

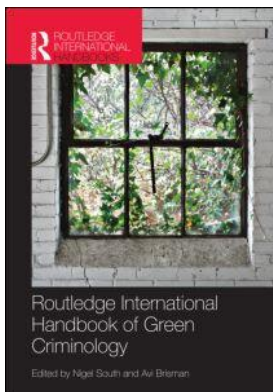
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.104

On: 24 Jan 2021

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## **Routledge International Handbook of Green Criminology**

Nigel South, Avi Brisman

### **The ordinary acts that contribute to ecocide**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203093658.ch3>

Robert Agnew

**Published online on: 20 Dec 2012**

**How to cite :-** Robert Agnew. 20 Dec 2012, *The ordinary acts that contribute to ecocide from:* Routledge International Handbook of Green Criminology Routledge

Accessed on: 24 Jan 2021

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203093658.ch3>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# The ordinary acts that contribute to ecocide

## A criminological analysis

*Robert Agnew*

---

Mainstream criminologists focus on the explanation of “street crimes,” such as assault, robbery, and larceny. But as green and other criminologists point out, there are a range of additional behaviors that also cause much harm, often far more serious than that caused by street crimes (e.g., Beime and South 2007; Gibbs et al. 2010). This chapter focuses on the explanation of one such set of behaviors, the ordinary acts that contribute to ecocide – or the contamination and destruction of the natural environment in ways that reduce its ability to support life (South 2009: 41). These ordinary acts have several characteristics: they are widely and regularly performed by individuals as part of their routine activities; they are generally viewed as acceptable, even desirable; and they collectively have a substantial impact on environmental problems.

Many specific acts meet these requirements. The most notable include living in a large, suburban home, heated and cooled to comfortable levels; using a gasoline-powered automobile for most transportation; frequently purchasing consumer products; and regularly consuming meat. These activities are hereafter referred to as “ordinary harms” for short. They contribute to ecocide by increasing air, water, and soil pollution; destroying natural habitats and animal life; depleting natural resources; and helping to cause climate change (Worldwatch Institute 2010).

To illustrate, the livestock grazing that supports meat consumption is a major source of deforestation, water pollution, and climate change – accounting for 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions (Gossard and York 2003; Stehfest et al. 2009). The United States (U.S.) leads the world in the commission of ordinary harms. For example, U.S. residents comprise only 5 percent of the world’s population but account for 32 percent of all global expenditures on consumption. If everyone lived at the same level as U.S. citizens, the world could sustain only 1.4 billion people (the current population is 6.8 billion) (Worldwatch Institute 2010). For that reason, much of the discussion below focuses on the U.S., although the points made are generally applicable to all societies having market economies and a sizeable economic surplus.

Ordinary harms have been neglected not only by mainstream criminologists, but by many green criminologists as well – who more often focus on the environmental harms committed by states, corporations, and organized criminal groups (Shover and Routhe 2005). The focus on these latter harms is readily understandable given the tremendous damage they cause (e.g., Beime and South 2007; Kangaspunta and Marshall 2009; Shover and Routhe 2005). But ordinary harms also cause great damage. Furthermore, a full understanding of environmental

harm requires that we consider both the actions of individuals and larger groups, for they are symbiotically related. Ordinary harms committed by individuals provide much incentive for those state and corporate behaviors that contribute to ecocide, such as deforestation and the generation of electricity in coal-powered plants. At the same time, states and corporations encourage and facilitate the commission of ordinary harms. I regularly refer to the ways in which this occurs in the discussion below. My focus, however, is on the more immediate factors that lead individuals to engage in ordinary harms (e.g., live in large homes, drive to work, consume meat).

In particular, I explain ordinary harms in terms of those social-psychological theories that dominate criminology, including strain, social control, self-control, social learning/rational choice, and opportunity theories. One might question whether these theories can explain acts such as driving an automobile and consuming meat. Despite the harm they cause, such acts are instances of conformity, rather than crime. Therefore, it might seem doubtful as to whether they can be explained by the factors used to explain street crimes, such as strain, low social control, and association with criminals. And, indeed, most efforts to explain ordinary harms have been carried out by researchers studying the causes of consumerism and environmentally responsible behavior (the converse of ordinary harms), with these researchers drawing on theories designed to explain behavior in general rather than criminal behavior (e.g., Dietz et al. 2007; Iwata 2004; Kurz 2002; Larson 2010; Michaelis 2007; Patchen 2010; Smart 2010; Stearns 2001; Takacs-Santa 2007; Worldwatch Institute 2010). Nevertheless, I argue that the leading crime theories can help explain these ordinary harms, although they sometimes have to be applied in creative ways to do so. Where possible, I support my arguments with research from the environmental and consumerism literatures, although I argue that the crime theories have new insights to offer. Each of the major crime theories is discussed in turn below.

### Strain theory

Strain theory states that individuals are pressured into engaging in crime by the strains they experience (Agnew 2006). Strains refer to events and conditions disliked by individuals, and they involve the inability to achieve one's goals (e.g., monetary success, high status), the loss or threatened loss of positively valued stimuli (e.g., financial loss, death of family members), and the presentation or threatened presentation of negatively valued stimuli (e.g., verbal and physical abuse). These strains lead to negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, and envy. These emotions, in turn, create pressure for corrective action: individuals feel bad and want to do something about it. Crime is one possible response; crime may be used to reduce or escape from strain (e.g., theft to obtain money), seek revenge against the source of strain or related targets (e.g., assaulting abusive peers), or alleviate negative emotions (e.g., illicit drug use).

