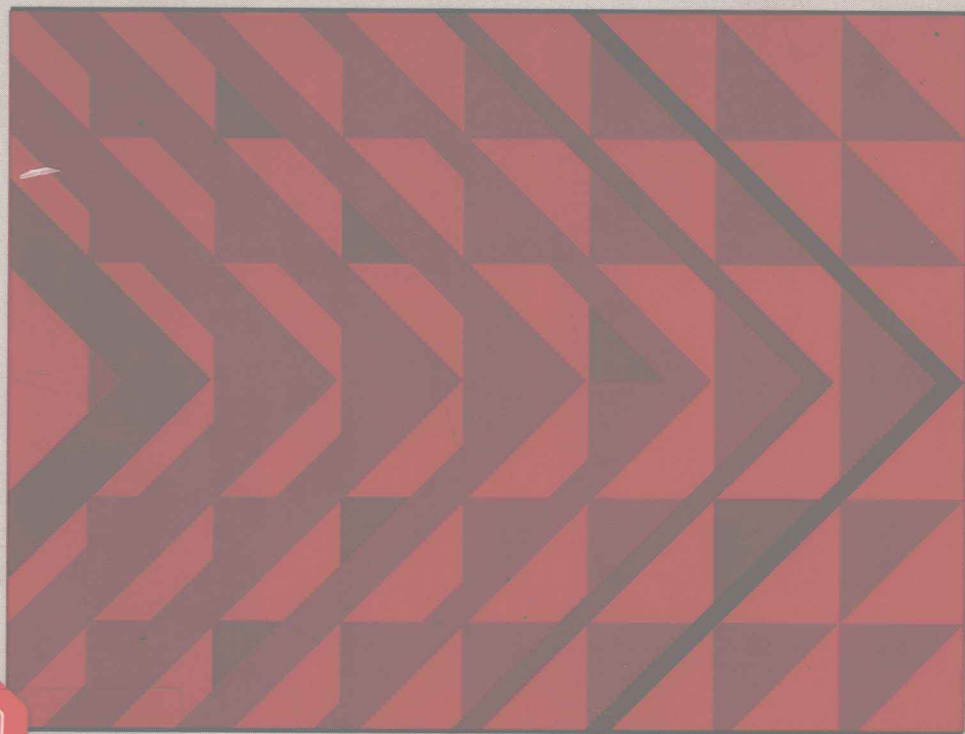


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THEORIES OF CRIME



CURRAN ▼ RENZETTI



THEORIES OF CRIME

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Allyn and Bacon

Boston • London • Toronto • Sydney • Tokyo • Singapore

*To Sean and Aidan,
with our love and with our thanks for your patience*

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A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
160 Gould Street
Needham Heights, MA 02194

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Curran, Daniel J.

Theories of crime / Daniel J. Curran and Claire M. Renzetti.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-205-14193-5

1. Criminology. I. Renzetti, Claire M. II. Title.

HV6018.C87 1994

364—dc20

93-25394

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 98 97 96 95 94 93



PREFACE

It has been said that there are as many theories of crime as there are criminals. Clearly this is an overstatement, but it would not be stretching the truth to say that there are at least as many textbooks about theories of crime as there are theories of crime. In doing this text, we, of course, do not simply wish to add to the existing pile of paper, but rather hope to contribute something new. We do not offer a new theory, but instead a fresh presentation of existing theories. In doing this, we have three objectives.

Our first objective stems from our knowledge of the audience likely to use the book: undergraduate and graduate students in criminology and criminal justice courses. Students who take criminological theory courses are typically social science majors, including sociology, criminal justice, and pre-law. However, students from other backgrounds, such as education and business majors, may also enroll. For many graduate students, the criminological theory course is the first course in their graduate school careers, and thus it provides them with a pivotal introduction to the discipline, even if as undergraduates they were sociology or criminal justice majors.

