

Introduction: Theory and Contemporary Criminology

Charles R. Tittle

The word “theory” means different things to different contemporary criminologists, depending on their philosophies about the nature of criminology, what it is attempting to accomplish, and how they think criminology ought to be done. Diversity is evident from the presence of at least seven differing “philosophies of the enterprise,” expressed in distinct “models” for doing criminology. The seven approaches include: (1) theoretical science; (2) problem solving; (3) “*verstehen*” analysis; (4) descriptive approaches; (5) critical work; (6) nihilistic thinking; and (7) amelioration. Yet, there does appear to be a dominant paradigm.

In the following pages, I will briefly describe six of the styles of contemporary criminology and assess the meaning and importance of theory in each. However, my description of theoretical science is far more extensive than it is for the other six because theoretical science seems to be the most widely endorsed, even if not always actually practiced, mode of work in contemporary criminology. While all seven of the models to be discussed have an established place in the criminological landscape, are represented by strong advocates, contain powerful intellectual challenges, have produced important results, and command a degree of influence, most criminology seems to follow, to one degree or another, the model of science. Of course, classifying scholars and/or their products into camps is always somewhat arbitrary, and the relative popularity of the various modes of work may be undergoing change. Nevertheless, for now I will follow the classification scheme outlined above in trying to describe theory and its uses in contemporary criminology.

Theoretical Science

Theoretical accounts within a scientific model are intellectual structures designed to help explain things within given domains of interest (for more detailed descriptions of theoretical science see Reynolds, 1971; Tittle, 1995; Turner, 2003: Chapter 1). That is, scientific theories, and explanations try to provide answers to questions of “why” and “how” that are deemed satisfactory by critical audiences made up of scientists who expect such a theory to provide intellectual satisfaction as well as the means for predicting aspects of the phenomena of interest. However, scientific predictions are quite different from prophecy. A scientific prediction is of the form: “given conditions x , y , and z , one should expect to find q ,” which may be applied to events or phenomena in the past as well as the present. A prophecy, on the other hand, is a projection into the future. Scientifically oriented criminologists do not issue prophecies except in the form of conditional statements, such as: “if conditions x , y , and z continue or emerge, then q is likely to happen.”

Scientific explanations can be free-standing, applying to specific phenomena, often at a particular time and place, with quite concrete elements. But, the most useful explanations are embedded in general theories setting forth abstract principles from which explanations of many separate phenomena can be derived. Science strives for such general theories because they are more efficient than myriad specific explanations. In addition, if organized in a deductive way (from general abstract statements or ideas down to more and more concrete phenomena), general theories make it possible to synthesize large bodies of knowledge as well as to derive explanations of phenomena that previously have not been explained. Finally, general theories serve the ends of science because they rest on common causes of various phenomena, thereby guiding the identification of the unity in nature on which science is built.

Theories, however, are intellectual accounts with no necessary connection to the real world they purport to explain. Theories may be intellectually excellent – providing convincing-sounding explanations and being well-structured, logical, comprehensive, and the like – at the same time that the predictions they suggest about the empirical world may be incorrect. Science strives to produce theories that are good intellectual products and that are also empirically faithful. Ultimately, the point is to explain (answer questions of “why” and “how”; establish the causes of) aspects of the domain covered by the theory. To determine if a theory is empirically correct, and to provide the means for improving it when evidence shows that it is not fully correct, scholars must assess how well it accommodates appropriate data about the real world. Research is mainly about testing the match between the intellectual world of a theory with the empirical world supposedly being explained.

In advanced fields the research process first requires derivation of specific, reality-oriented hypotheses from existing theories, the validity of which can be assessed with concrete, empirical information. Hypotheses are statements about relationships among two or more variables, each of which has a direct empirical reference. Statements of relationship contained within, or implied by, a general theory cannot

be tested directly because they are in the form of abstract notions about “concepts” rather than variables. Moreover, general theories typically cannot be tested in their entirety because (1) they are composed of many potential causal parts that must fit together in particular specified ways; and (2) because some theoretical propositions in general theories are usually of such high levels of abstraction that it is impractical to attempt to reduce them to concrete form. Checking the “real world” applicability of a general theory, then, inevitably involves substantial theoretical manipulation prior to the technical procedures required for empirical test.

For instance, a given theory may suggest that *A* (a general, abstract concept) causes *B* (another general, abstract concept) and that *C* (a general, abstract concept) causes *D* (a general, abstract concept), as well as many other relationships and causal connections. In addition, that theory might imply that *A* indirectly affects *D* because *A* affects *C*, which in turn, affects *D*. As long as these implied relationships concern abstract phenomena they stand simply as intellectual puzzles. An empirical test, however, requires that the general, abstract concepts of *A* and *B* be reduced to concrete instances of the general categories of *A* and *B*, that the theoretical relationship between those general categories be specified in more specific empirical terms, and that those empirical terms be accurate reflections of the concepts of the theory. Sometimes, many hypotheses from a given general theory can be assessed simultaneously by estimation of an entire set of causal relationships. But, usually, for a variety of technical and theoretical reasons, the whole set of relationships implied by a theory cannot be tested at once. Instead, scientifically oriented criminologists usually focus on more limited empirical statements (as noted above, called hypotheses). By testing a large number of such hypotheses derived from a theory (not necessarily all at once, but through many research projects by many different scholars, using many samples or social contexts), scholars can indirectly test the accuracy of the entire theory – but only if the theory lends itself to deductive reasoning so that very general notions can lead logically to more concrete specifications of relationships among variables.