But can strain theory explain ordinary harms? On the face of it, it would seem that individuals do *not* have to be pressured into engaging in such harms; they are widely practiced, satisfy a range of needs and desires, are viewed as acceptable or desirable, and carry little risk of sanction. But with some modification, strain theory can shed much light on such harms. Although such harms are legal, they are nevertheless a method of coping with certain strains – including both experienced and anticipated strains. Furthermore, such harms are also a function of strains that are *not* experienced or at least not perceived.

## *Strains that increase the likelihood of ordinary harms*

### Relative deprivation

Individuals experiencing relative deprivation believe that they are materially deprived relative to those in their reference group. They experience emotions such as frustration and envy as a result. Relative deprivation is especially common in countries such as the United States, where success is defined in material terms, people are regularly exposed to more privileged others, and they are encouraged to compare themselves to these others (Messner and Rosenfeld 2007; Passas 1997). As such, both the poor *and* the wealthy may feel relatively deprived. The major way to cope with this feeling is through heightened levels of consumption, including consumption financed through borrowing and, occasionally, crime. This argument, it should be noted, does not predict a strong *cross-sectional* association between relative deprivation and ordinary harms. Those who score highest on ordinary harms (e.g., live in the largest houses, own the most automobiles) may have reduced their sense of relative deprivation. A longitudinal study, however, should find that relatively deprived individuals at one point in time are more likely than comparable individuals to engage in most ordinary harms at a later point in time.

### Status frustration

Those experiencing status frustration believe that they lack sufficient respect and admiration from others, particularly those in their reference group (Cohen 1955). Status frustration is closely related to relative deprivation, given that material objects commonly function as status symbols in countries such as the U.S. (Messner and Rosenfeld 2007; Smart 2010; Stearns 2001). Consequently, individuals experiencing status frustration often cope through excessive consumption. And research does suggest that individuals frequently use consumption – including the purchase of fashionable clothes, luxury cars, and large homes – as a way to mask low status and/or claim high status (e.g., Anderson 1999; Brisman 2009b; Deutsch and Theodorou 2010; Dittmar 2005).

### Accomplishing gender

Closely related to the desire for status is the desire to fulfill appropriate gender expectations – that is, to successfully “accomplish masculinity or femininity” (Messerschmidt 1993). Consumption also plays an important role here. A critical part of being a “man” in many societies is being a successful “provider,” which involves providing one’s family with a nice home, automobile, and a range of possessions. A critical part of being a woman in many societies is maintaining an attractive appearance, which involves the consumption of fashionable clothes, cosmetics, and jewelry. Also, the consumption of meat, particularly red meat, is often linked to masculinity (Allen et al. 2000; Gaarder this volume). A study by Deutsch and Theodorou (2010) provides some support for these arguments. When poor boys in the U.S. were asked what they wanted in life, they often replied a nice house and car. Poor girls, on the other hand, more often replied that they wanted to go shopping and buy clothes.

### Material deprivation

As numerous commentators have noted, businesses in market-oriented economies try to create a strong desire or “need” for consumer products in order to fuel spending (e.g., Farrell this

volume; Smart 2010; Stearns 2001; Worldwatch Institute 2010). Reflecting this fact, individuals in such societies come to view products such as air conditioning, dishwashers, and cell phones as “essential” or as “necessities.” So while these products may be desired to reduce feelings of relative deprivation, enhance status, and/or accomplish gender, individuals also develop an independent need for them. This argument reflects the fact that individuals consume not only for display, but also for comfort. And this argument may be especially relevant to products that function as *primary* reinforcers, such as air conditioners and automobiles, and to individuals who have a genuine need for these products, such as those without access to public transportation (Brisman 2009b). Consequently, individuals without these products feel a strong sense of material deprivation, and they typically cope by trying to obtain the products. (Note: The motives of display and comfort often overlap, but sometimes diverge – as when the desire for display leads to the consumption of uncomfortable products, such as high-heeled shoes.)

### The threatened and actual loss of valued possessions/lifestyles

Once individuals are committing ordinary harms, an additional set of strains may become operative. In the first case, the strain involves the *anticipated* loss of valued possessions and lifestyles. In particular, individuals may *not* be high in relative deprivation, status frustration, gender-related strain, or material deprivation. But they may experience great strain if they anticipate that their possessions and lifestyle are threatened. This perceived threat may stem from a variety of sources, including economic problems and government regulations designed to foster more environmentally responsible behavior. As a consequence of this threat, individuals may do all that they can to protect their possessions and lifestyle. In the second case, the strain involves the *actual* loss of valued possessions and/or unwanted changes in their lifestyle (e.g., driving less, turning down the heat). This type of strain is especially likely to generate strong negative emotions, since individuals have become accustomed to the products and lifestyles that they have lost. These individuals may cope by trying to replace their lost possessions and lifestyles, as well as taking actions to prevent further loss.

### Consumption as a coping mechanism for other strains

The strains listed above are reduced by ordinary harms. For example, relative deprivation, status frustration, and material deprivation are reduced by living in a large house and driving a luxury car. Certain other strains, however, may prompt individuals to engage in excessive consumption, even though these are strains that are *not* reduced by this consumption. In particular, individuals may purchase a range of products and services in order to *alleviate the negative emotions* associated with a wide range of strains (as opposed to reducing the strains themselves). That is, consumption may play a role similar to drug use. This idea is reflected in popular views, such as the notion of “retail therapy.” It finds support in the research on “compulsive buying,” which is often done to alleviate the negative emotions associated with a range of problems or strains (Dittmar 2005; Ertelt et al. 2011). And this idea is a central theme in the research on consumerism, which finds that consumerism developed partly to compensate for problems such as the drudgery of industrial and clerical work (e.g., Smart 2010; Stearns 2001: 56–57). It should be noted, however, that consumption does not necessarily result in the long-term alleviation of negative emotions. In fact, data suggest that increases in income (and energy consumption) are only associated with increases in psychological well-being up to a point; well-being no longer increases once individuals reach a certain minimal level of financial security (Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Michaelis 2007; Smart 2010; Worldwatch Institute 2010). Consumption appears to bring

a *brief* increase in well-being, however. And the larger culture promotes the idea that consumption leads to happiness (Dittmar 2005).

