White-Collar Crime in a Postmodern, Globalized World

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We live in a world of boundaries. They include boundaries between academic disciplines and within disciplines, boundaries between areas of specialization. We live in a world of temporal boundaries, where it is common to differentiate between past, present, and future. We live in a world of geographical boundaries between communities, states, and nations. The erosion of boundaries in all of these realms, or the reconfiguration of such boundaries, is one of the guiding themes of this chapter. Developments pertaining to white-collar crime and its control bring this theme into especially sharp relief.

If the study of white-collar crime is a criminological topic, the complex nature of white-collar crime calls for attention to many different disciplines, including philosophy, history, economics, political science, psychology, sociology, jurisprudence, managerial sciences, and communications studies. On a theoretical plane, we have witnessed some recent calls for the development of an integrated criminology, addressing multiple levels of explanation. If the study of white-collar crime can be characterized as a specialization within criminology, this form of crime intersects in significant ways with other forms of crime, including organized crime, professional crime, and political crime. If white-collar crime has been principally addressed in terms of the conditions of modernity, it increasingly manifests attributes of an emerging postmodern world. If white-collar crime was originally a largely local phenomenon, then a state or national phenomenon, it is increasingly a global phenomenon, with some of its most significant forms transcending national boundaries. A substantial literature has now developed on white-collar crime, on globalization, and on the postmodern, but to date there has been relatively little cross-fertilization between these realms of inquiry. As the various boundaries identified here increasingly disintegrate, such cross-fertilization will surely intensify.

E. H. Sutherland and the Discovery of White-Collar Crime: Traditional Roots and a Modern Context

Edwin Sutherland is universally recognized as the founding father of white-collar crime scholarship. Although Sutherland’s birth in 1883 occurred during a period of great expansion for an industrialized, modern America, he was
personally a product of a small rural town, a traditional environment, born in Gibbon, Nebraska. With maturity, Sutherland increasingly came into contact with a modern, urban society, especially during his pursuit of a doctorate at the University of Chicago and subsequent years as a professor there. Sutherland’s interest in white-collar crime has been attributed, at least in part, to his revulsion at the practices of Wall Street manipulators who helped bring about the 1929 stock market crash (and subsequent Great Depression), as well as the increasingly conspicuous corporate empires of the first half of the 20th century. In one sense, Sutherland could be regarded as reacting against the corrupting elements of a modern society in relation to the traditional society familiar to him from his youth. The basic framework of Sutherland’s work could be described as modernist, in its focus on modern industrialized (and bureaucratized) major corporations. Sutherland’s White-Collar Crime can also be said to have a nationalist framework: he focused primarily on American corporations, operating principally within American borders. Most white-collar crime scholarship—at least American white-collar crime scholarship—has adopted this modernist, nationalist framework. It has focused on professions operating within modern communities, or on small businesses, individual managers, employees, and entrepreneurs operating within such communities. It has also focused on national industries and major American corporations, and on federal and state bureaucracies regulating these corporations. One could cite many examples to support this claim. Such a framework may continue to be adopted indefinitely within white-collar crime scholarship in the years ahead, but it misses or fails to encompass immensely significant (and in some cases emerging) forms of white-collar crime. Accordingly, white-collar crime scholarship must increasingly adopt a postmodern, globalized point of view.

**Contemporary White-Collar Crime Criminologists and a Globalized Framework**

While most criminologists—including students of white-collar crime—adopt a framework that is modernist and nationalistic, a relatively small number of them have sought to construct a broader, globalized framework. An orientation toward globalization appears to be more pronounced among non-American than among American criminologists, although there are important exceptions to this proposition. Several key themes emerge from the literature linking crime with globalization. First, globalization itself is viewed as generating some significant criminogenic tendencies. Second, globalization has an impact on a wide range of different types of crime, including conventional forms of crime. Third, certain classes of people (for example, women) are especially vulnerable to victimization as a consequence of an ever-accelerating globalization. And fourth, transnational—or multinational—corporations have become immensely powerful in a globalized world, and are increasingly beyond the reach of existing agencies of social control and regulation. While nations have responded to some forms of globalized crime, they have done so quite selectively. New international norms and new global regulatory initiatives are now needed. The harmful human, environmental, and economic consequences of globalized crime are formidable.