

Explaining Crime

A Primer in Criminological Theory

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

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1

The Basics of Criminological Theory

Criminologists study how, why, when, where, and under what conditions crime, criminality, and victimization occur. Like any academic discipline, there are a variety of ways criminologists think about and research causality. Some scholars of crime seek to map out crime in its relationship to social environments, such as the economy, in institutions such as schools and families, and in group dynamics, while others focus on individual decision-making processes. Criminologists have created and tested dozens of theories (and many more variants of formal theories) in order to better understand, explain, and hopefully do something about crime in the real world. Such study and theorizing is not as straightforward and simple as it may sound. The truth is that there is a lot going on with crime, and criminological theories try to find out what exactly these things are.

Let's start with a classroom example. Occasionally we ask our students at the beginning of our criminology classes the difficult question "What causes crime?" In response, it is not uncommon for students to identify things such as poverty, dysfunctional families, racism, peer pressure, laziness, and the lack of good jobs. When probed to elaborate, some argue that if people can't find a good job, they can't make the bills, and so they decide to commit crimes (for example, steal money or sell drugs) to get by. Other students say that when parents fail to provide rules and guidelines for their children's behavior, there can be no accountability, let alone discipline, and therefore kids will be more likely to get into trouble because they do not fear punishment. Criminologists have found that while both of these lines of reasoning have merit, they do not capture the real working dynamics or root causes of crime commission. Because crime is complicated, there are

no easy answers. In the explanation of crime, as in real life, things are often easier said than done.

Attempts to explain why people violate rules is not new, and what we now call criminology dates back to the middle of the eighteenth century. The pioneers in the area of theoretical criminology were trained in a variety of disciplines. Cesare Beccaria (1738–1794) and Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) were philosophers and students of law; Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), regarded as the founder of criminology, was a physician and surgeon; Raffaele Garofalo (1851–1934) was a professor of law and a magistrate; Enrico Ferri (1856–1929) was a criminal lawyer and member of the Italian parliament. Although people from many disciplines continued to make important contributions to the field over the years, theoretical criminology found its primary academic home in departments of sociology, although it is ever more closely associated with criminal justice departments as well.

The basic goal of **theory** is *explanation*. Explanations are important because they help us figure out why things are the way they are, and they suggest what might be done to change things. In this sense, criminological theory's main job is to render crime more understandable. This simple way of conceptualizing theory reflects the diversity of applications that theories have in criminology. Every academic discipline has theory, for it drives basic questions about the subject matter. Indeed, theory is inescapable in virtually all aspects of life and human activity. Without it "we would be lost in space and time" (Pfohl, 1985: 10). Sometimes theories are found in places not obvious to the casual observer. For example, when preparing to cross a busy street one considers how best to do so by evaluating the flow of traffic versus the distance needing to be traveled. When parenting, decisions are made about the proper balance to strike between the discipline and support of a child. When you made your decision to enroll in college, your understanding of the value of education in the marketplace and in your vision of the future helped determine your course of conduct. In all of these cases, theories have instructed the decision making by helping to make sense out of a situation and to provide options and rationales for action. Theories exist in a wide range of popular culture contexts, such as sports (there is plenty of theory behind baseball, football, golf, hockey, basketball, running, and almost every other sport) and theories of music instruction (how notes, rhythms, chords, and harmonies can be meaningfully organized). Card and casino games have plenty of mathematical theories that apply to player strategies (e.g., card counting in blackjack, probability play in poker); and there are even theories about theories, known as metatheories.

Criminology, the study of lawmaking, lawbreaking, and the reactions to crime, is a rich field of study with many ideological, intellectual, and methodological disagreements. This partially explains why there are several

dozen theories in the field, all of which will be reviewed in this text. Many of the theories attempt to explain why certain people commit crime. Other theories attempt to explain why some places have higher crime rates than others, or the social conditions under which crime rates rise and fall. There is also a group of theories in criminology that endeavor to explain lawmaking, the process by which certain behaviors or people are labeled criminal. Still other criminological theories attempt to shed light on the purpose of criminal justice itself, victimology, and the politics of crime and justice.