All of these students share an interest in—some might even say a fascination with—crime, although most have limited direct personal experience with it and, for many, their perceptions and understanding of crime may be based largely on media presentations. Consequently, our first objective was to write a text that is comprehensible to such a diverse group. In examining specific theories of crime, extant research is discussed which supports or refutes particular positions, and the practical implications of each theory are usually considered. This approach not only gives students a fuller understanding of the theory, but also distinguishes the myths and

realities of crime and demonstrates the interrelatedness of theory and practice.

Our second objective follows from the first: to encourage students to view crime, law, and theories about crime and law as criminologists do. Students (and some criminologists) often see crime and law as absolutes; that is, crime is something “wrong” or “bad” and law is a set of regulations that stipulates what is “wrong” or “bad.” Criminological theories are simply explanations of why people do “wrong” or “bad” things. In contrast, we present the view that crime, law, and the theories that explain them are social products. They reflect the social, political, and economic conditions of the historical period during which they were created. The text, therefore, is designed to teach students that theories of crime, as well as who and what are defined and studied as criminal, are outgrowths of a social process that is affected not only by structural conditions, but also by the personal characteristics of the researchers and the researched.

Our third objective is to demonstrate to students that crime is not solely a U.S. problem and that, consequently, it cannot be fully explained by culture-bound theories. We have found during our combined thirty-two years of teaching criminology and criminal justice courses that when students think of crime in foreign countries, they relate it only in terms of how it impacts on the United States—for example, how terrorism affects U.S. citizens abroad. Our goal is to expand students’ views by introducing them to cross-cultural research, which empirically tests theories developed in the United States in societies different from our own, and to expose them to some of the ways in which issues raised by various theories (such as the death penalty and the insanity defense) are handled in other countries.

Our strategy for implementing these objectives begins with providing readers with a balanced presentation of the major theoretical perspectives on crime and law. The notions of theory and paradigm are introduced in Chapter 1, where criteria for evaluating the power of a theory are explained, and the assumptions and tenets of the major schools of criminological thought are reviewed. Subsequent chapters systematically evaluate criminological theories rooted in biology/physiology (chapter 2), psychology/psychiatry (chapter 3), and sociology (chapters 4–6). Each chapter contains a boxed insert entitled **Controversy and Debate**, highlighting a controversial issue raised by the propositions of a specific theory. Each chapter also contains a boxed insert entitled **How the World Sees It**, which examines various ways that a practical issue raised by a specific theory is addressed in other countries. Illustrative excerpts from empirical or journalistic works appear in each chapter as well. Key concepts or terms are highlighted in bold print within the chapter narratives and are grouped alphabetically with definitions at the end of each chapter. A summary and concluding statement, along with suggested readings, also appear at the end of each chapter.

Because a substantial amount of empirical research is discussed in the text, we thought it beneficial to provide an appendix on research methodologies. Here students with little or no background in research methods will find explanations of fundamental methodological concepts and procedures, such as validity and reliability, sampling, cross-sectional versus longitudinal designs, and the differences between and problems associated with official data versus self-report data. Instructors may wish to assign the appendix as required or optional reading at the outset of the course, or to integrate segments of it at various points throughout the term.

Finally, an instructor's manual is available for this text. This supplemental resource contains summaries of each chapter; a test bank with multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions; film and video suggestions; and, when possible, other available resource material. We hope instructors find the manual helpful in preparing and evaluating their classes.

The process of writing this book was made easier and more enjoyable by the many people who assisted us with their technical and intellectual skills. We wish to thank Joanne Devlin for typing parts of the manuscript, and Fiona Kelly for assisting in the preparation of the instructor's manual. We also wish to thank the following individuals who reviewed the manuscript: Stephen Bahr, Brigham Young University; Bruce L. Berg, University of Massachusetts—Boston; Thomas Calhoun, Ohio University; Dennis Hoffman, University of Nebraska—Omaha; Billy Hu, Central Missouri State University; William Kelly, University of Texas at Austin; David Simon, San Diego State University; Ellwyn Stoddard, University of Texas at El Paso; and Victoria Swigert, College of the Holy Cross. We also wish to thank staff members at Allyn and Bacon, many of whom we have come to know well during the last few years. This project benefited enormously from the editorial skills and expertise of Kathy Smith. We are grateful to our editor and good friend, Karen Hanson. It is said that patience is a virtue; we are fortunate that Karen is a very virtuous person. And to our sons, Sean and Aidan, to whom this book is dedicated, a simple thank you is hardly enough.



