

# CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORIES

## Introduction and Evaluation

*Second Edition*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# INTRODUCTION TO CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY

### What Is Theory?

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**T**o many students, criminal justice practitioners, and other people, theory has a bad name. In their minds, the word "theory" means an irrelevant antonym of "fact." Facts are real, while theories seem to involve no more than impractical mental gymnastics. Theories are just fanciful ideas that have little to do with what truly motivates real people. This is a mistaken image of theory in social science in general and in criminology in particular. Theory, if developed properly, is about real situations, feelings, experience, and human behavior. An effective theory helps us to make sense of facts that we already know and can be tested against new facts.

Consider the situation of a young girl's child abuse and her later involvement in prostitution. What about the relationship between the limited opportunities for legitimate work and the selection of a career in crime? Think about the fact that members from a significant proportion of immigrant groups have become successively involved in organized crime, such as Jews, Irish, and Italians, and now Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and Latinos. Or consider the fact that some kinds of behavior are legally defined as criminal, while others are not. Theories are tentative answers to the commonly asked questions about such events and behavior. Why? By what process? How does it work? The answers may provide explanations of one set of events by referring to other events.

In general, scientific theories make statements about the relationship between two classes of phenomena. (Vold and Bernard, 1986:4)

Theories, then, are really generalizations of a sort; they explain how two or more events are related to each other. (Williams and McShane, 1988:2)

A theory is a set of interconnected statements or propositions that explain how two or more events or factors are related to one another. (Curran and Renzetti, 1994:2)

Note that these and other definitions of theory (see Gibbs, 1990) refer to statements about relationships between actual events; about *what is* and *what will be*. They are not answers to questions of *what ought to be*, nor are they philosophical, religious, or metaphysical systems of beliefs and values about crime and society.

Criminological theories are abstract, but they entail more than ivory-tower or arm-chair speculations. They are part of the broader social science endeavor to explain human behavior and society. Understanding why people conform to or deviate from social and legal norms is an integral part of a liberal education. Moreover, such understanding is vital for those who plan to pursue specialized careers in the law or criminal justice. Virtually every policy or action taken regarding crime is based on some underlying theory or theories of crime. It is essential, therefore, to comprehend and evaluate the major theories of criminology, not only for the academic or research criminologist, but also for the educated citizen and the legal or criminal justice professional.

## Types of Criminological Theories

Edwin H. Sutherland (1947) defined criminology as the study of the entire process of *law-making*, *law-breaking*, and *law-enforcing*. This definition provides us with a starting point for classifying criminological theories. One such major type of theory addresses the first and third part of this process: the making and enforcing of the law. Theories of this kind attempt to account for why we have laws and why the criminal justice system operates the way it does. Another major type of theory explains law-breaking. Such theories account for criminal and delinquent behavior. They are usually extended to explain any deviant behavior that violates social norms, whether or not such behavior also violates the law.

There are not as many different theories of the first kind (theories of law and criminal justice) as there are of the second kind (theories of criminal and deviant behavior). Therefore, while both are important, more attention will be paid here to the second type of theory. Conflict, labeling, Marxist, and feminist theories are examples of theories that attempt to shed light on both criminal behavior and the law.

### *Theories of Making and Enforcing Criminal Law*

Theories of making and enforcing criminal law (also herein referred to as theories of law and criminal justice) offer answers to questions of how or why certain behavior and people become defined and are

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dealt with as criminal in society. Why is a particular conduct considered illegal and what determines the kind of action to be taken when it occurs? How is it decided, and who makes the decision, that such conduct is criminal? And how are the resources of the public and state brought to bear against it? Theories try to answer these questions by proposing that social, political, and economic variables affect the legislation of law, administrative decisions and rules, and the implementation and operation of law in the criminal justice system.