If the purpose of criminological theory is to explain crime, how do criminologists judge its success and value? Surely a theory should be logical, testable by research, and defensible in the face of criticism, but let's consider some less obvious criteria for evaluating the quality of a theory:

The theory should shed light on the topic under study. Imagine yourself in a dark room. What do you see? Now flip on the light switch. Can you see things more clearly? Are things that were otherwise not in view now visible? A good theory should function like a light switch. Of course, the brighter the light it triggers the better. As you will see in later chapters, some theories cast more light than others.

Theory should specifically point out the relationships between variables. A variable is anything that changes or can have different values. Theories specify how relevant variables are logically linked to the problem in need of explanation. For example, a few theories of crime hold that economic status is linked to crime because of shifts and changes in the unemployment rate. A theorist adopting this approach would have to specify how changes in the independent variable (unemployment rates) impact the frequency and distribution of crime (the dependent variable). More generally, a good theory correctly predicts the outcomes produced by changing circumstances.

Theory should be helpful in guiding research and future theoretical developments. To some, theory for itself is surely a stimulating intellectual exercise, but theory is especially meaningful when it can be articulated and applied in the real world. Although it is true that theories have an indirect influence on many aspects of criminal justice policy and practice, often the actors (lawmakers, police officers, judges, etc.) are not cognizant of the academic versions of theory and therefore not necessarily informed of the potential or substantiated drawbacks discovered in the academic community. Alternatively, some theorists we have talked to care little about the "practical" side of their work, choosing to instead leave those matters to others. Yet, putting theory to work in the real world is, overall, a vitally important part of criminology (Barlow, 1995).

Theories should hold up under empirical scrutiny. Flip through any major criminology journal and you'll likely find articles that in some way attempt to gauge the veracity and explanatory power of a theory. Such tests are important in any academic discipline, as theories that have been consistently

shown to be weak should be reworked or eschewed in favor of better explanations. However, caution should be used when discussing whether or not a study or group of studies has actually “proven” or “disproved” a theory. In the social sciences, such absolutism is difficult to achieve, and instead, studies can either be said to have “supported” or “not supported” a theory.

Theories should be parsimonious. Anything said in wordy or complicated ways is typically less useful than things said in a straightforward and simple manner. One of the reasons undergraduate students often dislike theory is because it seems unclear and abstract. The effort to explain many variables and their relationships, thereby increasing the scope of a theory, often comes at the sacrifice of parsimony. As we shall see, theories differ considerably in how well they balance the tension between parsimony and scope,

In addition to considering how we can judge the quality and usefulness of theories, we also need to think about the goals of theory more generally. One of these is that a new theory should be able to shed a *different* sort of light on the topic under study than those previously applied. In this vein, several criminological theories are *oppositional*. Such theories develop from an explicit critique of existing modes of explanation. In the late eighteenth century, for example, Classical theory (reviewed in chapter 2) introduced the notion of rational choice and, in the process, rebuked supernatural explanations of crime. In like manner, Edwin Sutherland introduced his theory of differential association through a critique of earlier theories that held that poverty was a major cause of crime. More recent theories reviewed in this book, such as postmodernism and feminism, are also oppositional, for they include fundamental critiques of other explanations of crime as a central step in advancing their own arguments.

Another function of theory is to guide social and criminal justice policy. If there is a need to convince anyone that crime is a highly significant social problem, consider that in the United States alone billions of dollars are spent each year on governmental crime and criminal justice programs and institutions. Moreover, each year there are millions of victims of crime and the fear of crime can be paralyzing for people whether they have been victimized or not. The large amount of films and televisions shows based on crime and criminal justice themes also suggests that there is a long-standing and significant interest in crime (see box 1.1). Perhaps the most compelling—and to some extent controversial—film on crime in recent years is Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine*, which is summarized in box 1.2.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THEORY

Before we examine particular theories of crime and criminality, it is helpful to consider how they differ. There are four main ways to classify theory:

Box 1.1. Crime in Film

For many years the American public has been fascinated with crime. Some of this interest may be because the fear of crime is so widespread. It may also be because people enjoy thinking about others taking chances that they themselves would never consider. Strong interest in crime is also reflected in popular culture, as there are literally thousands of television shows, films, and songs that in one way or another relate to crime or criminal justice.