Thus, because the same abstract principles can yield many hypotheses, and because abstract concepts can be expressed in many concrete variables, no particular test of a hypothesis provides all, or even a substantial amount, of the information needed to evaluate a theory. Correct evaluation requires many tests of many hypotheses in many different circumstances, using various operationalizations (the term used to refer to the translation of abstract concepts into concrete empirical variables). Certainly, no single study makes a science or permits firm conclusions about the nature of reality or the validity of a given theory. At any given time the status of a theory depends on the weight of evidence compiled up to that point. No theory is ever completely proven, because even if all prior tests have been supportive, there is no guarantee that the next test, with different variables, different samples, and in different parts of the world, will also be supportive. Further, when a theory enjoys numerous successful tests it is likely to provoke closer attention to detail that reveals other possibilities needing testing or that call for refinements of the theory to accommodate previously ignored possibilities. For the same reasons, no theory is

ever completely discredited, though substantial negative evidence (provided the evidence is correctly applicable to the theory) may place a theory in low regard in the community of scholars.

Hence, the adequacy of a theory is always tentative, resting on the collective judgment of the community of scientists who express various degrees of confidence in it at any given point in time. Theories are not deemed to be right or wrong; they simply enjoy different amounts of support. Of course, as noted above, theories with little or no empirical support may hold peripheral status, depending on whether their lack of support comes from unsupportive tests or simply from the absence of adequate tests. Though scientifically oriented criminologists ideally downplay theories lacking empirical support, they rarely reject any theories altogether. This is partly because many tests of criminological theories are deemed to be weak, often with the measured variables having poor correspondence with the theoretical concepts at the center of the theories. But, it is also because the culture of criminology, which views theories as the property of their makers rather than as collective endeavors, promotes themes of professional politeness. The ethic of professional politeness leads most scholars to interpret results of research in a generally positive light, so that negative evidence is softened by researchers' calling attention to various counter-possibilities. Indeed, the culture of criminological research calls for authors of papers reporting research results to try first to convince readers that the evidence is relevant and useful for the purpose at hand and then within the same paper to caution readers by detailing reasons why the research should be questioned. Consequently, definitive studies are rare.

In the practice of theoretical science in criminology, theory is the central focus – it is the point of the enterprise. Research is merely a handmaiden to theory-building. If criminologists could explain everything about crime, criminal behavior, and efforts to prevent or channel it, and could do so in an efficient, general, and completely accurate way, there would be no need for research. Criminologists would have achieved their collective goals. Of course, the probability of ever reaching this goal is extremely low, especially since, without research, we cannot ascertain the accuracy of explanations. So, for science, whose guiding goal is theory, research is typically the beginning, the constant helpmate, and the ultimate arbiter.

The process of theoretical criminology, then, is a constant interaction between efforts to build or improve theory and testing of theory as it exists at any given point in time. The process begins with establishing, or perhaps sometimes imagining, regularities in behaviors or social arrangements that seem to bear on crime or crime-related phenomena. Such observations or perceptions sometimes inspire attempts at *ad hoc* explanation (aimed at the specific regularities observed or documented). Once an *ad hoc* explanation has been formulated, it must then be tested in other circumstances where the *ad hoc* phenomenon potentially exists. Such testing requires statement of some logical expectations (hypotheses) based on the previously formulated explanation. If the results of a series of such tests are unfavorable, then scientists are not likely to continue to entertain that explanation (though, as noted before, social scientists are, and must be, cautious in abandoning explanations or

theories, even in the face of seemingly strong contrary evidence). If some of the tests are favorable and some are not, theorists are challenged to modify the *ad hoc* explanation to help it accommodate the evidence. If all of the tests are favorable, theorists and researchers are likely to try to expand the argument to include more situations and more variables.

The early stages of a discipline striving to become a theoretical science will spawn numerous observations of regularities, formulations of *ad hoc* explanations, testing of hypotheses, and feedbacks to produce alterations of original *ad hoc* explanations. Thus, at a certain point in the development of a science, the field will contain a number of limited explanations of specified phenomena. Such a situation challenges theorists to recognize or discover the commonality or kinship of underlying causal processes which can be incorporated within a more general formulation. And so begins the enterprise of building general theory (a comprehensive, abstract account) from disparate-appearing, limited explanations.