This does not refer to philosophies regarding what kind of legal system we should have; nor is it a theoretical statement, for instance, to argue that we *should* have a fair, just, and effective criminal justice system. Such a statement offers desirable social goals that citizens may debate and vote on, but it provides no scientific explanation of law and criminal justice. Arguments over the goals and purposes of the system—such as whether it should focus on crime control rather than due process, should provide just deserts for law violators or only take actions that deter crime, or should rehabilitate or severely punish serious offenders—are not theoretical arguments. Philosophical and pragmatic debates over society's control of crime may be informed by theory or have relevance to the application of theory, but they are not *themselves* theoretical explanations of why laws are formulated and enforced. Theories attempt to explain the behavior of the participants in the legal system and the operation of the system itself. They produce hypotheses about the factors that account for legal and criminal justice actions and decisions. Theories do not tell us what are the correct, proper, and desirable values that should be exemplified in the system.

This is not to imply that the theorists themselves are totally unaffected by philosophical and value judgments. There is a significant relationship between theories of crime and criminal justice and philosophies that define the desirable goals of a just, effective, and well-managed criminal justice system. Such goals partially direct which theories will be considered important, and those theories will help to develop strategies to reach these goals.

For example, one of the reasons that conflict theory is important in criminology is that its theoretical propositions about the operation of the system are relevant to the political and moral debate over the justice of that system. The goal of a just system is to treat everyone equitably based on legally relevant factors such as the nature of the criminal act and the laws relating to it. Conflict theory hypothesizes that actions taken in the criminal justice system may be decided differentially based on such factors as the race, class, and gender of offenders, rather than on the type of crime. The decisions of a criminal justice system that relies more on such social characteristics than on the nature of the crime is not a just system. Therefore, the extent to which conflict theory

is supported or refuted by research evidence is critical to the debate over the fairness of the criminal justice system.

### *Theories of Criminal and Deviant Behavior*

Theories of criminal and deviant behavior try to answer the question of why social and legal norms are violated. This question has two interrelated parts: (1) Why are there variations in group rates of crime and deviance, and (2) why do some individuals come to commit criminal and deviant acts?

The first question poses the problem of trying to make sense of the differences in the location and proportion of deviant and criminal behavior in various groups and societies. For example, why does the United States have such a high rate of crime compared to Japan and most of the Western European countries? Why do males as a group commit so many more violent and criminal acts than females? How do we explain the differences in homicide and drug use among different classes and groups within the same society?

The second question raises the issue of explaining differences among individuals in committing or refraining from criminal acts. Why are some individuals more likely to break the law than others? By what process or under what circumstances do people typically, and not just in a specific, individual case, reach the point of obeying or violating the law? Why does one person commit a crime, given a certain opportunity, while another does not, given the same opportunity? Why are some people more likely than others to commit frequent crimes or pursue criminal careers?

The first set of questions focuses on societal and group patterns, the second on individual differences. A theory that addresses broader questions about differences across societies or major groups in society is called a "macro" theory. Conversely, one that focuses specifically on small group or individual differences is referred to as operating on the "micro" level of analysis (Orcutt, 1983; Alexander et al., 1987). Other terms have also been used to make a similar distinction between theories. Cressey (1960) refers to "epidemiology" (the prevalence and distribution of crime across groups and societies) and "individual conduct." Akers refers to such different theories as social *structural* or *processual* (Akers, 1968; 1985). These distinctions between macro and micro, structural and processual, refer not only to questions about groups and individual behavior, but also to the kinds of answers a theory offers. For example, a theory that tries to answer the question of the differences between male and female crime rates by relying on innate biological differences between men and women would still be operating on the micro level.

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In actuality, the two major questions of group and individual behavior are really just subtypes of the same general question: *Why do or do not people commit crime and deviance?* This is why theories of criminal behavior are neither strictly structural nor processual, although each will emphasize one or the other. Theories emphasizing social structure propose that the proportion of crimes among groups, classes, communities, or societies differ because of variations in their social or cultural make-up. Most structural theories, however, also include implicit or explicit statements regarding the process by which these structural conditions produce high or low crime rates. Processual theories assert that an individual commits criminal acts because he or she has experienced a particular life history, possessed a particular set of individual characteristics, or encountered a particular situation. Such theories also consider the deviancy-producing structures that an individual must encounter in order to increase the probability of his or her committing a crime.