Regarding crime films, Nicole Rafter (2000: 141) writes in *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* that the reason for their popularity is often tied to the nature of the heroes:

Viewers delight in watching characters who can escape from tight spots and outsmart their enemies, all the while tossing down scotch and flibbing jibes. Good-guy heroes please us by out-tricking the tricky, tracking down the psychos, solving impossible mysteries. Bad-guy heroes appeal by being bolder, nastier, crueller, and tougher than we dare to be by saying what they want, taking what they want, despising weaklings, and breaking the law with impunity.

Our examination of the all-time highest grossing films in the United States reveals that at least a quarter of them contain some kind of crime theme. The same is true with the American Film Institute's Top 100 Films of the American century. Organized crime films seem especially popular, as movies such as *GoodFellas*, *Scarface*, and *The Godfather* series rank high in both popular and critics' lists.

Rafter (2000) proposes that crime films not only reflect society's interest in rule breaking but that they also provide a way to frame the causes of crime as well. For example, if films depict someone committing a crime because of an addiction to hard drugs, viewers may come to believe that this is a cause of crime in the real world. As you read through the following chapters, keep a crime movie or two in mind and see if any of the academic explanations are similar to those provided in the films.

(1) by level of analysis, (2) paradigmatic structure, (3) range of explanation, and (4) by causal locus. We shall review each of these classifications in turn.

Levels of Analysis. Some theories deal mainly with large-scale social patterns such as social change or the social, economic, and political organization of society. Crime is viewed as a property of whole groups of people rather than as a property of individuals. Because they focus on how societies are organized, these theories usually relate crime to social structure. They are called **macro level theories**, but this does not mean they lack relevance for the everyday lives of individuals. Rather, such theories attempt to make sense of the everyday behavior of people in relation to conditions and trends

Box 1.2. *Bowling for Columbine* as Pop Criminology

Michael Moore's Oscar-winning film, *Bowling for Columbine*, is regarded by many as one of the most powerful nonacademic treatments of real-world crime to date. In the film, Moore raises fundamental questions about the relationship between social inequality, opportunity, and violence in the United States by exploring destructive individual, corporate, state, and special-interest-group practices and how they contribute to both interpersonal and social injury. Moore frames crime, especially gun violence, as the result of many factors, including youth alienation, racism, and poverty. He draws attention to the high level of gun violence in the United States by providing a series of powerful images, interviews, stories, and biographies. Among the more poignant of these are:

- An interview with musician Marilyn Manson about those who blame him for the Columbine shootings and similar forms of violence.
- Chilling video that until recently had only been viewed by the parents of children killed or injured at Columbine. The video shows dozens of students panicked during the assault by Klebold and Harris.
- Juxtaposing the U.S. government's bombing of an aspirin factory in Kosovo on the same morning that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold slaughtered thirteen people at Columbine High School. Predictably, Moore argues, then-President Clinton only defined one of those actions as violent.
- Taking two young men—one in a wheelchair and the other with a bullet still embedded in his chest, who were shot by Klebold and Harris—to Kmart corporate headquarters to demand that the company stop selling handgun ammunition. After the predictable corporate neutralization of the situation, Moore and the two young men return a few days later with the media in tow to again demand some action. Several days later Kmart announces the phasing out of the selling of such ammunition.
- The story of a woman who left her son to live with her brother because she was forced to work two jobs under Michigan's "welfare to work" program. Her son took a loaded handgun from his uncle's dwelling and then shot and killed one of his first-grade classmates.
- Moore implies that if the state of Michigan's policy was not so strict, the boy would have been with his mother and unable to access a firearm.
- Media obsession with the reporting of violent crime. Using the case of the first-grader shooting, Moore shows how media agents frame stories without consideration of the effects of poverty on individual decision making and behavior. In another instance, Moore asks a field reporter what would be more attractive: covering a "guy with a gun" or a "baby that is drowning." The reporter picked the former.
- A friendly Moore randomly opening the doors of homes in Toronto and asking the residents why they really weren't scared when he appeared.

