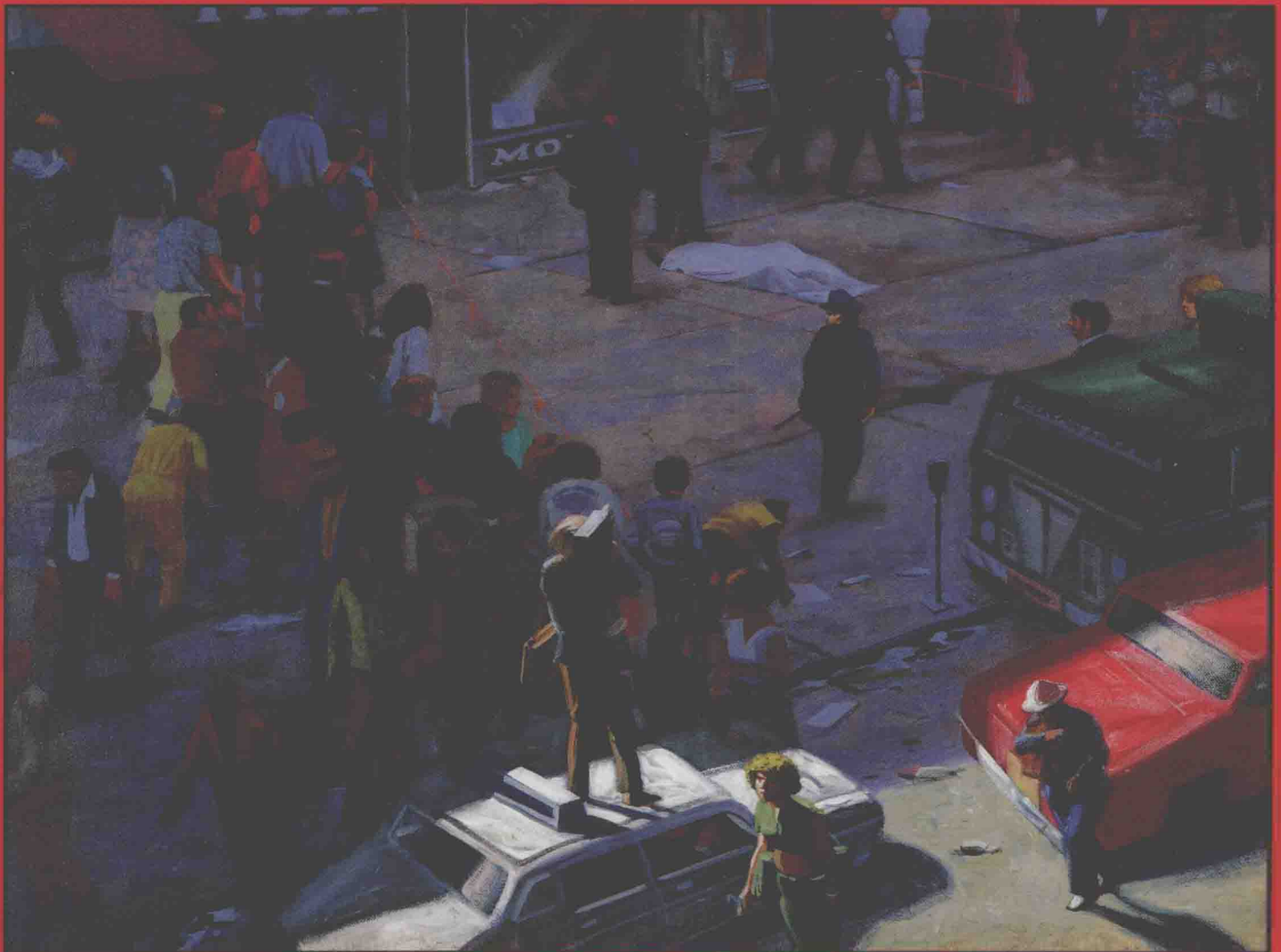

CRIMINOLOGY

APPLYING THEORY

John E. Holman

James F. Quinn



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Criminology: Applying Theory

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WEST PUBLISHING COMPANY

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Preface

Many methods have been used to introduce criminological theory to undergraduate students. Some focus on the historical development of criminological theory, while others are devoted to the presentation of a particular theoretical view. Either approach, we believe, has difficulty holding the attention of undergraduate students, who generally lack a good understanding of critical methodological issues. Our chief goal in writing this book was to overcome this problem and attempt to inculcate a fascination with theoretical explanations of crime in students. Simultaneously, we sought to demonstrate that all the major perspectives in criminology have worthy contributions to make to our understanding of the causes of crime and its distribution in society.