There are other ways to classify criminological theories. One common way is to refer not just to micro or macro, but to several levels of explanation that ascend from the smallest to the largest unit of analysis. Such a classification typically categorizes the theories according to the general scientific discipline from which the explanatory variables are drawn. The most common classifications are: *biological* theories that explain crime with one or more genetic, chemical, neurological, or physiological variables; *psychological* theories based on personality, emotional maladjustment, mental retardation, psychic disturbance, or psychological traits; *social psychological* theories that account for crime by reference to behavior, self, and cognitive variables in a group context; and *sociological* theories that explain crime with cultural, structural, and socio-demographic variables. (See Nettler, 1984; Gibbons, 1979; Vold and Bernard, 1986; Liska, 1987; Williams and McShane, 1988; Shoemaker, 1990; Jensen and Rojek, 1992.)

Just as the categories of structure and process overlap to some extent, some theories will draw from two or more disciplines. For instance, contemporary biological theories do not rely exclusively on genetic or biochemical factors, but also draw from psychological or sociological variables as well. Other theories, such as social learning, are clearly social-psychological, utilizing both sociological and psychological variables.

The theories are arranged in the following chapters in an order that draws roughly from both the structure-process distinction and the classification of theories as biological, psychological, and sociological. Chapter 2 introduces the classical and contemporary statements of deterrence theory. Chapter 3 surveys early and recent biological and psychological theories. The remaining chapters review the major so-

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ciological theories of crime. Social learning theory (Chapter 4), control theories (Chapter 5), and labeling theory (Chapter 6) are the more social-psychologically oriented of these sociological theories. Chapter 7 (anomie/strain theories) and Chapter 8 (conflict), Chapter 9 (Marxist), and Chapter 10 (feminist theories) discuss those theories that draw the most heavily from social structure and culture. Labeling, conflict, Marxist, and feminist perspectives are both theories of criminal justice and theories of criminal behavior. The final chapter examines the extent to which the differences and commonalities in theories can be reconciled and integrated.

Whatever the classification of theory that may be used, there will be some kind of overlap, shortcomings, and loose ends. No special case will be made here for the order in which the various theories are presented. The focus here is not on how best to classify each theory but rather on introducing what each theory proposes and on evaluating its validity.

## Criteria for Evaluating Theory

How do we know if a theory offers a sound explanation of crime or criminal justice? The various theories that will be explored provide different, sometimes contradictory, explanations of crime. How do we judge which explanation is preferable over another, or which is the best amongst several theories? The weakest reason for accepting or rejecting a theory of crime is how well it conforms to one's own beliefs, ideologies, or preferred policies.

If criminological theories are to be scientific, then they must be judged by scientific criteria. The most important of these is empirical validity, the extent to which a theory can be verified or refuted with carefully gathered evidence. But there are several other major criteria by which theories can be assessed. These include internal *logical consistency, scope and parsimony, testability, empirical validity, and usefulness and policy implication*. (For discussions of the criteria for evaluating criminological theories, see Schrag, 1962; Gibbons, 1979:14-16; Vold and Bernard, 1986:340-363; Liska, 1987: 14-25; Shoemaker, 1990: 3-11; Barlow and Ferdinand, 1992:189-99; Tittle, 1995:17-53).

### *Logical Consistency, Scope, and Parsimony*

The basic prerequisite for a sound theory is that it has clearly defined concepts and that its propositions are logically stated and internally consistent. For example, a theory which proposes that criminals are biologically deficient and that deficiency explains their criminal behavior cannot also claim that family socialization is the basic cause of criminal behavior.

The scope of a theory refers to the range of phenomena which it proposes to explain. For instance, a theory that accounts only for the crime of check forgery may be accurate, but it is obviously very limited in scope. A better theory is one which accounts for a wide range of offenses including check forgery. A theory of juvenile delinquency that does not relate as well to adult criminality is more restricted than one that accounts for both juvenile delinquency and adult crime. A theory that explains only the age distribution of crime has a more limited scope than one that explains the age, race, sex, and class distributions of crime.

Parsimony, the conciseness and abstractness of a set of concepts and propositions, is also a desirable characteristic in a scientific theory. Scope and parsimony are interrelated, in that a theory which explains a wide scope of events with a few, succinct statements is scientifically preferable to one which relies on a complex set of propositions and variables that accounts for only a small range of events. The principle of parsimony is to use as few propositions as possible to explain the widest range of phenomena. For example, a theory which proposes that *all* crime and delinquency is caused by low self-control is much more parsimonious than a theory that requires a different set of multiple hypotheses to explain crime and delinquency, depending upon the type of offense and the age, sex, or race of the offender.

### *Testability*

A scientific theory must be testable by objective, repeatable evidence. If a theory cannot be tested against empirical findings, it has no scientific value. Gibbons (1979:14) argues that, "In the final analysis, the acid test of a scientific theory is testability; that is, the extent to which it can either be verified or disproved by appropriate empirical evidence." It is not enough for a theory to fit known facts about crime or contain empirical evidence consistent with its propositions. It must also be possible to subject the theory to empirical falsification; in other words, it must be open to evidence that may counter or disprove its hypotheses with negative findings. If it is not *falsifiable* in this sense, it is not testable (Stinchcombe, 1968).

A theory may be untestable because the definitions of its concepts and its propositions are stated as a *tautology*. A tautology is a statement or hypothesis that is true by definition or involves circular reasoning. If, for example, one begins with the definition of low self-control as the failure to refrain from crime then proposes low self-control as a cause of law violation, then one's proposition is tautological. Given the definition of low self-control, the proposition can never be proven false, because self-control is defined by the very thing it is hypothesized to explain. It simply says that a person who has low self-control has low

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self-control, or that a person who violates the law violates the law. A variation on a tautology that is true by definition is seen in the practice of placing a label on some behavior, then using that label to explain the same behavior. For instance, one may label serial killers as psychopaths, then assert that people commit serial murders because they are psychopathic. Such a statement does no more than repeat the label. Similarly, we may observe that a person drinks excessively and has problems with alcohol, so we theorize that the person overdrinks because he is an alcoholic. How do we know he is an alcoholic? We know because he drinks excessively and has problems with alcohol. We have come full circle.

Another way in which a theory may be untestable is that its propositions are so open-ended that any contradictory empirical evidence can be interpreted or re-interpreted to support the theory. For example, a theory may propose that males who rob banks are motivated by an irrational and unconscious impulse to resolve their guilt over their childhood sexual attraction towards their own mothers. This is a testable explanation of male bank robbery because it is not true by definition. If research finds enough bank robbers who fit this description, then the theory is supported. If research uncovers other cases where bank robbers claim their only motive is money and they have no such feelings towards their mothers, then that can be taken as falsifying the theory. However, the theory cannot be falsified if the claims of the latter bank robbers are dismissed by asserting that their very denial of these feelings in effect *supports* the theory, because the same unconscious impulse that motivated them to rob banks also rendered them unconscious of their true motivations. Similarly, a theory may contend that criminal laws always serve the interests of the ruling capitalist elite. Even if laws are enacted to serve the interest of the working class, one could always re-interpret them with the argument that such laws only appear to serve the working class but in fact serve the ruling class. There is no way to falsify the theory. Hence, a theory that can never be proven wrong, regardless of the findings, is not a testable theory.

A theory may also be untestable because its concepts are not measurable by observable and reportable events. A theory's concepts and propositions identify the explanatory events or *independent variables* that account for variations in the *dependent variables*, which are events or behavior to be explained. Even a non-tautological theory cannot be tested if it is not possible to find observable events that can be taken as objective and repeatable measures of these concepts. Without such measures, the hypothesized relationships cannot be checked against actual events. If a theory proposes that people commit crimes because they are possessed by invisible demons, there is no way to prove whether or not such demons are responsible for the crime. If we cannot measure

the existence of demons separately from the occurrence of criminal behavior, we may simply assume the existence of the demons from the existence of the crimes. We have a similar tautology if the dependent and independent variables are measured by the same events. For example, it is tautological to explain delinquent behavior as the result of social disorganization, if one of the indicators of social disorganization is the delinquency rate itself. Both the events to be explained and the events used to explain them are the same thing. It is tautological to interpret an event as the cause of itself.

Not all concepts must be directly measurable for a theory to be testable, but one must be able to relate them in a logical and clear way to measurable phenomena. For instance, one part of social learning theory proposes that an individual's exposure to admired models who are involved in deviant or delinquent behavior will increase the chances that person will imitate those same behaviors. Imitation is defined as one engaging in acts after he or she has watched them being engaged in by others. It is quite possible to directly observe the behavior of adult or peer models whom adolescents are in a position to imitate, or to ask adolescents to report exposure to such models then observe the extent to which their behavior matches that of the models. The concept of imitation refers to observable, measurable events; therefore, propositions about modeling are testable.

### *Empirical Validity*

This is the most important criterion for judging a theory. Empirical validity simply means that a theory has been supported by research evidence. For a theory to be logical, parsimonious, and non-tautological means little if it turns out to be false. It is seldom the case, however, that a theory is found to be entirely true or entirely false. Falsifiable theories may encounter some negative evidence without being judged as wholly invalid. The question is, what degree of empirical support does the theory have? Do the findings of research provide weak or strong support? Does the preponderance of evidence support or undermine the theory? How does its empirical validity compare with that of other theories?

For instance, deterrence theory proposes in part that offenders will not repeat their crimes if they have been caught and given severe legal punishment. If research finds that this is true for only a small minority of offenders or that punished offenders are only slightly less likely to repeat crimes than unpunished offenders, then the theory has some, but not much, empirical validity. Labeling theory, on the other hand, proposes that the experience of being caught and processed by the criminal justice system labels offenders as criminal. Hence, the label promotes their self-identity as criminals and makes them more likely,

rather than less likely, to repeat their crimes. If research finds that, other things being equal, apprehended offenders are more likely to recidivate than those who have not been caught, then labeling theory has more empirical validity than deterrence theory.

### *Empirical Validity and the Concept of Causality and Determinism*

Notice the terms "more likely" and "less likely." Empirical validity does not mean that a theory must identify variables that always cause criminal behavior to occur or always explain the decision to arrest an offender. The traditional concept of causality in science is that cause X must precede and produce effect Y. To be a cause, X must be both a "necessary condition," the absence of which means that Y will not occur, and a "sufficient condition," so that Y always occurs in the presence of X. No criminological theory can meet these two traditional causation criteria of necessary and sufficient conditions. But that makes little difference, since a probabilistic concept of causality is more appropriate for assessing the empirical validity of criminological theories. The probabilistic concept of causation simply asserts that the presence of X renders the occurrence of Y more probable. That is, contemporaneous variations or changes in criminal behavior are associated or correlated with variations or changes in the explanatory variables identified in the theory. The presence of the variables specified in the theory precede the occurrence of crime and delinquency, thereby predicting when they are more likely to occur or re-occur. The stronger the correlations and associations, the greater the theory's empirical validity.

Interpreting correlations as causation even in the probabilistic sense remains a problem, because the direction of the relationship between two correlated variables may not be the same as specified in the theory. For instance, a theory may hypothesize that an adolescent engages in delinquent conduct as a result of associating with other adolescents who are already delinquent. Finding a correlation between one's own delinquent behavior and the delinquency of one's friends, therefore, could be taken as evidence in support of the theory. But the relationship may exist for converse reasons; that is, the adolescent first becomes delinquent and then seeks out delinquent associates. Thus, the association with other delinquents may be the dependent variable, resulting from one's own prior delinquency, rather than the independent variable that increases the probability that the adolescent will commit delinquency. Further research would be needed to find out which direction the relationship typically runs.

The probabilistic concept of causality suggests that human behavior is neither completely determined by external forces nor completely an

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outcome of the unfettered exercise of free will choices. Rather, behavior is best understood from the middle-ground perspective of "soft determinism" (Matza, 1964). Soft determinism recognizes that various factors influence and limit actions but leave room for individual choices that cannot be completely predicted. Increasingly, criminological theorists have come to adopt this view.

. . . [B]iological, sociocultural, and developmental factors may influence—but *not determine*—behavior because the systematic processes underlying criminal behavior are complex, dynamic, and self-reinforcing. A key reason for the effective unpredictability of these and similar nonlinear systems is their extreme sensitivity to initial conditions. (Vila, 1994:329)

Numerous theorists, however, have come to advance similar arguments in recent years. Versions of soft determinism or indeterminism are now advocated by control theorists, rational choice theorists, social learning theorists, conflict theorists, and others. . . . [P]eople may transcend previous experience through reflective thought—altering their preferences and developing unexpected and sometimes novel strategies for acting on those preferences. (Agnew, 1995:83, 88)

### *Usefulness and Policy Implications*

Finally, the value of a criminological theory can be further evaluated by its usefulness in providing guidelines for effective social and criminal justice policy and practice. Every criminological theory implies a therapy or a policy. The basic assumption in theory-guided practice is that the better the theory explains the problem, the better it is able to guide efforts to solve the problem.

All major criminological theories have implications for, and have indeed been utilized in, criminal justice policy and practice. Every therapy, treatment program, prison regimen, police policy, or criminal justice practice is based, either explicitly or implicitly, on some explanation of human nature in general or criminal behavior in particular. Every recommendation for changes in our legal and criminal justice system has been based on some underlying theory that explains why the laws have been enacted, why the system operates as it does, and why those who are in the system behave as they do.

The question, then, is not whether policy can be or should be based on theory—it already is guided by theory—but rather, how well is policy guided by theory and how good is the theory on which the policy is predicated? In most public discourse about criminal justice policy, the underlying theoretical notions are ill-stated and vaguely understood. A policy may be adopted for political, economic, or bureaucratic reasons, then a theoretical rationale is formulated or adopted to justify the policy. Typically, the theoretical underpinnings of a program are not a single coherent and tested theory, but rather a hybrid mixture of several,

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sometimes conflicting, theoretical strands. This understandably results from the effort to try any number of things to see what works. Utility and effectiveness, not theoretical purity, is the standard in policy and practical application. However, this often leads to adopting theories without close regard to how well they meet the criteria for a good theory.

A clear, parsimonious, non-tautological, and empirically valid theory has even more to recommend it if it can also guide programs and practices. If a program guided by that theory is instituted and is successful in achieving its goals, we gain additional confidence in the validity of the theory. However, this is an indirect and imprecise way to judge the empirical validity of a theory. The program may be a poor adaptation of the theoretical principles to the actual situation. There may be practical or ethical roadblocks against carrying out the actions that the theory implies are needed to change criminal behavior, reduce recidivism, or make the system operate better. There may be political or economic factors that come into play to enhance or retard the effectiveness of the program that have nothing to do with the validity of the theory.

### *Empirical Validity as the Primary Criterion*

This brings us back again to the primary standard for judging a theory—its verification or refutation by empirical research (Gibbs, 1990). Reference will be made, where appropriate, to tautologies, applications to policy, and other criteria for evaluating criminological theories. But the emphasis in this book will be on: (1) introducing the central concepts and propositions of criminological theories, and (2) evaluating their empirical validity.

### **Summary**

Criminological theories are both theories of the making and enforcing of criminal law and theories of breaking the law. The former attempts to explain the content of the laws and the behavior of the criminal justice system; the latter tries to explain the commission, occurrence, and patterns of criminal and deviant behavior. Structural or macro theories focus on differences in group and societal rates of crime, while processual or micro theories address individual differences and social processes. The aim of criminological theory is to gain an understanding of crime and criminal justice. Theories are useful for addressing the issues of which policies are more or less likely to work, but they are not philosophical statements about what ought to be done.

A theory may be evaluated, either on its own or by comparison with other theories, on the criteria of clarity and consistency, scope and parsimony, testability, practical usefulness, and empirical validity. Of

these the most important is empirical validity. To what extent is the theory supported by empirical findings or more supported than alternative theories? That is the criterion to which most of the attention will be given in the following chapters.