- Moore and sociologist Barry Glassner comfortably standing at the corner of Normandy and Florence in Los Angeles. They are unable to see the famous “Hollywood” sign because of massively thick air pollution. Moore asks a cop standing by if he could arrest the people responsible for poisoning his lungs. After a mumble or two, the cop walks away.

While Moore’s film does not represent anything close to an academic breakthrough in the study of crime, it does present a number of compelling visual portraits of victims and offenders that encourages viewers to think about the causes and consequences of crime and violence. And while Moore has come under fire for the film’s political slant, there are those in criminology who see this as unproblematic, as many theories of crime reflect ideological beliefs, as we explore later in box 1.3.

that transcend the individual, and even the individual’s neighborhood and community. A macro level analysis might also include the study of the social origins of criminal definitions as well as how their enforcement affects group life, including crime itself. Some macro level theorists are interested in why certain events and people are labeled criminal and others not; other scholars look into the process of constructing criminal definitions itself—among scientists, perhaps, or on the street or in the courtroom.

Some other theories focus on the ways individuals interact with others and with the groups to which they belong. These are called **micro level theories**, and most share an interest in the way social interaction creates and transmits meanings. They emphasize the social processes by which people and events become criminal. For example, as people move from situation to situation, they are confronted with all sorts of messages, rules, and expectations, some of which are not obvious. Through a process of sending, receiving, and interpreting messages, individuals help construct the social reality of which they are a part.

Figure 1.1 provides one way to think about levels of analysis through concentric circles. Criminality is at the center, and around it are some of its influences, such as peer group associations and broader social forces such as the economy.

In reality, some theories do not neatly fit into these categories, while others seem to bridge the two levels. Laub and Sampson (1988), for example, predict that structural factors such as household crowding, economic dependence, residential mobility, and parental crime influence the delinquent behavior of children through their effects on the way parents relate to their children day by day. Sociological theories that attempt to explain