### Strains that are not experienced, are not perceived, or are discounted

Finally, individuals may commit ordinary harms partly because they do not face immediate environmental threats, they are unaware of or discount the environmental threats they do face, perhaps because such threats are in the future, and they are unconcerned about the threats faced by others (e.g., Brody et al. 2008). It should be noted that environmental problems are now viewed as a serious threat by many in the U.S., with 41 percent of the respondents in a 2009 survey stating that reducing such problems should be a “top domestic priority” (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2010). But at the same time, environmental problems ranked sixteenth on the list of top priorities, with global warming ranked twentieth. The environmental psychology and sociology literatures have examined many of the factors that influence the level of environmental strain, including factors such as media coverage and traits such as a short time horizon and self-interest (see the discussion of beliefs below, as well as the excellent overview by Takacs-Santa 2007). Those low in environmental strain should be more likely to engage in ordinary harms since these harms are less likely to be seen as problematic. Conversely, those high in environmental strain should be more likely to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors, such as recycling and using public transportation. Research provides some support for this argument, with environmentally responsible behavior being more common among those high in environmental strain and the negative emotions prompted by such strain, such as anger, fear, and sadness (e.g., Dietz et al. 2007; Patchen 2010; Takacs-Santa 2007). Environmental strain, however, is more likely to motivate environmentally responsible behavior among those who care about the environment (Tribbia 2007; cf. Brisman 2009a, 2009b).

### *Factors conditioning the reaction to the above strains*

Strain theory states that there are several ways to cope with strains, with certain factors increasing the likelihood of criminal coping (Agnew 2006). People are more likely to cope with the above strains by engaging in ordinary harms when:

- They have the resources and opportunity to engage in such harms, with financial resources being especially important for the more costly ordinary harms (e.g., buying a large house and car). Ordinary harms are also more likely when people *lack* the resources and opportunity to engage in alternative behaviors, particularly environmentally responsible behaviors (e.g., they are physically unable to walk long distances, public transit is not available in their community, see Tribbia 2007). Most people in the U.S. possess the resources and opportunity to engage in a range of ordinary harms, especially less costly harms, while it is often more difficult to engage in many environmentally responsible behaviors (see Brisman 2009a, 2009b).
- The risk of sanction for engaging in ordinary harms is low, which is generally the case in the U.S. given the conformist nature of such harms. Ordinary harms are also more likely when there is a significant risk of sanction for engaging in environmentally-responsible behaviors, which is sometimes the case (see below).
- The disposition for engaging in ordinary harms is strong, while that for engaging in environmentally responsible behaviors is low. The disposition for ordinary harms is generally strong in the U.S. As described below, most people possess traits, beliefs, and identities

conductive to the harms (e.g., self-interest, materialism), are regularly exposed to others who model the harms, and are reinforced for engaging in the harms.

In sum, strain theory suggests that engaging in ordinary harms is a popular and at least temporarily effective coping strategy for a range of pressing strains. These strains are especially common in market-oriented societies with a large economic surplus that is broadly distributed, that define success largely in terms of material achievements, and that encourage individuals to compare themselves to more privileged others. The U.S., as suggested, is an exemplar of such societies. While these ideas are compatible with the literatures on consumerism and environmentally responsible behavior, strain theory provides a more complete description of the forces that pressure individuals into engaging in ordinary harms and the factors that influence the choice of ordinary harms as a coping strategy.

### Social control theory

Social control theory focuses on the controls that prevent crime. According to control theory, crime requires no special explanation; it is often the easiest way to satisfy our needs and desires. What requires explanation is conformity and we conform because of the controls or restraints to which we are subject (Agnew 2009). These controls include direct control or the fear of sanction. Direct control is high to the extent that others set clear rules that forbid crime, monitor behavior, and consistently sanction rule violations in a meaningful manner. The controls also include stake in conformity, which refers to those things that might be jeopardized by crime. Stake in conformity is high to the extent that individuals have close ties to conventional others, good reputations, a large investment in their education, well-paid jobs that they value, and high expectations for the future. And controls include beliefs that condemn crime. When these social controls are present, crime should be low and conformity high. Ordinary harms involve conformist behavior and so should be the result of high control.

#### *Direct control*

Ordinary harms, like other conformist behavior, are generally *not* sanctioned. That is, one is not sanctioned for acts such as living in a large home, regularly driving long distances, and consuming meat. (Certain jurisdictions and individuals, however, are beginning to sanction instances of some ordinary harms, such as excessive water use, the failure to recycle (or the failure to recycle properly), and driving in specific lanes on highways and freeways without a certain minimum number of passengers.) The fact that ordinary harms are not sanctioned helps explain their popularity and pervasiveness. But unlike certain other conformist behavior, *the failure* to commit ordinary harms is usually *not* subject to state sanction. For example, while the failure of children to attend school and of adults to care for their children is subject to state sanction, the failure to live in a large home or drive a luxury car is not. There are several reasons for this, perhaps the most notable being the fact that ordinary harms are frequently quite pleasurable – satisfying a range of needs and desires (see above). As such, their performance is less dependent on the threat of formal sanction – unlike the sometimes burdensome activities of attending school and raising children. Ordinary harms generally represent the positive side of conformity and, as histories of consumerism note, were emphasized in part to compensate for the negative side of conformity, particularly work in manufacturing jobs (e.g., Stearns 2001).