But, general theories, like free-standing explanations before them, must be squared with the empirical world through derivation and testing of hypotheses. Some scholars/theorists contend that the results of such theory testing should be used to modify theories to make them more consistent with the evidence (see Tittle, 1995, 1985, 1989). Other scholars/theories, however, regard theories as more or less fixed in their original form (see Hirschi, 1979, 1989). To them, empirical tests are simply to confirm or contradict specific theoretical statements, with the whole enterprise consisting of competition among various theories to see which ones fare better. Presumably, the theory that prevails in this competitive struggle will be accepted as true and correct – at least until a rival arises to pose a new challenge. Hence, criminologists pursuing theoretical science disagree as to whether theory is to be accommodative or defensive in the face of contrary evidence.

Criminologists also disagree about the next step after testing initial theoretical formulations. Some believe that theoretical science requires efforts to tie limited theories together into still more general and encompassing accounts that explain more phenomena more accurately. If such higher-level formulations are created, they, in turn, are expected to lead to empirical testing through hypothesis derivation, translation of concepts into variables, and empirical testing. Results from such tests also provide a basis for forming various degrees of confidence in these “integrated” theories. And, for those who embrace an “accommodative” approach to contrary evidence, challenging evidence is ideally used to alter theories in order to more adequately account for the empirical facts. Theoretical alterations of this type are long-range and collective, with an aim toward developing more effective general theories in the face of challenging research evidence. Such theoretical refinements are far different from situational maneuvering by researchers who sometimes modify theories on the spot to more effectively square with the evidence, thereby giving a false impression of strong support.

But, just as criminologists disagree about how theorists should deal with non-supportive evidence, they also disagree about whether various limited theories should be fused through an “integrative process.” Some regard integration

disapprovingly, allegedly because it compromises one or more of the original theories that are integrated. More importantly, theoretical integration is sometimes condemned as a fool's errand because different explanatory formulations are alleged to be based on specific assumptions that may be contradictory or incompatible across theories, rendering integration impossible or impractical. For instance, it is said that the general class of theories relying on weak or inadequate "control" to explain why individuals commit crime assume that motivation for misconduct can be taken for granted because misconduct is inherently gratifying. Yet, many other theories attempt to explain criminal behavior by referring to the strength of motivation as a key element (see Tittle & Paternoster, 2000). To some, this means that integration of control-type and motivation-type theories makes no sense because, presumably, motivation for crime cannot be both a constant and a variable.

The advocates for theoretical integration, however, do not accept the inherent incompatibility notion, viewing it as posing a false conflict, stemming from a failure to distinguish fundamental assumptions from assumptions of convenience. Many assumptions made by theorists are idiosyncratic to that theorist and are not necessary within the parameters of the basic ideas incorporated within the theory. Moreover, theorists sometimes deliberately make assumptions in order to "hold constant" certain elements relevant to their theory until the theoretical consequences of other elements are explored and developed.

When assumptions associated with specific theories simply reflect biases of the theorist or involve deliberate maneuvers to assist in efficient theory-building, they are "assumptions of convenience" and in no way represent barriers to theoretical integration. Sometimes, of course, seemingly there are incompatible assumptions between various theories, or even within specific theories that may raise questions about the possibility of integration. Integrationists, however, maintain that such "incompatibilities" can be accommodated with the addition of contingency statements within integrated theories. Contingencies are statements of the "scope" of causal arguments, representing conditions under which a causal process operates with more or less force. Thus, if some condition or process is an assumption of a given theory that is integrated into a more general formulation along with a second theory with a different fundamental assumption, the larger, integrated theory can take those differing assumptions into account by specifying that some causal process (presumably the main one set forth by the integrated theory) is theorized to work better or perhaps work at all only when the terms of the contingency have been met.

Therefore, despite differences among theoretical scientists about technicalities, the ideal agreed end-product is general theory that specifies causal processes and which has been shaped and/or confirmed by empirical test. It is important to note, however, that theory is not evaluated only by empirical test. Besides being empirically accurate; theories in scientifically oriented criminology also must be satisfying to critical audiences, they must be "internally" well structured, and they must do certain things. To satisfy critical audiences theories must reflect what is currently (at whatever time the theory is being assessed) thought to be known (that is, they must be sensible and reasonable), and they must actually answer causal questions in a way

that is convincing to those who have struggled extensively with the issues relevant to the theory. To qualify as “well-structured” theories must be logically organized, systematic (in that all the parts fit together without inconsistencies, illogicalities, or tautologies, and without loose ends) and manipulable in ways that will yield specific applications (this is usually in the form of a deductive system in which general abstract principles lead to more concrete outcomes through sequential reasoning).

In addition, to qualify as fully adequate theory, formulations must exhibit certain features. Although various scholars uphold somewhat different standards concerning the characteristics of good theory, scientifically-oriented work mandates at least five desirable characteristics: (1) actual explanations that satisfactorily answer questions of why and how; (2) breadth; (3) comprehensiveness; (4) precision; and (5) depth.