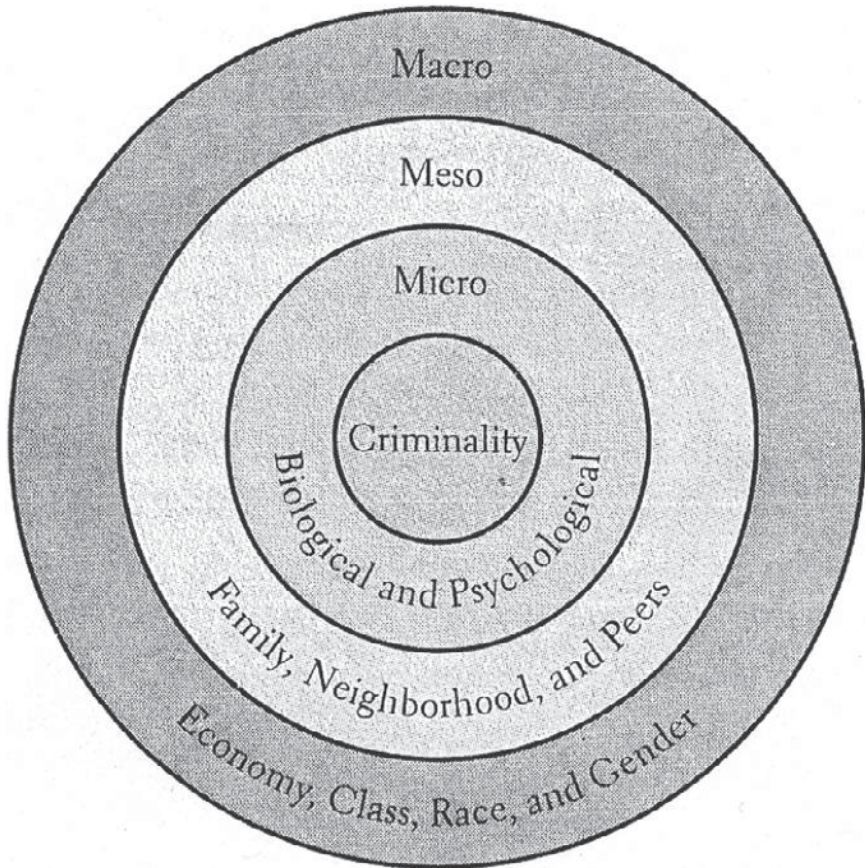


Figure 1.1. Levels of Analysis, Crime, and Criminality

“micro-macro” dynamics between individuals and society often take this approach. Indeed, it is a daunting but important task to explain how larger social forces shape institutions and groups and ultimately find expression in the interactions of everyday life.

Paradigms and Criminological Theory. Paradigms are broad assumptions and presuppositions about the nature of social life (*ontology*) and how knowledge is to be gained about social life (*epistemology*). Paradigms are far more fundamental than theories or perspectives—they are indeed the foundation upon which theories are built. There are two basic paradigms in criminology: the **positivist paradigm** and the **social constructionist paradigm**. While some have argued that there are also Marxist, postmodernist, and feminist paradigms, we see these approaches as multidimensional. That is, they combine elements of both the positivist and constructionist paradigms.

The positivist paradigm holds that crime can be known and explained through the scientific method. Crime is considered an objective condition, or social fact, that can be analyzed and understood as an independent phenomenon, regardless of differing ideas about its development and constitution (Michalowski, 1985). A positivist theory of crime asks questions such as “What are the concrete cause(s) of crime?” and “How can crime be controlled or reduced?”

In contrast, the social constructionist paradigm does not assume the objective existence of crime. It emphasizes instead how crime, law, and criminal justice are differently defined and conceptualized by social actors. Thus, the term *social constructionist*. To these theorists, crime is not an objective condition, nor is the law, the criminal, or the criminal justice system. Criminologists operating from the social constructionist paradigm might build theories to explore questions such as “Who defines crime and for what purpose?,” “How and why are labels attached to certain people and to certain acts at particular moments in time?,” and “What are the consequences of the application of labels to people and groups over time?”

General and Restricted Theories. Another important way that theories differ is in the range of phenomena they try to explain. **General theories** are meant to explain a broad range of facts. They are also not restricted to any one place or time. A general theory of crime, for example, is one that explains many (if not all) types of crime and can be applied to a variety of social and historical settings.

Although some theories in criminology purport to explain all or most crime, few really do meet a sufficiently generalizable level of analysis to satisfy crucial questions of causality or correlation. Sometimes this results in the production of **restricted theories**, explanations designed to apply to a narrower range of facts. A restricted theory of crime might apply to one type of crime or to various types under a limited set of circumstances. Most modern theories in criminology are regarded as restricted, but the development of general theory remains an important goal, and some recent efforts are promising.

Distant and Proximate Causes. Causation is not a simple concept, especially in the social and behavioral sciences. Think about your own behavior for a moment. Right now you are reading this book. How and why you are reading could probably be explained in many different ways; in other words, various causes might be at work. Some of the causes are closer or more immediate—called **proximate causes**—while others are more **distant**, or *background*, **causes**. A proximate cause might be that your professor just assigned this chapter to be read before your next class, which is tomorrow. An even more proximate (and perhaps more powerful!) cause might be that your parents just told you that they would buy you a new car if you got an “A” in your criminology class. A more distant cause is the expectation that

you will follow your mother's footsteps and become a lawyer. An even more distant cause may lie in the fact that a university education is a requirement for many professional careers and increasingly for other jobs as well.

You look out the window and notice that a friend is not cracking the books like you. No surprise, since she's not a college student. But then you wonder why not. Because you know her you comfortably reject personal explanations based on her intelligence, her drive, and her commitment to getting ahead, and start thinking about background factors. You remember that neither of her parents has a university education; you recall that she has four brothers and sisters and that only her father works outside the home, as a house painter. You remember that one of her brothers is disabled and that a few years ago the father had an accident and was out of work for two years. You start thinking about other university students you know and about high school friends who never went to college or dropped out.