Our experience in college classrooms has convinced us that most undergraduate students of criminology and criminal justice prefer to approach the causes of crime from a psychological orientation. This reflects their customary perception of the causes of the specific behaviors they observe in everyday life. Although it is very natural for students to attempt to deal with issues related to crime in the same way that they deal with other situations in life, criminological theory can improve their understanding of crime-related phenomena by allowing them to view such situations from a variety of theoretical perspectives. We are thus advocating an instructional method that concentrates on the application of criminological theory to the world as it is experienced by most citizens, and especially criminal justice students, rather than on the validation of a specific theory with aggregate data. While the distribution of crime is a macro-level concern, criminal laws define crime as the acts of individuals. Therefore, macro-level perspectives must be demonstrably relevant to micro-level variables if their explanations are to avoid the appearance of being spurious.

Our use of the *case-study approach* is not intended to diminish the importance of theory validation with aggregate data, but rather to separate methodological issues from theoretical ones to facilitate the learning process. By using criminological theory to explain particular criminal cases, we introduce many basic methodological concepts and issues in a somewhat painless way. This text examines all the principal theories used by criminologists, and assesses their strengths and weaknesses in as impartial a manner as possible. The case study method uses hierarchical arrangements of criminological theory. Each theoretical hierarchy progresses from the most general level, the perspective, through a series of descending levels of specificity: approach, theory, and hypothesis. A tripartite scheme of causal factors—consisting of precipitating, attracting, and predisposing forces (Benjamin and Masters, 1964)—is also used to describe each theory's main strengths and weaknesses.

This case-study method is employed to bring criminological theories to life for undergraduate students at the microlevel where, in general, people are initially most comfortable. This sensitizing strategy for approaching new subject matter is not new to the study of criminology and has been used extensively over the past several decades by many notable criminologists—for example, Clifford R. Shaw's (1930) study of muggers, Edwin H. Sutherland's (1937) study of professional thieves, and Abadinsky's studies of organized crime (1981) and jewel thieves (1983).

The cases are used for illustrative instructional purposes, not for scientifically validating theory, and should promote the development of both deductive and inductive reasoning. As the basic ideas of each theory are mastered by the student, they should become an aid to explaining other cases, as well as patterns and trends in aggregated data. By using well-documented criminal cases, rather than merely discussing abstract theories and statistical data on crime, the authors hope to keep the student focused on the construction and use of criminological theory, rather than on the problems encountered in interpreting research data. In this way, students simultaneously gain substantive knowledge of criminological theory and its application to actual events, as well as a more complete view of the possible causes of crime. This approach avoids the confusion inherent in the "mixed" findings that are almost inevitably present in reviews of the theory-validation literature.

Very few, if any, criminal acts can be fully explained by one criminological theory. This is because the "causes" of criminal behavior occur simultaneously at all levels of analysis and constantly interact with one another as well as with other environmental, structural, and internal forces. The case-study method of explaining crimes used in this text allows the student to see how various factors are involved in crime when applying either a macro- or micro-level theory to actual cases. It is very effective in transforming theory from a mere object of study to a useful explanatory device. Deduction from our examples to other applications of the theories is encouraged. It must be remembered always that the explanations offered are only examples of how theories should be used; they are not definitive descriptions of why a specific crime occurred. The interpretations provided by students and instructors are not the "final word," nor are they intended to be. Instead, the goal is to encourage students to think in a scientific fashion by testing and challenging the application of criminological theory to fact.

Such challenges to the veracity of theory applications are also vital to the development of criminology as a science because they force scholars to constantly refine their theoretical perspectives and revalidate them in the real world. In this way, the case-study method indirectly lends itself to theoretical advancement. Were it not for such disagreements among scholars, social science would never keep pace with changing social realities, and criminology would fail to take full advantage of relevant developments in related fields. This book aims to help establish in some small way criminological theory as the basis of a scientific discipline *sui generis*, without perverting the intent or content of the contributing disciplines.

This book could not have been written without the love and support of our families. Therefore, our first thanks go to Carla Mullen-Quinn and Betty Holman, as well as Brandon, Mitchell, and Carley Holman. We would also like to thank Carla Mullen-Quinn for her valuable critiques of our early drafts.

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CHAPTER **1**

Introduction

The Use of Theory
Intent and Organization of This
Book
The Structure of Criminological
Theories

The Nature of Theory Application
The Process of Explaining Crimes
With Theory
The Nature of Celebrated Criminal
Cases

Criminal Motivations
Glossary
Notes

The Use of Theory

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Theories serve a variety of important purposes for criminologists and practitioners in related professions such as law enforcement, corrections, and social work. Among the most common uses of theory are (1) to explain and predict events, patterns and trends occurring in the real world; (2) to broaden understanding of particular issues; and (3) to help design programs and policies to improve society. Before theory can be used for such broad and optimistic purposes, however, the theory-user must understand the methods by which theories are constructed. The logic and limitations of particular theories must be understood if they are to be truly useful in explaining the causes of crime—and thus aid an intelligent response to current and future issues by scholars, policymakers, and practitioners.