Explanation The first, and most important criterion of good theory within the framework of theoretical science is whether the theory answers questions of “why” and “how.” This means that a formulation must, above all, help satisfy intellectual curiosity as to the causes of phenomena of interest. However, since audiences for theories differ in sophistication, scientifically oriented theories primarily aim to satisfy professional audiences that are knowledgeable about the subject matter and who employ an acute critical and demanding perspective. Clearly, many intellectual endeavors, some called “theory,” do not in fact provide explanations. Such formulations include: perspectives that provide broad paradigms for analyzing or thinking about crime-relevant phenomena; moral philosophies; classification systems for crime-relevant analyses or understanding; descriptions of crime-relevant features of societies, groups, or individuals; and conceptualizations involving development of names and ideas about the parts of social situations or societies that seem to bear on crime. As astute, interesting, and important as many of these efforts are, they do not fulfill the needs of theoretical science and so do not qualify as “theory” within that framework.

Breadth A second desirable trait of good theory is the capacity to explain a variety of specific instances within a given domain of phenomena. Ideally, criminological theories should encompass all forms of crime, no matter what is included within the criminal code of various societies, and provide explanations of all aspects of crime-relevant phenomena. Of course, breadth is a matter of degree and it is likely that no criminological theory will ever achieve total coverage. Nevertheless, with its general theories, theoretical science strives to explain as wide a range of phenomena as possible, and increasing degrees of success along those lines are usually highly regarded.

Comprehensiveness This feature of theory refers to inclusivity of causal processes; that is, the explanatory mechanism or mechanisms must accommodate, in one way or another, all of the operative causes of the phenomena in question. It is unrealistic to imagine that crime-relevant phenomena have one and only one cause, so an adequate theory for scientific purposes must take that complex reality into account.

This can be achieved in several ways. One way is to feature a central causal process that incorporates within itself various causal streams. Another way is to identify and bring into the formulation various contingencies (discussed earlier) for the operation of a main causal process. Still a third way is to integrate various causal processes through a structural arrangement of theoretical elements, showing how each element comes to bear on various other processes and outcomes.

Precision The fourth desirable feature of good scientifically oriented theory is especially difficult to achieve. It refers to three different aspects of theory. The first is specification of when and to what degree the causal forces laid out in the theory operate with greater or less force – in other words, good theories spell out the contingencies under which causal forces unfold with greater or less strength or completeness.

The second aspect of precision relevant to adequate scientifically oriented theory has to do with the form of theorized causal effects. Most criminological theories are interpreted as proposing linear effects only (many suspect this is because our methods of analyzing linear effects are more easily employed and better known than are those concerning other forms of relationships). However, many existing theoretical statements actually imply curvilinear or even more complicated forms of effects among relevant variables. Moreover, it does not take much imagination to expect many crime-relevant phenomena to involve complicated causal effects not yet detailed in theories. So, a strong but frequently ignored feature of adequate scientific theories is to spell out the various forms of likely effects.

Finally, precision calls for specification of casual intervals. An ideal theory according to theoretical science details the amount of time that must transpire before a causal variable produces the theorized outcome. Some effects may be instantaneous; some may be short-term (perhaps a few hours or days); and others may not unfold until years later. For adequate explanation (and appropriate empirical assessment), such differences must be recognized and the correct causal interval specified. Current theoretical formulations in criminology rarely do this, though some general causal lags are sometimes implicit in the argument. For example, theories about the effects of childhood experiences on adolescent or adult crime inherently suggest a causal interval of several years.

Depth A fifth feature of adequate theory in the service of theoretical science is specification of how the concepts of the formulation fit together in sequences of effects and/or interactions. Many of the causes of crime no doubt involve feedback effects, and no cause of crime exists without a history and roots in other features of social life. One goal of adequate theory, then, is specification of complete causal chains that show the prior influences on all variables and how the operative causal variables mesh with each other in causally ordered sequences.

Parsimony An additional feature that some expect of good theory is parsimony. However, it is not always regarded as highly desirable, depending on the definition

of parsimony one uses. According to this criterion, theories should be as simple as possible. This is, of course, easy to endorse because unnecessary complexity is burdensome, but there is a catch – the phrase “as possible.” Many scholars contend that crime-relevant phenomena are not, in reality, very simple so theories to account for them must necessarily be more complicated. In other words, it is “not possible” to be simpler because simplicity is often bought at the price of accuracy or adequacy. In fact, many dictionary definitions of parsimony describe it as “excessive” simplicity. Overall, most scholars agree that there is no advantage to making theories more complicated or complex than is required for the theoretical job, but at the same time, if theories are to account for inherently complicated phenomena, they must also be complex. The notion of parsimony is usually invoked when comparing two or more theories purportedly explaining the same thing. If all explain equally well, then the more acceptable theory would be the one that does the job in the most straightforward way, using the fewest variables and qualifications. Again, however, there is a catch – it is unlikely that all contending theories explain specific phenomena equally well. So, the issue of parsimony will rarely emerge as a relevant criterion for adequate theory. But when it does, theorists must be alert to the possibility of sacrificing accuracy in search of simplicity.