Even though it is only a small sample of people, you begin to see patterns. You realize that a university education is explained by a combination of proximate and distant causes, some of which relate to the individual, some to the community and larger society, and some to the social situations people move in and out of in the course of their lives. You recognize, as well, that some causes seem to have a direct impact while the effect of others is more indirect, working through their impact on something else. Some causes are both direct and indirect. For example, the impact of poverty on behavior may be indirect through its effects on family relationships and direct through its impact on opportunities and access to them.

IDEOLOGY AND CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY

The way criminologists visualize their field and its subject matter reflects their particular set of beliefs and values. These beliefs and values—called ideology—affect decisions about what to investigate, what questions to ask, and what to do with the knowledge gained. The intrusion of ideology is a normal aspect of the academic enterprise, and the study of crime is no exception. There are a number of competing ideological perspectives in criminology: conservative, liberal, and critical. The latter approach includes feminist, Marxist, postmodernist, cultural, and peacemaking theories, which we review more fully in chapter 6.

Conservative Criminology. *Conservative criminology* is identified with the view that criminal law is a codification of moral precepts and that people who break the law are somehow psychologically or morally defective. Crimes are seen as threats to law-abiding members of society and to the social order on which their safety and security depend. The “right” questions to ask about crime include: “How are morally defective persons

produced?" and "How can society protect itself against them?" The causes of crime are located in the characteristics of individuals. The solution to the crime problem is couched in terms of a return to basic values wherein good wins over evil. For example, consider Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory, a moderately conservative explanation of crime discussed later in this text. According to this theory, individuals with low self-control are most likely to commit crimes. The traits associated with low self-control include: short-time perspective; low diligence, persistence, and tenacity; a tendency to be "adventurous, active, and physical"; a tendency to be "self-centered, indifferent, or insensitive to the suffering and needs of others"; and a tendency to have "unstable marriages, friendships, and job profiles" (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 91). The major cause of low self-control, according to the authors, is "ineffective parenting," a claim that has much more support in conservative than liberal circles. Until well into the twentieth century, most criminological thinking was conservative. In lay circles, the conservative view enjoyed a considerable boost during the Reagan and Bush years, and to some extent continued to enjoy popularity throughout the Clinton and Bush administrations.

Liberal Criminology. Liberal criminology began to emerge as a force during the late 1930s and early 1940s, and it has remained dominant ever since. The most influential versions of liberal criminology explain criminal behavior either in terms of the way society is organized (social structure) or in terms of the way people acquire social attributes (social process). *Social structure* theories include strain theory, cultural transmission theory, and conflict theory. Strain theory argues that when people find they cannot achieve valued goals through socially approved means, they experience stress and frustration, which in turn may lead to crime. Cultural transmission theory draws attention to the impact on individuals of the values, norms, and lifestyles to which they are exposed day to day. Delinquency and crime are learned through exposure to a criminogenic culture, a culture that encourages crime. According to conflict theory, society is characterized by conflict, and criminality is a product of differences in power exercised when people compete for scarce resources or clash over conflicting interests.

Social process theories include associational theory, control theory, and labeling theory. Associational theories assert that people become criminal through close association with others (family members, friends, coworkers) who are criminal. Control theory asserts that crime and delinquency result "when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken" (Hirschi, 1971: 16). More room is allowed for individual deviance when social controls are weak. Labeling theory suggests that some people become criminals because they are influenced by the way other people react to them. People who are repeatedly punished for "bad" behavior may eventually accept the

idea that they are bad, and their subsequent behavior is consistent with that identity.

Critical Criminology. Liberal criminologists locate criminogenic forces in the organizational and routine social processes of society, yet they do not call for any change in its basic economic, cultural, or political structure. **Critical criminologists** (sometimes called *radical criminologists*) generally do. From a Marxist theoretical perspective, crime and criminal justice have reinforced and strengthened the power of the state and the wealthy over the poor, working class, and developing world. To some Marxists, crime and criminality are the products of the exploitative character of monopoly capitalism, and efforts to control crime are poorly disguised attempts to divert attention from the crimes committed by the state, corporations, and capitalists. While Marxism is but one school of thought within critical criminology, the overall approach has largely been shaped by Marx's ideas, such as his call to work for social justice, encapsulated in his dictum: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (quoted in Tucker, 1978: 143).