In essence, theory provides a method of limiting one's view to the information that is considered most relevant to the situation in order to develop a relatively simple explanation of a usually complex event. However, there is a price to pay for the simplification of complex events. In reducing the amount of data used, one inevitably loses information. The correct application of criminological theory seeks to minimize the amount of truth lost while maximizing the degree of simplicity in the explanation of a situation.

We have found that most people, including students of criminological theory, seem to approach the causes of crime from a more or less psychological orientation that reflects their customary perception of the causes of these specific behaviors. This we attribute to their exposure to the media's (television and movies) stereotyping of criminals as psychotic, or at least seriously psychologically disturbed, as well as to their lack of exposure to other criminological explanations. A far better understanding of criminal phenomena, however, is afforded by viewing them from a variety of perspectives. Indeed, this is true for understanding any type of **social phenomena**—that is, social events that can be scientifically described. Each perspective assigns different values to the available facts and emphasizes different causal forces. In reality, these causal forces are operating constantly and simultaneously. Theory allows us to impartially separate and analyze each causal force as a separate factor. In this way we gain the fullest possible understanding of the phenomena.

Criminological theory accomplishes this by the use of rigorous logic. Each theory is based on a set of explicit assumptions. These assumptions reflect beliefs about the nature of human behavior and society. Assumptions cannot hope to reflect all of reality but serve to make the task of interpreting the social world manageable by limiting the nature of the questions we ask and the type of data we need to answer them.

Individual theories are developed out of unique viewpoints and are at times competing explanations of the same phenomenon. More often, however, they are complementary explanations for different aspects of the same case. Each, of necessity, excludes some evidence. But one theory developed from one viewpoint may include all or some of the evidence excluded from a different theory developed from a different viewpoint. Thus, theories focused on entirely different types of facts may have to be considered together in order to provide a comprehensive view of a situation.

The view provided by each theory is only as correct as the assumptions upon which it is based. Therefore, each theory has some validity if its assumptions reflect at least part of reality. Obviously, some theories will have more validity than others and therefore offer greater explanatory power. Also, some theories are more appropriate to the specific circumstances and available facts. Using theories correctly is ultimately a matter of judgment that must be developed over time.

Consider the possible viewpoints from which one might approach the problem presented in Exhibit 1.1. There are four interrelated and overlapping facts in the situation: (1) addiction to drugs, (2) criminal acts, (3) economic frustration, and (4) the desire to use illegal drugs. These four facts give four possible bases on which an explanation might be built: (1) the presence of addiction; (2) the observation of serious, predatory criminal behavior; (3) the issue of economic status or need; and (4) the status of illegal drug laws. Depending on the base used to build the explanation of this crime, explanations targeted at the four divergent phenomena would focus on (1) the prevention and treatment of illegal drug addiction; (2) the punishment of addicts and armed robbers; (3) the training and employment of addiction-prone groups, such as the inner-city poor; or (4) the legalization of drugs to make them less expensive.

It is not possible to address all four phenomena simultaneously because some of them are mutually exclusive of others. For example, it would make no sense to punish addicts while legalizing drugs, or to train them for good jobs so that they can afford to purchase illegal drugs. This mutual exclusiveness is a direct result of the fact that there are different viewpoints from which problems can be approached. The conclusions reached as to (1) the nature of the problem, (2) its scientific explanation, and (3) the best method of improving the situation, will differ greatly depending on which fact becomes the focus of attention.

Intent and Organization of This Book

Most people experience the world in a very personal way—that is, in a case-by-case, situation-by-situation manner. This book was written to accommodate that fact. Rather than use statistical studies to validate one theory or another, we concentrate instead on the application of theory to the world as it is experienced by most citizens and criminal justice practitioners. In doing so we do not mean to refute the importance of theory validation with **aggregated data**—that is, a set of facts about a group of cases in which individual identities are ignored in order to examine patterns and trends within the entire group and/or among its subgroups. That approach has its place, and indeed is the

Exhibit 1.1

Addicts who rob

People addicted to illegal drugs are committing **armed robberies** to **obtain money** to buy the **illegal drugs** for their own personal use, because they are unable to find other ways to obtain that money.

basis of most criminological theory texts. Research based on aggregated data is used to illustrate the degree to which various theories can be applied to a specific area of criminological concern (e.g., prostitution, robbery, murder). The limitations of each theory are then usually described in the same way. Much valuable information has been provided thus. We have not, however, found research studies based on aggregated data to be very helpful in illustrating the strengths and weaknesses of theories. Instead, we believe that illustrations of this type often leave the student confused as to the relevance of the theories to everyday events. This, we feel, is due primarily to two facts: (1) criminological research studies generally report mixed findings (i.e., some studies support a theory, others do not); and (2) research studies and aggregated data are too abstract for the purpose of an introduction to theory. In essence, studies reporting mixed findings are, by nature, problematic for the student in learning theory, as is the inherent complexity of the theory-validation process.