Formalization A final feature of good theory according to some is formalization (see Gibbs, 1972, 1994; Hage, 1994). Formalization refers to the way in which the various propositions of a theory are arranged and expressed relative to each other. A fully formalized theory is one in which all of the causal relationships among concepts are arranged tightly into a clear deductive system from which one can derive lower-level causal statements indirectly from higher-level statements. Ideally, these theoretical relationships are expressed mathematically so that the theory appears as a series of equations. The advocates for formalization argue that it should be the goal of scientific theory because anything less leads to massive disagreements among scholars about the implications of various theoretical accounts. Indeed, it is common to find criminologists arguing about whether certain evidence supports or challenges one theory or another, or even about whether specific outcomes are predicted from various theories. However, most criminologists do not think that formalization, especially full formalization through mathematical statement, is desirable or even possible. Most are more comfortable with a discursive mode of reasoning, though deduction through logical sequences of specific causal statements from more general abstract principles to more specific outcomes is favored.

Summary Theoretical science, which seems to be the dominant approach to contemporary criminology, ideally demands much of its theory. However, in actual practice the criminological community is tolerant and forgiving. Though completed theory that explains everything we want explained, does so with breadth and precision, and shows adequate depth, does not currently exist and probably never will, the enterprise of scientifically driven criminology forges ahead, recognizing that science is ongoing. It is the striving for the ideal that inspires and guides our

work. The more we learn, the more questions we have. And the more often a general statement is upheld empirically, the more scientists look for limits of applicability. Our knowledge at any given level of theoretical development then depends on theory development and verification, with greater verification generating more confidence and with refinement of internal structure bringing about greater intellectual satisfaction. Rarely, however, do theoretical scientists in the various realms of social inquiry uniformly endorse a given theory. Science is always in process, and theory, which is the end-product of that process, is always incomplete.

At this point in theoretical development of criminology as science, no theory has achieved the ideal, or even come close to achieving it. Yet, there are many contenders that include some of the desirable characteristics of scientific theory, and most theoretical scientists believe that the main causal processes concerning crime-relevant processes have been identified. Thus, for most theoretical scientists, the remaining tasks are to refine the theories we have and to find ways to bring them together to fulfill the features specified above as desirable for science work. It would take a very large book to detail all, or even most, such efforts, but suffice it to say that theory in the scientific tradition in criminology is quite viable.

Theory Within Other Philosophies of the Enterprise

While theory in theoretical science has a particular meaning and is crucial, representing the ultimate goal of criminological work, theory does not have the same meaning for all criminologists, nor is it necessarily of great import to the work of many. Indeed, for some criminologists, theory, regardless of how it is conceptualized, is irrelevant or of only tangential significance. In the following paragraphs I will briefly describe the essence of the other contemporary camps of criminology, with an emphasis on the meaning and uses of theory. These descriptions are necessarily attenuated and may not fully represent the various approaches in ways acceptable to their practitioners. After all, practitioners within any given camp of criminology are less acquainted with and have less understanding of the intricacies of alternative styles of work than do those more deeply involved in specific modes. While one may acknowledge the viability and legitimacy of various approaches to criminology, balanced understanding of the place of theory for each style of work is challenging.

Problem-solving criminology

A substantial number of criminologists, perhaps even a majority (though theoretical science seems to be the dominant approach, there are no hard data to establish that judgment), aim their work toward finding solutions to crime or crime-related problems (for examples, see any issue of journal *Criminology and Public Policy*, or Kleiman, 2009). Such problems range all the way from international threats of

terrorism to very focused concerns with how best to prevent littering on public streets in particular towns or cities, and may even involve efforts to assess all manner of collateral damage for crime-linked activities. Problem-solving criminology includes *ad hoc* explanatory efforts as well as evaluations of existing programs designed to achieve specific purposes. Some problem-solving criminologists define their efforts as policy-oriented, designed to help public officials formulate approaches to managing crime or crime-related problems. Others think of themselves as providers of information to enable any responsible party (whether parents and school officials, bureaucratic functionaries, or private citizens) to fashion their crime-relevant actions.

Problem-solving (practical) criminologists usually follow scientific mandates in collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. However, they do not necessarily formulate their research issues from theories, nor do they attempt to judge the import of their findings for theories. In fact, some think that theory is irrelevant to their work; sometimes problem-solving scholars do invoke “theory” but turn out to be classifying actions such as identifying potential predictive variables based on prior research as “theory.” At times, practical criminologists aim to develop explanations concerning the specific situation or problem they are investigating without concern as to whether that explanation or explanations might generalize to other issues in other circumstances. Moreover, problem-solving criminologists typically approach their work from a focused perspective – concentrating on specific locales or specific instances of the problems in question. Within this *ad hoc* orientation, variables to be measured and studied are those that seem to have particular relevance to the instant situation, with such variables and concepts often being based on the “folk” understandings and statements of local participants.

