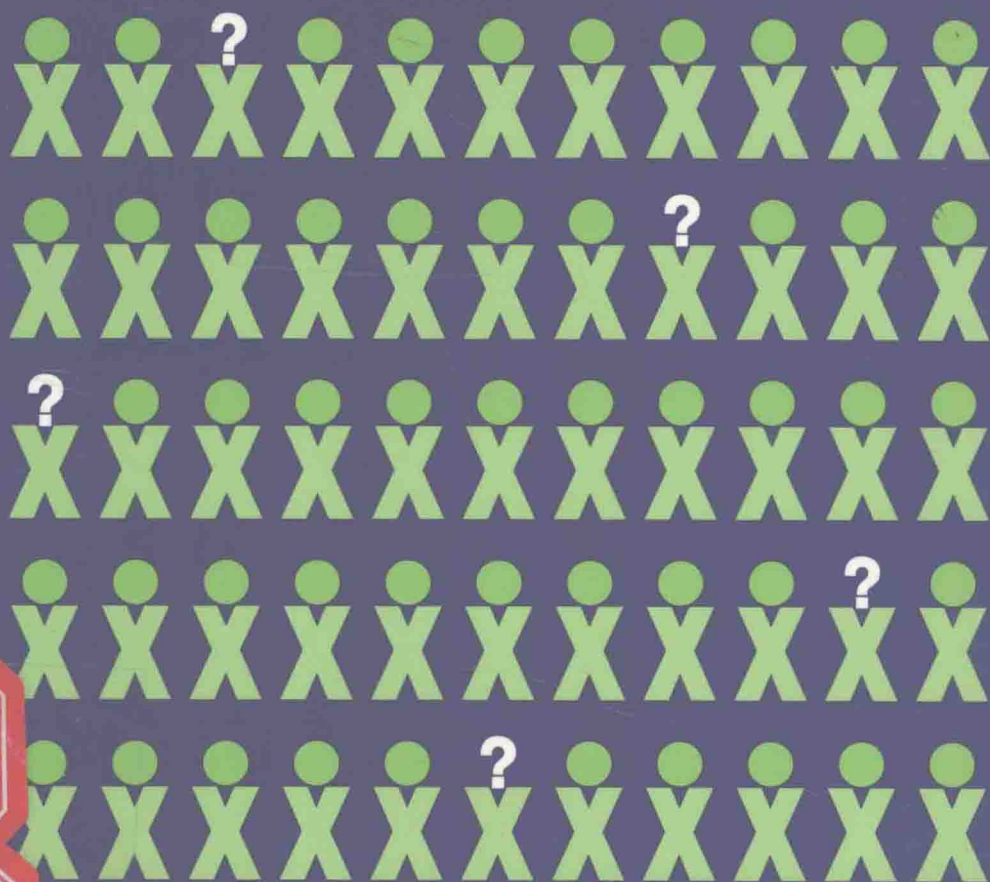


# CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORIES:

*Introduction and Evaluation*

Ronald L. Akers



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## Introduction and ~~Evaluation~~

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*This book is dedicated  
to the precious memory of my father*

*Charles E. Akers  
(1920-1993)*

*and to my loving mother*

*Thelma Louise Akers*

# PREFACE

The purposes of this book are to review the basic concepts and principles of criminological theories and to evaluate their adequacy as explanations of criminal and deviant behavior or of the criminal law and justice system. While not exhaustive, the coverage of theories is comprehensive. I have included all of the major theories that have been the subject of nine out of ten theory-testing articles in the leading criminological journal over the past three decades (Stitt and Giacopassi, 1992).

The first goal in presenting each theory is to give a concise and clear exposition of its central concepts, assertions, and hypotheses. The intent is to provide an accurate, understandable introduction for readers who are not familiar with the theory and a review for those who are. In each case, an effort has been made not only to present the classic or original statements of a theory, but to show modifications and revisions of it, including the most recent and significant developments.

The second goal is to evaluate the theory. In the Prologue (Chapter 1), I review the main criteria by which the merits of a theory can be judged—logical consistency, scope, parsimony, applicability to policy, testability, and empirical validity. All of these are invoked at various points, but the central focus of the evaluation of each theory is the *empirical validity* of the theory. I review the research relevant to the theory and assess how well the findings support or contradict the main assertions of the theory. Before the empirical adequacy of a theory can be evaluated, of course, it must be testable, and a considerable amount of attention is given to questions of tautology and measurement. The last chapter is an epilogue devoted to the topic of theoretical rivalry and integration. Recent examples of conceptual and propositional integration are reviewed and evaluated.