At the same time, the failure to engage in certain ordinary harms is subject to *informal* sanction. For example, those who wear out-of-date clothes or follow vegetarian diets are sometimes

seen as deviant and subject to rebuke, ridicule, and the loss of status. To illustrate, certain vegetarians report that they encounter significant hostility from family members, especially male family members (Merriman 2010). Those who do not engage in ordinary harms may be seen as deviant and therefore deserving of sanction; they are atypical and their failure to partake of the benefits of conformity is difficult to understand, especially given that many of these benefits are viewed as necessities (e.g., air conditioning, meat). Also, those who fail to engage in ordinary harms may be seen as challenging the values and behaviors of those who do – again prompting sanction.

### *Stake in conformity*

Individuals also engage in ordinary harms because the failure to do so might jeopardize their stake in conformity. For example, the failure to wear fashionable clothes, live in a large house, and drive a “nice” automobile may threaten their reputation. The failure to provide family members with a nice house and a range of possessions may jeopardize ties to them (see Deutsch and Theodorou 2010). In fact, advertisers regularly promote the idea that providing others with valued objects is how one expresses affection for them. And, as noted above, an essential part of the adult male role is providing family members with a range of objects; those who fail to do so are seen as bad husbands and fathers. Furthermore, ordinary harms directly benefit individuals (e.g., the comfort of air conditioning, the convenience of an automobile). As such, engaging in ordinary harms creates its own stake in conformity, providing individuals with possessions and a lifestyle that they are reluctant to relinquish.

### *Beliefs*

Finally, individuals engage in ordinary harms because they hold beliefs that define those harms as acceptable or desirable. The nature of these beliefs is described in detail under social learning theory, but a core part of such beliefs is captured in the notion of “materialism.” Individuals in the United States and many other developed countries are taught that it is desirable to accumulate material objects and lead the type of life made possible by such objects. Doing so is said to be the major route to happiness, a mark of one’s success, and a means for self-expression and the realization of one’s potential (Messner and Rosenfeld 2007; Stearns 2001). Furthermore, engaging in such harms is said to provide some social benefit; most notably, such harms help provide employment, maintain a strong economy, and support the free enterprise system. Such harms are seldom defined as harmful or undesirable, although this is *starting* to change with respect to some of the more extreme ordinary harms, such as driving certain “gas guzzling” vehicles (see, e.g., Brisman 2004, 2007b, 2009b).

These ideas regarding social control have not been fully tested. In particular, researchers have not systematically examined the extent to which *not* engaging in particular ordinary harms is subject to direct control by various agents and jeopardizes the different stakes in conformity. Researchers, however, have devoted much attention to the relationship between beliefs and engaging in environmentally responsible behaviors (see below). So once again, criminological theory can help guide the research on ordinary harms.

### **Self-control (and environmental control)**

Those low in self-control have difficulty exercising self-restraint when tempted to engage in crime. Several traits contribute to this lack of restraint, including the tendency to act without



thinking about the consequences of one's behavior, a focus on the immediate rather than the delayed satisfaction of one's desires, a short time horizon, an attraction to risky activities, little concern for the rights and feelings of others, little motivation and perseverance, and irritability (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Because ordinary harms are conformist rather than criminal in nature, we might expect that they are the result of high rather than low self-control. And having a moderately high level of self-control does facilitate the commission of the more costly ordinary harms – such as buying a large home and luxury car. Engaging in these harms generally presupposes that individuals have a good job, which requires some self-control. So in order to reap the rewards of conformity, individuals must have sufficient self-control to devote some effort to the work of conformity.

But to complicate matters somewhat, the traits comprising *low* self-control likely increase the *appeal* of ordinary harms. Ordinary harms result in the immediate satisfaction of one's needs and desires. Furthermore, the damage resulting from such harms is delayed and diffuse, affecting others as much as, if not more than, oneself. As such, ordinary harms may be more attractive to those who possess traits such as a desire for immediate gratification, a short time horizon, a tendency to act without thinking, and little concern for others. Reflecting this fact, those high-rate offenders who are low in self-control are usually quick to spend *all* of their money on consumer products, such as clothing and automobiles (e.g., Wright and Decker 1997). So those low in self-control have the will, but often not the way, to engage in ordinary harms. Those high in self-control have both the will, albeit to a more limited degree, and the way to engage in ordinary harms.

The will to engage in ordinary harms, however, might be better measured if the dimensions of self-control are considered in a more nuanced manner. In particular, we should examine whether individuals consider the *environmental* consequences of their behavior; whether they are sensitive to the rights of people throughout the world, as well as those of non-human animals and the natural environment more generally; and whether their time horizon extends to future generations. Individuals with these traits might be said to be high in “environmental control”; that is, they are able to restrain themselves from engaging in environmentally harmful behaviors when tempted. So while we would expect more costly ordinary harms to be somewhat more common among those high in self-control, as traditionally defined, we would expect these harms to be lower among those high in environmental control. Research provides some support for this argument. For example, those with a long time horizon and a concern for the natural environment are more likely to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors (e.g., Dietz et al. 2007; Patchen 2010; Tribbia 2007).

### **Social learning/rational choice theory**

Social learning theory states that individuals learn to engage in crime from others (Agnew 2009; Akers 1998). These others are frequently members of criminal groups, such as gangs, but they also include parents, neighbors, and the mass media (Brisman 2007a). Individuals learn to engage in crime in three ways: they are differentially reinforced for crime; are exposed to criminal models, particularly admired others who experience reinforcement for their crime; and are taught beliefs that approve of, justify, or excuse crime in certain conditions. Rational choice theory is similar to social learning theory, stating that people give some consideration to the costs and benefits of various actions, engaging in crime when they believe that its benefits exceed its costs (Akers 1990; Cornish and Clarke 1986). Social learning and rational choice theories were developed to explain all forms of behavior, both conformist and criminal, and so can readily explain conformist acts such as ordinary harms.