Feminist theories in criminology focus on how gender relations and patriarchy constitute and impact the nature, extent, and distribution of crime, responses to crime, and victimization. Theoretical criminology, like most academic areas, has historically been male-centered, sexist, and either ignorant or dismissive of issues related to gender inequality and discrimination. Since the 1970s, however, there has been a substantial increase in the study of the gendered nature of the causes and consequences of crime, although the extent to which more radical forms of feminist criminology have impacted mainstream criminology is considerably less than that of liberal forms of feminism.

Another critical criminological approach is postmodernism, which employs notions of chaos and unpredictability in the understanding of crime and questions conventional ideas about the value of science in explaining crime (Ferrell, 2003; Henry and Milovanovic, 2003). Postmodernism is clearly an oppositional theory and is really a loose collection of "themes and tendencies" that include the rejection of scientific methods, the notion of Truth, and the legitimacy of the state (Schwartz and Friedrichs, 1994). Criminological postmodernism also sensitizes us to the power of words, especially the so-called crime speak, which is how through language we think about and define the "reality" of crime and justice (Arrigo, 1998; Borokin, Henry, and Milovanovic, 2006; Henry and Milovanovic, 1996; 1999). For example, the phrase "war on crime" suggests more a more militaristic than humanist strategy to reduce crime.

Critical criminology has also given rise to what is known as peacemaking criminology. Peacemaking criminologists theorize on how to bring victims, offenders, and communities together in the harmonious resolution

of conflict. Borrowing heavily from the ideas of humanist thinkers such as Jane Addams and Mohandas Gandhi, this perspective holds substantial applicability to crime and criminal justice policy, most notably in the form of restorative justice.

All of these ideological positions—conservative, liberal, and radical/critical—can be found in the various theories reviewed in the next several chapters. As you can see, there is much variety within theories of crime, and in the real world of criminology, political ideology is partly responsible for this (see box 1.3). But, there is much variety in lots of things. Consider, for example, tactics used in sports. Just as there are different ways to catch fish, pitch a baseball, or hit a golf ball, there are different ways to approach the study of crime. Further, not all theories of crime (like baseball pitches) are suitable at all times or in all places. What pitcher would only have one pitch in his repertoire? What angler would only have one lure? And what golfer would use a putter on the tee? The same holds true with theories of crime,

Box 1.3. Political Ideology and Criminologists' Theoretical Preferences

A survey of criminologists lends considerable support to the notion that political ideology is related to theoretical preferences. In Walsh and Ellis's (1999) survey of 138 scholars of crime, 70 identified themselves as liberal, 35 as moderates, 23 as conservative, and 10 as radical.

The study found that criminologists who regarded themselves as more politically conservative or moderate were more likely to favor theories that focus on low self-control and poor disciplinary practices as important causes of crime. Liberals were more likely to favor theories that focus on environmental factors that lead to crime, such as economic and educational inequality. Critical/radical criminologists were even stronger in their belief that these factors are important in the understanding of crime. Moreover, while radicals supported mostly Marxist and conflict theories, conservatives supported theories that do not implicate larger social factors in the causes of crime. Not surprisingly, those claiming to be liberal or moderate "fall in between" radical and conservatives (Walsh and Ellis, 1999: 14).

The authors indicate that it is unclear whether political ideology causes theoretical preference or whether theory influences a person's ideology. This is an interesting question, for if only ideology causes theoretical preference, to what degree can criminology be "scientific"? If, however, certain theories are found to be supported in the research and this causes a change in ideology, does this mean that the discipline is more "objective" and committed only to the searching of truth? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are not easy, but what this study points out is that indeed criminology is (and perhaps has always been) "highly fragmented" by political ideology (Walsh and Ellis, 1999: 14).

as criminologists have devised a number of different theories to explain what causes crime. But as you will discover, the large number of theories in criminology is not necessarily negative, as crime itself is widely variable, changing both in time and space.