In this text, we use theory to explain particular criminal cases that are in some ways similar to those encountered in the daily operation of the criminal justice system.¹ The **case study method** is employed throughout the text in large part to bring the theories to life. Case studies are extensive, qualitative examinations of illustrative or exemplary cases of a phenomenon.² This way of approaching criminological theory represents a sensitizing strategy for discussing new subject matter.³ Cole and Weston, for example, used this method to introduce the linkages between drug abuse and criminal behavior in *Case Studies of Drug Abuse and Criminal Behavior*.⁴ It should be noted that the case study method is not new to the study of criminology—it has been used extensively over the past several decades. Notable early criminologists, such as Clifford R. Shaw in his 1930 study of muggers and Edwin H. Sutherland in his 1937 study of professional thieves, used the case study method.⁵ More recent criminological inquiries, such as Abadinsky's 1981 study of jewel thieves and 1983 study of organized crime, have continued to employ the method.⁶

This utilization of the case study method for theory application is justified on the grounds that the cases are used throughout the text for illustration purposes, not for scientific validation of theory.⁷ That is, the cases are used to show how theories explain actual events. They are not presented as evidence that the theory is true. Concern focuses not only on the events of the crime but also on the motives of the individual(s) involved, the central issue being the processes involved in the crime.⁸

As the basic concepts of each theory are mastered by the reader, the theory should become an aid to explaining other cases, as well as patterns and trends in aggregated data. Therefore, this book encourages the use of an *inductive* approach (reasoning from the specific to the general) for the application of criminological theory to criminal cases rather than a *deductive* one (reasoning from the general to the specific).

Many ways of introducing the study of theory have been used in criminology. Some texts are primarily concerned with the historical development of criminological theory, while others are devoted to the presentation of one particular view. Texts of the latter type seem to be the more common. They tend to evaluate evidence and other views in a restricted way that supports the central viewpoint of their presentation.

In the early 1980s, Liska suggested that textbooks on criminological theory introduce the full range of theories rather than a single one, thus broadening

the reader's understanding of the causes of crime.⁹ We adhere to this view. Accordingly, we have attempted to examine all of the principal theories used by criminologists, and assess their strengths and weaknesses in an impartial manner. This book, like many others written in the 1980s, is organized around these major theories in a logical, rather than historical, fashion. Each theory is introduced as a separate, equally valid way of describing the causes of crime. This text is unique in that illustrations of each theory's usefulness and limitations are then provided by explaining the facts of a single criminal act through the viewpoint provided by that theory. Rather than merely discussing abstract theories and statistical data on crime, we demonstrate how particular theories help to explain the facts of well-documented criminal cases. (In doing so, we also specify those aspects of a crime with which the theory cannot deal.) The idea is to keep the reader focused on the construction and use of the theory, rather than on the problems encountered in interpreting the research data. The reader is neither required nor expected to immediately grasp the interrelationships between these theories, but should gradually note the way in which the theories complement each other in explaining particular examples of human behavior.

In short, the authors' goal is to explore the use of criminological theory in a practical way, by applying it to real cases, taking note of its inherent limits, so that it might become a useful tool in the daily lives of new criminal justice practitioners.

The book is organized into chapters and subsections. Each chapter is devoted to a single *perspective*. Subsections deal with *approaches* and the specific *theories* contained within them. Discussion of each theory begins with a discussion of how and why it was developed and then focuses on the most important *concepts* in the theory, the theory's application to actual cases, and the major limitations on the theory's use.

At this point the reader should become familiarized with the common terms of criminological theory, including those just emphasized in the preceding paragraph. Let us consider the structure of criminological theories in order to explore the meanings of these terms.

The Structure of Criminological Theories

The basic components used in theory construction are: (1) concepts, (2) variables, (3) statements, and (4) formats. **Concepts** are, essentially, terms used to identify specific phenomena that are of interest to theory-builders and theory-users. They usually represent very thorough definitions of those phenomena. The concepts used in criminological theories tend to be abstract ideas (e.g., peer group, role, status), rather than concrete things (e.g., gang, husband, judge). They are universal, rather than specific, in their identification of phenomena. That is, they do not identify any specific particular person, place, or thing but refer to attributes that are common among a group of people, places or things.¹⁰

Variables are labels or names given phenomena so that they can be distinguished from other phenomena or used to describe degrees of differences among phenomena (e.g., young people, middle-aged people, old people).¹¹ Variables constitute measurable and concrete versions of concepts