](#)
- [Serial killers: Some say they're white, others say black](#)
- [Bulging prisons, petty offenses](#)
- [Ways to curtail serial murder: Considering normal human beings who kill](#)