The book's breadth of coverage combined with its modest length allows its adoption either as the principal or supplemental text in courses on theories of crime, delinquency, and deviance. It would also be useful as a supplemental text or one of several reading assignments in criminology, juvenile delinquency, deviance, criminal behavior, and similar courses.

While writing with a student audience in mind, I have not hesitated to draw upon the contemporary research literature and have not shied away from addressing central issues and controversies in the field. The text citations to the theoretical and research literature and the list of references are thorough and extensive. Therefore, I believe that other readers will find some value in the book. It should be useful to criminal

justice practitioners looking for validated theoretical principles and relevant literature on which to build or enhance programs and policy. Theoreticians and researchers will find some original analysis and insights that may be of interest.

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I am grateful for the collegial insights and suggestions of Jerome Rabow of the University of California, Los Angeles, in his role as consulting editor and manuscript reviewer. Richard A. Wright of the University of Scranton also offered extremely helpful general and detailed comments on the manuscript. A number of other colleagues reviewed various drafts of the manuscript: Robert Agnew, Emory University; Bruce L. Berg, Indiana University (Pennsylvania); Thomas J. Bernard, Pennsylvania State University; Michael B. Blankenship, East Tennessee State University; Dean Champion, Minot State University; Patrick G. Donnelly, University of Akron; Finn-Aage Esbensen, University of Nebraska; Steven F. Messner, SUNY, Albany; Robert J. Rush, Wilmington College; and Frank R. Scarpitti, University of Delaware. Their encouraging responses to the manuscript, their acuity in finding errors of omission and commission, and their professional judgment in making suggestions for improving the manuscript were invaluable to me. I am happy to recognize the contributions of these scholars and teachers while absolving them of responsibility for any shortcomings of the book.

It is a joy to thank my family publicly for their unconditional love that always sustains me: my wife Caroline, my sons Ron and Levi, my daughter Tamara, and her husband Lee Phillips. The debt I owe Caroline and Levi extends to their specific contributions to this book. They collaborated on the concept and design of a prototype for the front cover of the book. In addition, Levi assisted me in compiling the indexes and performed various disk-checking and word-processing tasks associated with submission of the text via electronic media.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# PROLOGUE

# INTRODUCTION TO CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY

## What Is Theory?

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

Consider the situation of a young girl’s child abuse and her later involvement in prostitution. What about the relationship between the limited opportunities for legitimate work and the selection of a career in crime? Think about the fact that members from a significant proportion of immigrant groups have become successively involved in organized crime, such as Jews, Irish, and Italians, and now Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and Latinos. Or consider the fact that some kinds of behavior are legally defined as criminal, while others are not. Theories are tentative answers to the commonly asked questions about

such events and behavior. Why? By what process? How does it work? The answers may provide explanations of one set of events by referring to other events.

A theory is . . . an explanation . . . a sensible relating of some particular phenomenon to the whole field of knowledge. . . . In general, scientific theories make statements about the relationship between two classes of phenomena. (Vold and Bernard, 1986:4)

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

[T]he social scientist sees a theory, in one way or another, as an attempt to make sense out of observations. (Shoemaker, 1990:8)

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

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

## Types of Criminological Theories

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

The first type of theory (of law-making and law-enforcing) is introduced and evaluated in Part One; the second type (law-breaking) is covered in Part Two. It should be noted that there are not as many different theories of the first kind as there are of the second. Therefore, while both include important criminological theories, more attention will be paid here to the theories in Part Two. Conflict, labeling, Marxist, and feminist theories shed light on both criminal behavior and the law; hence, these theories will be discussed in both Parts One (Chapters 2 and 3) and Part Two (Chapters 8 and 10).

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

Theories of making and enforcing criminal law (also herein referred to as theories of law and criminal justice) offer answers to questions of how or why certain behavior and people become defined and are dealt with as criminal in society. Why is a particular conduct considered illegal and what determines the kind of action to be taken when it occurs? How is it decided, and who makes the decision, that such conduct is criminal? And how are the resources of the public and state brought to bear against it? Theories try to answer these questions by proposing that social, political, and economic variables affect the legislation of law, administrative decisions and rules, and the implementation and operation of law in the criminal justice system.

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

This is not to imply that the theorists themselves are totally unaffected by philosophical and value judgments. There is a significant relationship between theories of crime and criminal justice and philosophies that define the desirable goals of a just, effective, and well-



managed criminal justice system. Such goals partially direct which theories will be considered important, and those theories will help to develop strategies to reach these goals.

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

### *Theories of Criminal and Deviant Behavior*

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

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

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

The first set of questions focuses on societal and group patterns, the second on individual differences. A theory that addresses broader questions about differences across societies or major groups in society is called a "macro" theory. Conversely, one that focuses specifically on