### *The differential reinforcement (benefits and costs) of ordinary harms*

Individuals engage in ordinary harms partly because of their many benefits. As noted above, ordinary harms often result in increased physical comfort and convenience, enhanced mental well-being (at least temporarily), status, and social approval, including affection from others. The harms do have certain costs, including financial costs and environmental damage. But the environmental costs are frequently hidden, delayed, and/or imposed on others; as such, they are heavily discounted (Kurz 2002). At the same time, engaging in environmentally responsible behavior often results in high costs and delayed benefits. Installing solar panels, for example, involves a large upfront cost, one that is not repaid for many years (see Brisman 2009b). Forgoing one's car and walking imposes immediate physical costs and time delays; the health benefits only come later. And, as noted above, individuals who engage in environmentally responsible behaviors are sometimes subject to informal sanction. Research in environmental psychology provides some support for these arguments, suggesting that the decision to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors is influenced by a consideration of financial, physical, and social costs and benefits (e.g., how much physical effort is required, do close others approve of the behavior) (e.g., Dietz et al. 2007; Gockeritz et al. 2010; Kurz 2002; Tribbia 2007).

It is important to note that the extent to which ordinary harms and environmentally responsible behaviors are differentially reinforced varies across groups and over time (e.g., Michaelis 2007). In particular, groups differ in their evaluation of and reaction to ordinary harms and environmentally responsible behaviors. There has been some research in this area, focusing on national and socio-demographic groups. The results are somewhat mixed, although many data suggest that females are more approving of and likely to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors (e.g., Dietz et al. 2007; Dunlap and York 2008; Franzen and Meyer 2010; Gossard and York 2003; Kalof et al. 1999). The mixed results regarding other variables may partly stem from the fact that these variables have countervailing effects on the factors listed above. For example, those in the higher social classes experience less material deprivation (decreasing their motivation for engaging in ordinary harms), but they also experience fewer environmental threats (increasing their motivation for ordinary harms) (see Dunlap and York 2008). But for most people in the United States, it still appears to be the case that the net benefits of ordinary harms exceed those of the environmentally responsible behaviors that might replace them (cf. Brisman 2009b).

### *Modeling*

Individuals also engage in ordinary harms because they are regularly modeled by others, including admired others who are reinforced for engaging in the harms. The media, in particular, regularly depict fictional and non-fictional others who engage in ordinary harms and reap a range of benefits from doing so – particularly social approval and status. Many data suggest that exposure to such models increases the likelihood of imitative behavior (Akers 1998). And research in environmental psychology and sociology indicates that views about whether others engage in environmentally responsible behavior have a large impact on whether individuals engage in such behavior themselves (see, e.g., Gockeritz et al. 2010; Patchen 2010; see also Brisman 2009b).

### *Attitudes favorable to ordinary harms*

Finally, individuals learn attitudes favorable to ordinary harms, with such attitudes being taught by family members, friends, community members, religious figures, politicians, the media, and

others. The research in environmental psychology and sociology devotes much attention to the nature of these attitudes and their impact on behavior, particularly environmentally responsible behavior (e.g., Dietz et al. 2007; Gockeritz et al. 2010; Kaiser et al. 1999; Kurz 2002; Larson 2010; Patchen 2010; Schultz et al. 2005; Takacs-Santa 2007). Attitudes favorable to environmentally responsible behavior have several components, including beliefs (e.g., the belief that driving less will reduce climate change), affect (e.g., the feeling that driving less is desirable), and behavioral intentions (e.g., the intention to drive less). Attitudes often have a strong effect on environmentally responsible behavior, particularly when the attitudes and behavior are measured at the same level of specificity (e.g., the belief that recycling is beneficial and actual recycling behavior). Attitudes, however, have a stronger effect on behavior when individuals believe that others perform and approve of the behavior in question, the perceived cost of the behavior is low, and individuals have the ability to perform the behavior. Drawing on this research, I list *certain* of the attitudes that should increase ordinary harms below.

### Ordinary harms cause little harm and much good

Ordinary harms should be more likely when individuals believe that they cause little or no harm (see Dietz et al. 2007; Frantz and Mayer 2009; Kurz 2002; Takacs-Santa 2007). This belief is common for several reasons. The damage caused when an individual engages in an ordinary harm is typically indirect, delayed, diffuse, and trivial. Related to this, the damage is often hidden, particularly in developed countries where consumption is removed from production (e.g., individuals who consume meat never see animals being slaughtered, see Smart 2010) and from the problem of disposal of accumulated waste and unwanted consumables. Also, the leading figures of the community regularly engage in such harms, making it difficult for many to believe that these “harms” cause damage (i.e., “good” people do not commit “bad” acts). Further, most individuals have a large investment – financial, psychological, and social – in the ordinary harms they commit. As such, they are motivated to ignore or discount information about the damage caused by such harms (Frantz and Mayer 2009). While the media do sometimes report on the damage caused by ordinary harms, the media coverage is uneven and an attempt is often made to provide “balanced coverage,” such that the views of those who deny harm are covered (McCright 2007; McCright and Dunlap 2000; see also Brisman 2012). Related to this, there is a well-funded and organized movement designed to deny and raise doubts about the seriousness of climate change and other environmental problems (Brisman 2012; Dietz et al. 2007; McCright and Dunlap 2000; Takacs-Santa 2007). Ordinary harms should also be more likely when people believe that engaging in them has benefits of both a personal and social nature. As suggested above, this belief is also common, in part because it is promoted by corporations and states. For example, many believe that the consumption of animal products has health benefits and that the purchase of consumer products has economic benefits.