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1

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN CRIMINOLOGY

Criminologists use a variety of methods to study crime, law creation, and other topics that interest them. These are methods of data collection; they yield *empirical observations* (see Appendix). However, the data do not speak for themselves; they must be interpreted. In other words, criminologists seek to understand the meaning of the data. This typically proves more challenging—and often, more frustrating—than the task of collecting data. Criminologists, then, are not satisfied with simply describing what’s “out there”; they also wish to *explain* it. This is where *theory* comes in. An overly simplistic definition of a theory—but one that serves our purpose for the time being—is that it is an explanation of something.

In the chapters that follow, we will discuss some of the theories that have been developed to explain criminal as well as law-abiding behavior. There are many theories, and students are sometimes overwhelmed by the numerous names and concepts they feel obligated to memorize. We organize the theories broadly into “types” (including biological, psychological, and sociological) and “subtypes,” recognizing, of course, that all such categorizations are imperfect. We also examine the theories in the social and intellectual contexts in which they were developed. Hopefully, both strategies will make learning about these theories not only more manageable, but also more interesting.

Before we undertake the study of specific theories, however, it would be useful to know more about theory in general and about theoretical traditions or schools of thought. This will be our primary objective in Chapter 1. Let’s begin by taking a closer look at what a theory is and what its role is in scientific disciplines such as criminology.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORY IN CRIMINOLOGY

Theory, whether we realize it or not, is a fundamental part of our everyday lives. We all draw on theory to make our lives safer, simpler, and less uncertain, although we rarely stop to think that this is what we are doing. Suppose, for example, that you invite several friends to a dinner at which you plan to serve chicken. You do the grocery shopping the day before the dinner and keep the chicken in the refrigerator until you're ready to cook it. Why wouldn't you just leave the chicken on the kitchen counter until dinnertime? The reason is that you understand the relationships between temperature and the growth of bacteria, and between bacteria and disease. Theories have just saved you and your friends from serious illness and hours of discomfort.

More specifically, then, what is a theory? A **theory** is a set of interconnected statements or propositions that explain how two or more events or factors are related to one another. Many of the theories that we use in our everyday lives are derived from personal experience, common sense, or from someone who has passed the knowledge on to us. In any event, these theories help bring order to our lives because they expand our knowledge of the world around us and suggest systematic solutions to problems we repeatedly confront. Without the generalizable knowledge provided by theories, we would have to solve the same problems over and over again, largely through trial and error. Theory, therefore, rather than being the ethereal mass that many of us conceive it to be, may be quite practical. It is *useable knowledge*.

Criminologists use theories for much the same reason noncriminologists do—for problem solving. Theories that explain the causes of crime suggest methods for solving the crime problem. Unlike some of the theories that we use to organize our daily lives, however, criminologists employ *scientific* theories. A scientific theory is *logically sound* and, more important, *empirically verifiable* (grounded in systematic observation). Earl Babbie explains why both logical integrity and empirical verification are essential ingredients for scientific theory:

*Logic alone is not enough, since what initially seems a logical expectation may not be the case in fact. On the other hand, the mere observation and collection of empirical facts does not provide understanding.*¹

This is not to say that scientific theory never springs from intuition or imagination. Indeed, some have argued that greater progress toward understanding crime would be made if criminologists exercised their imaginations more in research and theory development.² In addition, observation and

experience often provide the starting point for the development of scientific theory. This is called *inductive* theory construction; the theory is developed *after* systematic observation, through the analysis of data. In *deductive* theory construction, on the other hand, the theory is developed and subsequently tested through empirical observation. Of course, deductive theory construction does not take place in a vacuum; ideas are generated from one's own and others' observations. Thus, the distinction between inductive and deductive theory construction is less clear cut than it at first appears. However, whatever the source of the theory, to qualify as scientific it must satisfy at least the two criteria of logical integrity and empirical verifiability.