Theory for problem-solving criminologists, then, may correspond roughly to theory for theoretical scientists or it may be as crude as a “hunch” about some variable, process, or outcome. To problem-solving criminologists, theory, no matter its meaning, may or may not be important, but it is seldom crucial. Many such scholars, having been trained as researchers in the science tradition, are acquainted with general theories, and they do recognize that solutions may depend on understanding of causes. However, they tend to believe that such understanding can be achieved by direct study of the situations exhibiting the problems at issue without reference to larger theoretical accounts or confirmation by a large number of diverse investigations. The theoretical outcomes of problem-solving criminology, therefore, are typically *ad hoc* explanations.

Still, theoretical science and problem-oriented criminology share some commonality. The results of investigations aimed toward problem-solving can sometimes help identify and document regularities that call for explanation. *Ad hoc* explanations derived to account for those regularities can sometimes then be tied to other *ad hoc* explanations and become embedded within more general, abstract theories. In addition, the research of problem-oriented criminologists sometimes provides tests of hypotheses from larger general theories, though such service is usually inadvertent. Nevertheless, given the number of criminologists who try to solve problems and in

the process collect data relevant to some general theories, and given the relative dearth of pure theory-driven research, it may be that inadvertent theory testing is actually the main source of data for assessing some general theories.

Verstehen analysis

This approach to criminology features efforts to “understand” the actions and thoughts of participants. (*Verstehen* is the German word for “to understand”; its use as the name for this process became popularized in sociology and criminology by the writings of Max Weber.) The verstehen researcher usually tries to put himself psychically in the positions of the research subjects in order to see and interpret the world as the subjects see it and interpret it. This emphatic process is often assisted by careful ethnographic research and sometimes it is aided by comparative analyses designed to isolate differences between subjects exhibiting different outcomes or exposures. In recent times there has been a strong emphasis in criminology on exploring the active part that individuals play in their crime-relevant behavior or in escaping from criminal pasts (sometimes called human agency), and the verstehen approach is especially useful in pursuing that theme (see for example: Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001).

Studies of crime or crime-relevant issues from a verstehen perspective typically have a narrow focus, involving individuals and/or local settings. Moreover, research is normally aimed at producing a “grounded” (rooted in the immediate circumstances in which actors find themselves) interpretation of whatever is being studied. That interpretation, which presumably takes into account numerous causal influences as they are interpreted and acted upon by the subject, is sometimes called theory. Such theory, however, is emergent and as such applies only to the immediate situation. These interpretations, while regarded as theory by those who practice this approach to criminology, bear little resemblance to theory as it is understood by practitioners of theoretical science. Grounded theory makes little effort to identify general causal processes that might operate in other circumstances, for other individuals, or at different points in time and it studiously avoids abstract notions in favor of folk narratives.

Though verstehen criminology is usually narrowly focused on the individual or a few individuals, there is a related, larger analog that attempts to understand or interpret entire social situations. “Case studies,” often employing in limited sense the methods of verstehen criminology, allow scholars to appreciate how various social arrangements fit together, the various influences that shape how functionaries and other participants understand their world, and what forces, as interpreted by the participants, seem to be operative in everyday activities. As with problem-solving criminology, the theoretical work of verstehen criminologists, while quite different from the theoretical work of science-oriented criminology, is nevertheless potentially useful for theoretical science. Many times various studies in a verstehen tradition contain common elements not obvious to the researchers concentrating on their particular

research foci and often the products of such work exhibit insightful interpretations that actually have larger implications. Therefore, theoretical scientists can and sometimes do “glean” the field, picking up such commonalities and incorporating insightful observations within the more abstract notions contained within general theories. And case studies have always been important in mainstream criminology, having provided crucial material for theoretical scientists in their quest for general theory.

Descriptive criminology

A fourth style of work in contemporary criminology attempts to describe crime-relevant phenomena, situations, and relationships among variables, or to offer conceptual distinctions with which to classify, think about, or analyze crime-relevant aspects of social life. The objective is to identify the relevant variables empirically, and show how they actually mesh together in various circumstances. Once accurate description has been achieved, many descriptive criminologists are ready to move on to other research issues. In other words, the bulk of descriptive work is atheoretical – neither inspired by nor answerable to theory (see, for example: Farrington, 1997; Loeber, Slot, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2006).

Though most descriptive criminologists show little interest in interpreting situations or in answering questions of why or how, some do pursue theory in the form of organizational schemes or designation of dimensions by which empirical patterns can be arranged in an orderly or recurrent manner. Some products of conceptual efforts are classification schemes, or taxonomies (see, as examples, Cooney, 2009; Gibbs, 1981). Such intellectual products are sometimes highly insightful and useful. However, they do not qualify as theory within a theoretical science approach because they do not identify or explicate the causes of phenomena. Indeed, for descriptive criminologists, classification schemes are the “explanations,” and demonstration that the classification schemes actually accommodate aspects of the empirical world proves that the “theories” are correct.