### Ordinary harms are justifiable or excusable

Some individuals may believe that the costs of ordinary harms outweigh the benefits, but nevertheless justify or excuse engaging in such harms. They may claim that they perform such harms out of necessity or under duress (e.g., public transit is unavailable, they are unable to live without air conditioning). And they may claim that there is little they can do as individuals to make a difference, perhaps noting that they are just one of millions engaging in these behaviors, that others engage in far worse behaviors, and that they are powerless to effect meaningful change (Frantz and Mayer 2009; Iwata 2004; Patchen 2010).

## Environmentally responsible behaviors are ineffective or undesirable

Some believe that environmentally responsible behaviors are ineffective or undesirable. For example, behaviors such as recycling, using public transport, and following a vegetarian diet may be viewed as having little impact on the environment; costly in terms of money, time, and/or effort; a threat to physical and mental well-being; a danger to the economy; and incompatible with cherished values (Dietz et al. 2007; Frantz and Mayer 2009; Iwata 2004; Kalof et al. 1999; McCright and Dunlap 2000).

## General attitudes conducive to ordinary harms

Finally, certain more general attitudes contribute to ordinary harms (e.g., Dietz et al. 2007; Dittmar 2005; Ertelt et al. 2011; Franzen and Meyer 2010; Iwata 2004; Kaiser et al. 1999; Kalof et al. 1999; Larson 2010; McCright and Dunlap 2000; Patchen 2010; Schultz et al. 2005; Smart 2010; Takacs-Santa 2007; Tribbia 2007; Worldwatch Institute 2010). These include materialism or the view that the acquisition of material goods is a central life goal; a high value on economic growth, individual freedom, *laissez-faire* government, and free enterprise; and the belief that the natural environment is to be exploited for one's benefit, as opposed to managed for all people or valued in and of itself.

## The opportunity to commit ordinary harms

The above theories focus on those factors that dispose individuals to engage in ordinary harms. But individuals cannot engage in ordinary harms unless they have the opportunity to do so. Certain societies provide far more opportunity than others (e.g., Smart 2010; Stearns 2001; Worldwatch Institute 2010). Most notably, ordinary harms are much easier to commit in market societies with a large economic surplus and an ideology comparable to that of the "American Dream" (Messner and Rosenfeld 2007). Products in such societies are usually abundant, due to extensive trade and technological/organizational developments that permit their mass manufacture at low unit cost. These products are aggressively marketed to broad segments of the population, since manufacturers must sell what they produce. And cultural values strongly encourage their consumption. Within such societies, wealthy individuals are better able than poor individuals to engage in ordinary harms, particularly the more costly harms (cf. Brisman 2009a, 2009b). Reflecting this fact, the wealthy are more likely to engage in many of the ordinary harms listed above – even though some research suggests that they have more concern for the environment (Harlan et al. 2009).

Furthermore, societies not only make it possible to engage in ordinary harms, but they often make it difficult not to. In particular, they may limit the choices available to individuals, with ordinary harms often the only viable option. For example, the layout of cities, lack of public transportation, and absence of bicycle lanes means that many individuals have little choice but to drive to work (see Kurz 2002; Patchen 2010; Rudel 2009). Related to this, certain environmentally responsible behaviors (e.g., hybrid cars, solar power) are expensive, effectively putting them out of reach of many consumers (see, e.g., Brisman 2009b).

## Conclusion

The leading crime theories have much to say about why individuals engage in ordinary harms that contribute to ecocide, even though these harms represent conformist behavior. Ordinary

harms are a mechanism for coping with a range of strains and associated negative emotions. They are also a function of strains that are *not* experienced (i.e., environmental strains). The harms increase one's stake in conformity, since they provide a range of possessions and a lifestyle that most are reluctant to relinquish. *Not* engaging in ordinary harms, by contrast, may subject one to informal sanction, jeopardize one's stake in conformity, and challenge one's beliefs. The harms are attractive to those low in self-control, particularly "environmental control," although the more costly harms are facilitated by high self-control. Individuals learn to engage in the harms. They are reinforced for the harms by others, frequently with social approval and status; the harms are intrinsically reinforcing; they are regularly modeled by admired others; and individuals learn a host of attitudes that approve of, justify, and excuse these harms. Finally, individuals in many societies are given ample opportunity to engage in the harms; in fact, they frequently have little choice but to do so. Taken together, the crime theories point to multiple reasons why ordinary harms are so common (and environmentally responsible behaviors are uncommon).

The application of the leading crime theories to ordinary harms is important for several reasons. As noted above, these theories more fully describe certain of the factors that contribute to ordinary harms, building on the work on consumerism and environmental psychology and sociology. As next steps, researchers should test these ideas and, drawing on the results and the related research in other areas, attempt to develop an integrated theory of ordinary harms. It should be kept in mind that the specific variables in such a theory may differ somewhat depending on the ordinary harm that is being explained. For example, efforts to explain meat consumption will assign a central role to beliefs regarding animals, while efforts to explain automobile use will assign a central role to the availability of alternative forms of transportation.

The application of the leading crime theories also demonstrates that these theories can explain a broader range of behaviors than the street crimes to which they are commonly applied. The theories, however, sometimes have to be applied in creative ways to do so (e.g., the examination of strains *not* experienced and the focus on "environmental control"). Also, the harms are the result of *high* rather than low social and self-control, as well as social learning that occurs through the *dominant* culture rather than through deviant subcultures. This of course reflects the conformist nature of the harms. Hopefully, this application will stimulate others to draw on the mainstream theories when explaining harmful acts that are not legally defined as crimes. Efforts to explain environmental harm now draw most heavily on critical theories, with such harms being explained in terms of the desire of powerful groups – particularly states and corporations – to advance their interests.