We have noted already that criminologists have developed numerous theories, each purporting to explain crime or criminals or both. To confuse the matter further, all of these theories may be considered scientific. Should we conclude, therefore, that all theories are created equal? Is there any way to determine if one theory is better than another? These are questions we will address next.

Bad Theory, Good Theory, Better Theory: How Do We Judge?

Scientists use several criteria to assess the superiority of one theory relative to competing theories of the same phenomenon. If, in fact, you were to ask a group of scientists how they make such a judgment, you would likely find little variation in their answers. One might reply, for instance, that she evaluates the *parsimony* of each theory—that is, the simplicity of its structure. The theory based on the fewest assumptions and requiring the fewest statements or propositions to delineate the explanation is the most parsimonious and generally is considered the superior theory. Another scientist may say that he favors a theory that sensitizes people to things they otherwise would not have noticed or that causes them to see a phenomenon in a new way.³ Despite these minor variations, probably every scientist would also cite the two criteria of scope and accuracy.

The **scope** of a theory is sometimes called its *pervasiveness*. This refers to the range of phenomena that a theory can explain. **Accuracy** refers to the extent to which the theory matches empirical reality and, therefore, allows us to make correct predictions about the occurrence of the phenomenon in question. For instance, a theory stating that criminal behavior is the result of growing up in a broken home would lead us to predict that individuals reared in broken homes are more likely than others to engage in crime. Thorough empirical testing would provide us with a measure of the correctness of this prediction and, consequently, of the accuracy of the theory.

As a general rule, the theory that can explain the widest range of phenomena with the greatest degree of accuracy is considered better than

alternative theories. Singleton and his associates use an example from physics to illustrate this principle:

From Newton's theory it is possible to explain (or deduce) Kepler's laws describing the motion of the planets, Galileo's law of free fall, and the law of the tides, in addition to the motion of numerous objects that these laws cannot explain. . . . And so, once constructed, Newton's theory covered more ground and was more accurate than the existing laws that it explained. Later Einstein formulated his general theory of relativity, which explained and improved Newton's theory and also made new predictions about the motion of light near massive objects.⁴

Social scientists, including criminologists, rarely construct theories that conform to the formal propositional model common in the physical and natural sciences, and social science theories seldom approach the level of accuracy of those developed in these other fields. Yet this does not mean that scope and accuracy are not applicable to the development of social science theories. Consider our earlier example regarding the effect of growing up in a broken home on the probability of subsequently committing a crime. The theory is logically sound and it may withstand empirical testing—we may in fact find that individuals reared in broken homes more often engage in crime than individuals raised in intact families. However, an alternative theory—say a theory of economic inequality—may explain not only the likelihood of committing crime, but also the breakdown of marital and family relations. Thus, the alternative theory is more pervasive (broader in scope) and research may show it to be more accurate as well.

The use of terms such as “probability” and “likelihood” in the preceding discussion alerts us to another important issue to remember when evaluating criminological theories in the chapters that follow. Scientific predictions derived from theories are *probabilistic*, not absolute. When researchers test a theory, they measure the regularity with which the predicted behaviors or events occur. They look for patterns of behavior, but they always find exceptions. For instance, let's return one last time to our theory of crime and broken homes. It is not necessarily damaging to the theory's accuracy that some individuals from broken homes are law-abiding and some from intact families are criminal if we find that *overall*, individuals from broken homes are *more likely* than individuals from intact families to commit crimes; what is important is that we observe a general or probabilistic pattern. Therefore, a theory is not deemed inaccurate simply because it is not confirmed by 100 percent of the observable cases.⁵

When one of your authors enrolled in her first criminology course many years ago, she expected to know by the end of the semester what causes crime. But in class after class, theory after theory was carefully scrutinized and found wanting on some grounds. There was, she found, no one correct

answer. Those of you who have similar expectations will reach the same conclusion after reading this text, for little has changed in this respect. We may have more data than we did twenty years ago, but instead of a pat explanation, we still only have bad, good, and better theories of crime.