Another reason that there are so many criminological theories is that crime is an immensely variant phenomenon. From a strictly legalistic standpoint, crime includes a huge range of offenses, from property crimes like burglary and theft to violent crimes such as murder, rape, and assault. Criminologists also study white-collar crimes, which involve the violation of trust in the context of work. Examples of such crimes include embezzlement, environmental contamination, violations of worker safety laws, and genocide. With such a variety of behaviors that fall under the label “crime,” you can see that it is a daunting task to try to intelligently explain the causes and correlates of these various behaviors. But this is exactly what many criminologists attempt to do.

The fact that there are numerous criminological theories is also reflected in the sheer complexity of the behaviors and actions under study by criminologists. If it is criminal behavior to be explained, must behavior more generally also be explained? If so, we are asking ourselves to accomplish a feat that scholars in all sorts of disciplines (e.g., biology, psychology, sociology, philosophy) have studied for centuries. It should come as no surprise that many theories of crime do in fact owe intellectual debts to other fields of study, since criminology is perhaps one of the more interdisciplinary fields of academic inquiry today. Yet the goal of explaining why humans behave the way they do is still elusive. This is in part due to the fact that there are so many different aspects of the human and social condition that need to be considered as potential factors that contribute to behavior and whether or not there are unique causes of criminal behavior.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The main purpose of theory is explanation. Criminologists create, test, and apply theories in order to understand the nature, extent, definition, and consequences of crime. Theories should be able to shed light on an understudied or poorly understood problem, specify the relationship between variables, guide criminal justice policy, be economical, and hold up to empirical scrutiny. Theories are classified by their level of analysis, paradigmatic assumptions, causal focus, and scope. Macro theories deal with large-scale social patterns; micro theories focus on the interaction of individuals and on the manner in which meanings are created and transmitted in social situations. General theories explain a broad range of facts; restricted theories apply to a narrower range of facts. A general theory thus

subsumes more restricted theories. However, the development of general theory is extremely difficult, and most modern theories in criminology are regarded as restricted. Paradigms structure how theorists go about viewing the world in a fundamental way. The social fact paradigm assumes the objective existence of social phenomena, while the social constructionist perspective guides the investigation of subjective, interactive, and definitional processes.

Theories reflect the values, beliefs, and academic disciplines of those who propose them. Conservative criminological theories explain crime in terms of the moral or psychological defectiveness of individuals. Liberal theories explain crime in terms of normal social conditions and processes that characterize group life. Critical theories explain crime in terms of the exploitative character of capitalist society, patriarchy, or modernism. Crime is an immensely complex and variant phenomenon, and there are equally complex and variant attempts to explain it.

KEY TERMS

critical criminologists
conservative criminology
distant causes
general theories
liberal criminology
macro level theories
micro level theories
paradigms
positivist paradigm
proximate causes
restricted theories
social constructionist paradigm
theory

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Scholars treasure the function and importance of *theory*, but this word is generally not considered to be exciting or valuable outside of academic circles. Why might this be and how can the perception be changed?
2. Why is the concept of “levels of analysis” crucial to theorizing about crime? Do you think that one level of analysis is more popular than others in the general public’s thinking about the causes of crime?

3. Paradigms represent fundamental starting points for the understanding of any social scientific phenomenon, including crime. To what extent do you see either of the paradigms being more helpful and accurate than the other?
4. Some scholars believe that crime is political in all sorts of ways. Given the role of ideology discussed in this chapter, how do you see politics framing or entering into discussions of the causes of crime and crime control policy?

ACTIVITIES

1. Search the Republican, Democratic, and Green Party websites for the word "crime." Compare and contrast the different policies and approaches on these websites to the liberal, conservative, and radical theoretical perspectives on crime.
2. Watch Michael Moore's film *Bowling for Columbine* and identify the ideological components of the film as well as the extent to which attention is given to the three levels of analysis. Is Moore's analysis of crime more political than scientific?
3. Conduct an informal poll and ask people about their opinion on the causes of crime. Analyze their responses, looking for the presence of ideological assumptions and bias.