Finally, the focus on explaining why *individuals* routinely harm the environment supplements the work in green criminology, which focuses on the harmful acts committed by states, corporations, and organized criminal groups. This latter focus is important but, as suggested above, individuals are also deeply implicated in environmental harm. One might argue that the harmful behavior of individuals is a function of larger social forces, particularly the efforts of societies and corporations to encourage consumption with little concern for the environmental consequences. There is much truth to this, as noted above. And future work should build on this paper by more fully describing the ways in which the larger social, political, economic, and cultural environment promotes ordinary harms (see Dunlap and York 2008; Franzen and Meyer 2010 for an overview of certain work in this area). But at the same time, it is important to recognize that most individuals have become enthusiastic practitioners of ordinary harms. Also, the harms they commit provide a market for much of the harmful behavior committed by states and corporations. Furthermore, the commitment of individuals to these harms often makes them quite resistant to change, including change that will limit the ability of states and corporations to promote these harms.

This is not to blame individuals for the harms they commit. As described, a multitude of factors leads them to engage in these harms, with most individuals unaware of the harm they are causing. But it is to argue that any effort to understand the causes of environmental harm must consider both individuals as well as larger groups. The same is true of efforts to address environmental harm. This includes efforts to change state and corporate behavior; if such efforts are to be successful, they require knowledge of the myriad ways in which states and corporations impact individuals. And this includes efforts that are directed at individuals. Changing individual behavior will require changes in the culture, social structure, and infrastructure of societies. The above discussion points to the types of changes that are necessary. For example, any successful change will require such things as reduction in the status attached to ordinary harms, redefinition of gender roles in ways that place less emphasis on consumption, increased costs of engaging in ordinary harms, undermining the specific beliefs that foster the harms, and making alternatives to ordinary harms more available and less costly. These are of course major undertakings, but not impossible. Witness, for example, the dramatic reduction in cigarette smoking, stimulated in part by undermining the status of smoking, challenging the beliefs that foster smoking, and increasing the costs of smoking (U.S. Surgeon General 2000). And just as crime theories can shed light on the causes of ordinary harms, the crime control research can shed light on ways to reduce such harms – a topic for a subsequent paper.

## References

- Agnew, R. 2006. *Pressured Into Crime*. New York: Oxford.
- 2009. *Juvenile Delinquency: Causes and Control*. New York: Oxford.
- Akers, R.L. 1990. “Rational Choice, Deterrence, and Social Learning Theory in Criminology: The path not taken,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 81: 653–76.
- 1998. *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Allen, M.W., Wilson, M., Ng, S.H. and Dunne, M. 2000. “Values and Beliefs of Vegetarians and Omnivores,” *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 140(4): 405–22.
- Anderson, E. 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.
- Beirne, P., and South, N. 2007. *Issues in Green Criminology: Confronting Harms Against Environments, Humanity and Other Animals*. Portland, OR: Willan.
- Brisman, A. 2004. “Double Whammy: Collateral Consequences of Conviction and Imprisonment for Sustainable Communities and the Environment,” *William & Mary Environmental Law & Policy Review*, 28 (2): 423–75.
- 2007a. “Learning from ‘Virtual’ Others: Fence Flowers, Methamphetamine Cooks, and Sex Offenders on the Internet,” paper presented at 2007 American Society of Criminology Annual Meeting, Atlanta, GA (16 November).
- 2007b. “Toward a More Elaborate Typology of Environmental Values: Liberalizing Criminal Disenfranchisement Laws and Policies,” *New England Journal on Criminal & Civil Confinement*, 33(2): 283–457.
- 2009a. “Food Justice as Crime Prevention,” *Journal of Food Law & Policy*, 5(1): 1–44
- 2009b. “It Takes Green to Be Green: Environmental Elitism, ‘Ritual Displays,’ and Conspicuous Non-Consumption,” *North Dakota Law Review*, 85(2): 329–70.
- 2012. “The Cultural Silence of Climate Change Contrarianism,” in R. White (ed.) *Climate Change from a Criminological Perspective*, pp. 41–70. New York: Springer.
- Brody, S.D., Zahran, S., Vedlitz, A. and Grover, H. 2008. “Examining the Relationship between Physical Vulnerability and Public Perceptions of Global Climate Change in the United States,” *Environment and Behavior*, 40(1): 72–95.
- Cohen, A. 1955. *Delinquent Boys*. New York: Free Press.
- Cornish, D.B. and Clarke, R.V. 1986. *The Reasoning Criminal*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2000. “The Costs and Benefits of Consuming,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27: 267–72.