Finally, though it is not typically examined as a criterion for evaluating scientific theories, there is an ideological component in making such judgments. Understanding this requires some knowledge of *paradigms*. We turn now to a discussion of what a paradigm is and how paradigms are used in the social sciences. Then we will examine specific criminological paradigms.

PARADIGMS

Sometimes, when we read about a particular study or hear a research presentation, we come away feeling that the researcher was *biased*. Most of us would argue, in fact, that research is supposed to be conducted *objectively*. In reality, however, no study is characterized by complete objectivity. The research process is always influenced by the researcher's values as well as a host of other sources of bias and constraint. The research process, in other words, is both subjective *and* objective. In deciding what to study, how to study it, and what to do with their findings, researchers draw on their personal value systems; this is a subjective dimension of research. This does not mean, though, that if their findings turn out not to support their hypotheses, the hypotheses should be changed to conform to their perspective. It is during the data analysis that researchers must remain objective.

One especially important constraining factor in the research process is the set of assumptions or organizing principles that provide the foundation of a researcher's work. Michalowski refers to this set of organizing principles as a *perspective*.⁶ He likens this set of organizing principles to formulas for understanding the world around us. Any particular occurrence will be interpreted in a way that is fairly consistent with our basic assumptions about human nature and how the world operates. Michalowski states that:

*At the level of scientific inquiry, general perspectives on how that particular part of the world being studied functions leads to the development of relatively consistent bodies of knowledge which reflect the accumulation of past applications of that perspective to a particular phenomenon. As this "scientifically" produced body of knowledge about a particular phenomenon begins to grow and coalesce into a relatively consistent set of understandings, it becomes a paradigm.*⁷

A **paradigm**, in other words, is a school of thought within a discipline. It provides the scientist with a model for choosing the problems to be

analyzed, the methods for analyzing them, and the theoretical framework for explaining them.

All scientists, including criminologists, use paradigms to guide their work. However, while paradigms provide an essential structure to the scientific enterprise, they simultaneously act to constrain it. Because a paradigm defines what should be studied and how it should be studied and interpreted, it blinds the researcher to other relevant problems, methods, and explanations. The scientist, in effect, does not “see” certain puzzles to be solved, or labels them unimportant. There is a tendency not to use certain tools for puzzle solving or even to consider some solutions to particular puzzles because they appear unreasonable in the context of the paradigm in which the scientist is working.⁸ A number of different theories that explain a phenomenon may be developed by scientists working within the same paradigm, but as we will see in subsequent chapters, all will reflect the basic organizing principles of that paradigm.

How, then, are advances in a scientific discipline made? Usually, during any given period, one paradigm or school of thought dominates a science in that it has the greatest number of adherents. Knowledge about a phenomenon or problem accumulates as scientists working within the paradigm build on one another’s work and previous findings. This is what Kuhn refers to as “normal science” and it fits best with the popular or ideal image of scientific advancement.⁹

Sometimes, though, contradictory evidence or anomalies are discovered that are difficult to explain in terms of the currently dominant paradigm. For a time, the paradigm may be modified to account for them but, sooner or later, the dominant paradigm becomes stale or “wears out.” That is, it becomes inadequate for explaining new problems and changing conditions without compromising its basic organizing principles in some fundamental way.¹⁰ When this happens, a *scientific revolution* is likely: the inadequate dominant paradigm is displaced by another paradigm that is incompatible with the dominant paradigm’s basic assumptions, but better able to account for prevailing conditions and observations.

The significance of a scientific revolution is that it promotes advances in a discipline. “Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before.”¹¹

In sum, while the paradigm has been considered by some to be the “broadest unit of consensus” within a science,¹² not all practitioners in a discipline necessarily use the dominant paradigm to guide their work. There typically exist other competing paradigms for studying the same phenomenon. This is certainly the case in criminology, as it is in most other disciplines. Let’s examine, then, the major paradigms or schools of thought that historically have informed criminological research and theory building. We