While the notion of theory employed in theoretical science is foreign to that embraced by most descriptive criminologists, the work of description is nevertheless important to theory-building within a theoretical science model. Description is, after all, the first step in science – identifying empirical regularities in similar circumstances or disparate regularities across sets of circumstances. But, while science-oriented scholars attempt to develop abstract notions or conceive of processes that assimilate those similarities or differences in ways that permit abstract constructs to be integrated into general causal schemes, descriptive scholars are content to paint pictures of reality or to classify parts in such a way as to bring conceptual order to what is being portrayed. Interestingly enough, theoretical scientists can sometimes provide the causal mechanisms to actually explain what descriptive “theorists” claim has already been explained by their showing that the “theoretical” descriptions are accurate. Hence, descriptive work may inadvertently serve as a handmaiden to theoretical science.

Critical work

A substantial number of criminologists define their work roughly as spelling out social conditions that they believe are responsible for human suffering, injustice, or inequality, which, in turn, are thought by many to be linked with criminal behavior and crime-relevant phenomena (cf. Bonger, 1916 (1969); Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Gove, 1980; Quinney, 1970, 1974). Within this camp, any argument that logically or meaningfully connects a social situation or condition with a negative outcome that is assumed to be associated with crime or crime-relevant outcomes is called “theory.” Often the identified culprits are capitalism, mal-distribution of economic resources, patriarchy, racism, or other large structural arrangements. Scholars working in this vein share with theoretical science the goals of showing why and how the particular problem-generators operate. However, critical work differs from theoretical science in several crucial ways.

First, critical theorists usually start with a belief, often a commitment to a particular ideology or interpretation, that some particular social phenomena are inherently destructive or immoral, being responsible for violations of human rights, justice, and ultimately crime-relevant phenomena. The critical scholar, or theorist, therefore deliberately sets out to expose the operations and influence of these societal flaws. Skeptics contend that such *a priori* commitments almost inevitably incline scholars to avoid a search for evidentiary challenges or to ignore contrary evidence. Theoretical scientists, by contrast, supposedly remain open to contrary possibilities. Thus, theories in scientifically oriented criminology are presumably answerable to empirical research, which is undertaken specifically to test or challenge those theories, and scientific theorists are expected to either alter their theories in light of such negative evidence or at least to confront the possibility. Further, critical theorists rely mainly on select historical case studies to illustrate their arguments, exposing themselves to charges of “cherry picking” the evidence. Theories in the theoretical science tradition, by contrast, are presumably open to all evidence, with their validity resting on the relative balance of positive and negative findings.

Thus, critical theory, though often insightful and revealing, and sometimes indistinguishable from scientifically oriented theory, has a different focus than do theories in theoretical science. Some criminologists regard critical theories as no more than ideology, partly because the stated project of many critical theorists is to “save” or rescue their argument from hostile forces. Further, the resistance to empirical accountability except for illustrative case studies generates suspicion. Yet, it is possible to treat at least some critical theory just as scientific theory is treated, though it is often heavily laden with the theorist’s moral judgments. In this respect, it is instructive to remember that some theories in theoretical science are also vulnerable to the same kind of suspicion as is critical theory. “Science” theories sometimes seem to reflect their author’s ideological biases, sometimes remain popular in the face of nonsupportive evidence, and are invoked as moral imperatives.

Nihilistic thinking

A relatively small, yet vocal, segment of criminologists embrace the notion that it is impossible to build theories or explanations, and they are highly critical of science as a model for crime studies (cf. Arrigo, 2003; Einstadter & Henry, 1995; Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973). Such scholars essentially contend that nothing can be known except that nothing can be known. For them, theory is simply the collection of arguments, many of which are based on obvious biases evident in mainstream criminology, purportedly showing that humans are incapable of general understanding of human behavior or social structure and are utterly unable to study social life objectively. So, the idea of theory as a set of explanatory principles setting out the causes of things relevant to crime is far-fetched. To the nihilist, one can only document human attempts to understand each other or situations through narratives, or stories, shared and reacted to by members of local communities.

Nihilistic thinking appears to contradict almost every other type of criminological work. Yet, the purveyors of nihilism in criminology provide an important service. Above all, they force us to confront questions we would ordinarily never consider. The nihilists, to the extent that they are taken seriously, make us pause to demonstrate things we ordinarily take for granted. Moreover, they make us aware of generally unrecognized biases to which all of our activities are subject. But, according to nihilistic thinking, theory as normally understood by other camps of criminological inquiry is a sham.

Amelioration

A final style of criminology bears much in common with critical work in that it attempts to identify sources of human suffering or injustice, but it goes a step further and offers a prescription for overcoming those forces (cf. Pepinsky & Quinney, 1991). Theory for such criminologists, then, consists of the arguments specifying or asserting particular forces leading to human distress, which are thought to be connected with the probability of criminal behavior or the construction of legal rules artificially constraining various segments of the population, along with the remedies to be followed in overcoming those forces. Such scholars often reject legal notions of crime, redefining it in terms of behaviors or social structures producing suffering or injustice. Such theory differs from that central to theoretical science in that it is not subject to test except through practical application and its aim is action not explanation.