- Deutsch, N.L. and Theodorou, E. 2010. "Aspiring, Consuming, Becoming: Identity in a Culture of Consumption," *Youth & Society*, 42(2): 229–54.
- Dietz, T., Dan, A. and Shwom, R. 2007. "Support for Climate Change Policy: Social Psychological and Social Structural Influences," *Rural Sociology*, 72(2): 185–214.
- Dittmar, H. 2005. "A New Look at 'Compulsive Buying': Self-Discrepancies and Materialistic Values as Predictors of Compulsive Buying Tendency," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 24(6): 832–59.
- Dunlap, R.E. and York, R. 2008. "The Globalization of Environmental Concern and the Limits of the Postmaterialist Values Explanation," *Sociological Quarterly*, 49: 529–63.
- Ertelt, T.W., Marino, J.M. and Muller, A. 2011. "Etiology of Compulsive Buying," in A. Muller and J.E. Mitchell (eds) *Compulsive Buying*. New York: Routledge.
- Frantz, C.M. and Mayer, F.S. 2009. "The Emergency of Climate Change: Why Are We Failing to Take Action?" *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 9(1): 205–22.
- Franzen, A. and Meyer, R. 2010. "Environmental Attitudes in Cross-National Perspective: A Multilevel Analysis of the ISSP 1993 and 2000," *European Sociological Review*, 26(2): 219–34.
- Gibbs, C., Gore, M.L., McGarrell, E.F. and Rivers III, L. 2010. "Introducing Conservation Criminology," *British Journal of Criminology*, 50: 124–44.
- Gockeritz, S.P., Schultz, W., Rendon, T., Cialdini, R.B., Goldstein, N.J. and Griskevicius, V. 2010. "Descriptive Normative Beliefs and Conservation Behavior: The Moderating Roles of Personal Involvement and Injunctive Normative Beliefs," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40: 514–23.
- Gossard, M.H. and York, R. 2003 "Social Structural Influences on Meat Consumption," *Human Ecology Review*, 10(1): 1–9.
- Gottfredson, M.R. and Hirschi, T. 1990. *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Harlan, S.L., Yabiku, S.T., Larsen, L. and Brazel, A.J. 2009. "Household Water Consumption in an Arid City: Affluence, Affordance, and Attitudes," *Society and Natural Resources*, 22: 691–709.
- Iwata, O. 2004. "Some Psychological Correlates of Environmentally Responsible Behavior," *Social Behavior and Personality*, 32(8): 703–14.
- Kaiser, F.G., Wolfing, S. and Fuhrer, U. 1999. "Environmental Attitude and Ecological Behaviour," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 19: 1–19.
- Kalof, L., Dietz, T., Stern, P.C. and Guagnano, G.A. 1999. "Social Psychological and Structural Influences on Vegetarian Beliefs," *Rural Sociology*, 64(3): 500–11.
- Kangaspunta, K., and Marshall, I.H. 2009. *Eco-Crime and Justice*. Turin, Italy: UNICRI.
- Kurz, T. 2002. "The Psychology of Environmentally Sustainable Behavior: Fitting Together Pieces of the Puzzle," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 2(1): 257–78.
- Larson, K.L. 2010. "An Integrated Theoretical Approach to Understanding the Sociocultural Basis of Multidimensional Environmental Attitudes," *Society and Natural Resources*, 23: 898–907.
- McCright, A. M. 2007. "Dealing with Climate Change Contrarians," in S.C. Moser and L. Dilling (eds) *Creating a Climate for Change*, pp. 200–12. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCright, A. M. and Dunlap, R.E. 2000. "Challenging Global Warming as a Social Problem: An Analysis of the Conservative Movement's Counter-Claims," *Social Problems*, 47(4): 499–522.
- Messerschmidt, J. W. 1993. *Masculinities and Crime*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Messner, S. F. and Rosenfeld, R. 2007. *Crime and the American Dream*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Merriman, B. 2010. "Gender Differences in Family and Peer Reaction to the Adoption of a Vegetarian Diet," *Feminism & Psychology*, 20(3): 420–27.
- Michaelis, L. 2007. "Consumption Behavior and Narratives About the Good Life," in S.C. Moser and L. Dilling (eds) *Creating a Climate for Change*, pp. 251–65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Passas, N. 1997. "Anomie, Reference Groups, and Relative Deprivation," in N. Passas and R. Agnew (eds) *The Future of Anomie Theory*, pp. 62–94. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Patchen, M. 2010. "What Shapes Public Reaction to Climate Change? Overview of Research and Policy Implications," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 10(1): 47–68.
- Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. 2010. *Economy, Jobs Trump All Other Policy Priorities in 2009*. Available at: <http://people-press.org/report/485/economy-top-policy-priority>
- Rudel, T.K. 2009. "How Do People Transform Landscapes? A Sociological Perspective on Suburban Sprawl and Tropical Deforestation," *American Journal of Sociology*, 115(1): 129–54.
- Schultz, P.W., Gouveia, V.V., Cameron, L.D., Tankha, G., Schmuck, P. and Franek, M. 2005. "Values and Their Relationship to Environmental Concern and Conservation Behavior," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 36(4): 457–75.

- Shover, N. and Routhé, A.S. 2005. "Environmental Crime," *Crime and Justice*, 32: 321–69.
- Smart, B. 2010. *Consumer Society*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- South, N. 2009. "Outlining the Concerns and Agenda for a Green Criminology," in K. Kangaspunta and I.H. Marshall (eds) *Eco-Crime and Justice*. Turin, Italy: UNICRI.
- Stearns, P.N. 2001. *Consumerism in World History*. London: Routledge.
- Stehfest, E., Bouwman, L., van Vuuren, D.P., den Elzen, M.G.J., Eickhout, B. and Kabat, P. 2009. "Climate Benefits of Changing Diet," *Climate Change*, 95: 83–102.
- Takacs-Santa, A. 2007. "Barriers to Environmental Concern," *Human Ecology Review*, 14(1): 26–38.
- Tribbia, J. 2007. "Stuck in the Slow Lane of Behavior Change? A Not-So-Superhuman Perspective on Getting Out of Our Cars," in S.C. Moser and L. Dilling (eds) *Creating a Climate for Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- U.S. Surgeon General. 2000. "Reducing Tobacco Use: A Report of the Surgeon General," *MMWR Recommendations and Reports*, 49(RR16): 1–27.
- Worldwatch Institute. 2010. *2010 State of the World: Transforming Cultures from Consumerism to Sustainability*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Wright, R.T. and Decker, S. 1997. *Armed Robbers in Action*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.