Summary

Theory takes many forms in contemporary criminology because criminological scholars endorse and follow various philosophies of the enterprise, each involving specific notions about the value of theory and/or the form it should take. The dominant

philosophy appears to be that of theoretical science in which theory to *explain* (answer questions of why and how about phenomena within its domain) is the ultimate goal. Desirable theory within that philosophical camp follows a deductive framework, is subject to empirical test, admits the possibility of negative evidence, and reflects demanding characteristics. Problem-solving criminology, probably the second-most popular style of criminology may or may not draw on theory and usually produces at best *ad hoc* causal explanations applying to specific problems or situations. *Verstehen* analysis aims to permit scholars and consumers of *verstehen* work to see the world through the eyes of the subjects of investigation, to vicariously experience the things the subjects experience, and to appreciate, from the point of view of the subjects, why they did or do various things linked to crime or crime-related phenomena. Descriptive scholars frequently eschew theory altogether, focusing instead on accurate portrayal of patterns of behavior, though sometimes they produce conceptual schemes that organize recurrent patterns of crime-relevant factors. Critical scholars try to identify the social conditions producing human injustice or suffering, often asserting favorite villains and attempting to persuade audiences of the validity of their arguments rather than testing their ideas. Accounts of how those structures or forces seem to operate is the essence of critical theory. Nihilistic criminologists question the whole project of other styles of work, claiming that nothing can be known, particularly scientifically, except that nothing can be known. To them, “theory” consists of such arguments, often complicated and insightful, along with admonitions to key into folk narratives to appreciate how people interpret their own worlds. Finally, amelioration usually combines critical analysis with prescriptions for remedying structures or situations that produce injustice or destructive criminal behavior.

References

- Arrigo, B. (2003). Postmodern justice and critical criminology: Positional, relational, and provisional science. In M.D. Schwartz & S.E. Hatty (Eds.), *Controversies in Critical Criminology* (pp. 43–55). Cincinnati, OH: Anderson.
- Bonger, W. (1916[1969]). *Criminality and Economic Conditions*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Cooney, M. (2009). *Is Killing Wrong?* Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- Daly, K., & Chesney-Lind, M. (1988). Feminism and criminology. *Justice Quarterly*, 5, 497–535.
- Einstadter, W.J., & Henry, S. (1995). *Criminological Theory: An Analysis of Its Underlying Assumptions*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt and Brace.
- Farrington, D.P. (1997). Early prediction of violent and non-violent youthful offending. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 5, 51–66.
- Gibbs, J.P. (1972). *Sociological Theory Construction*. Hinsdale, IL: Dryden.
- Gibbs, J.P. (1981). *Norms, Deviance, and Social Control*. New York, NY: Elsevier Scientific.
- Gibbs, J.P. (1994). Resistance in sociology to formal theory construction. In J. Hage (Ed.), *Formal Theory in Sociology: Opportunity or Pitfall?* (pp. 90–104). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- Giordano, P.C., Cernkovich, S.A., & Rudolph, J.L. (2002). Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990–1064.
- Gove, W.R. (Ed.) (1980). *The Labeling of Deviance: Evaluating a Perspective*, 2nd edition. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Hage, J. (Ed.) (1994). *Formal Theory in Sociology: Opportunity or Pitfall?* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hirschi, T. (1979). Separate and unequal is better. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 16, 34–37.
- Hirschi, T. (1989). Exploring alternatives to integrated theory. In S.F. Messner, M.D. Krohn, & A.E. Liska (Eds.), *Theoretical Integration in the Study of Deviance and Crime: Problems and Prospects* (pp. 37–49). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kleiman, M.A.R. (2009). *When Brute Force Fails: How to Have Less Crime and Less Punishment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Loeber, R., Slot, N.W., & Stouthamer-Loeber, M. (2006). A three-dimensional, cumulative developmental model of serious delinquency. In P.-O.H. Wikström & R.J. Sampson (Eds.), *The Explanation of Crime: Context, Mechanisms, and Development* (pp. 153–194). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Pepinsky, H., & Quinney, R. (Eds.) (1991). *Criminology as Peacemaking*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Quinney, R. (1970). *The Social Reality of Crime*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Quinney, R. (1974). *Critique of the Legal Order: Crime Control in Capitalist Society*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Reynolds, P.D. (1971). *Primer in Theory Construction*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Taylor, I., Walton, P., & Young, J. (1973). *The New Criminology: For a Social Theory of Deviance*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Tittle, C.R. (1985). The assumption that general theories are not possible. In R.F. Meier (Ed.), *Theoretical Methods in Criminology* (pp. 93–121). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Tittle, C.R. (1989). Prospects for synthetic theory: A consideration of macro-level criminological activity. In S.F. Messner, M.D. Krohn, & A.E. Liska (Eds.), *Theoretical Integration in the Study of Deviance and Crime: Problems and Prospects* (pp. 161–178). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Tittle, C.R. (1995). *Control Balance: Toward a General Theory of Deviance*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Tittle, C.R., & Paternoster, R. (2000). *Social Deviance and Crime: An Organizational and Theoretical Approach*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury.
- Turner, J.H. (2003). *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, 7th edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson.