

Seventh Edition

# Criminological Theory

Frank P. Williams III | Marilyn D. McShane

 Pearson

*Seventh Edition*

# CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY

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# PREFACE

As its title implies, this book is about the major sociological theories of crime. While there are other approaches to the study of crime, since the 1920s, criminology has been oriented toward sociology. There is, however, some coverage of biological and psychological theories of crime and delinquency in the third chapter, and comments on the contributions of these perspectives are interspersed throughout, where appropriate. Nonetheless, we still intend the book to be representative of what criminological theory has *been* because a course in criminological theory is mainly a course in history.

When we first developed the concept of this text, there was but one criminological theory text on the market and that one was 30 years old (George Vold's *Theoretical Criminology*, published in 1958). Perhaps most importantly, there was no extant treatment of the importance of situating a theory in its own time and context in order to appreciate and understand its meanings and nuances. Thus, we set about to produce a text which, we hoped, would provide undergraduates with a brief but clear description of the most well-known criminological theories and simultaneously include a method of understanding those theories. After that beginning in 1988, criminological theory texts have become commonplace and, it seems, almost all now discuss the context surrounding the development of the various theories. This is a good thing.

We continue to hear from students and colleagues who have used the first six editions that many graduate students find the text valuable as a primer or as a study guide in their theory classes and for studying for comprehensive exams. The research references included in this edition are a valuable resource for a graduate student writing a research paper, thesis, or dissertation, or preparing for qualifying exams. As before, we have included updates in each of the chapters and a final chapter discussing current theory. The intent of the first edition was to focus on traditional theories, and we only briefly mentioned contemporary versions in the concluding chapter. In the second and third editions, we added chapters that summarized a number of new theoretical directions. However, as time goes on and theory testing and integration continues, we have found it necessary to split some of these concluding chapters into their own distinct theoretical areas. In this edition, Chapter 14 covers contemporary social process approaches. Chapter 15 discusses the broader context of integrative theories as well as metatheory.

The format of the first six editions has been retained in most chapters. We include a discussion of the social and intellectual heritage of the theory, highlight and explain the perspective and major concepts of the theory, and summarize and list the theory's major points. The lists of major points are intended to clarify earlier commentary and to demonstrate the logical connections among the various elements of each theory. The chapter summaries may also serve as review material for examinations. Graduate students may find the major points helpful in determining the background assumptions of the theories, comparing theories, and locating hypotheses for empirical testing. We realize that a discussion of a theory's major concepts, major points, and then a summary is somewhat redundant but our own experience from 40 years of teaching theory to all levels of students is that it helps retention and understanding. Many of our students have told us that this is not merely our perception.

## NEW TO THIS EDITION

- The bibliographies once again have been expanded to include a number of related sources that would be useful to those doing research in a particular theoretical area. These are called Research Bibliographies and they follow the general references section.
- In most chapters, we have included and updated brief biographies of the major theorists. We believe that it will interest the student to see the similarities and differences between the theorists' careers and how becoming a criminologist is not always a deliberate or dedicated path.
- The chapter on gender-based theories has been expanded and updated to include research on the gender gap.



- The list of informative weblinks at the end of each chapter has been expanded and updated. In particular, the “Ted Talks” can be used for exercises in class, and other links for researching special assignments. Students are also encouraged to find relevant websites on their own.
- The examples of how theory can be seen and applied today have once again been updated to draw on current events and incidents from the news with which students might be familiar.
- The final chapter is now an overview of various contemporary theoretical perspectives and a commentary on issues in modern theory. In addition, some deleted materials from earlier editions have been returned, as per requests.

As in the earlier editions, we attempt in most chapters to provide a classification of the theoretical perspective. These areas of the book continue to draw the most discussion. In one sense, we find this appropriate. There are so many methods of classifying theories that it is inevitable that instructors and others who use the text would find some conflict with their own positions. Rather than hide such conflicts, we believe it is more instructive to bring them out into the open for students. Thus, we continue to provide theory classifications and encourage instructors to tell students how and why their approaches differ from ours.

And as always, we welcome any feedback on the book. The numerous versions of each form of theory, as well as the various perspectives on them, make critical commentary inevitable. Since this book is designed primarily to be *used*, we invite readers, students, and teachers alike to provide us with their ideas on how to make it even more useful. We feel very fortunate that we were able to acquire firsthand the comments and advice of some of the original authors of the theories. Our sincere gratitude and heartfelt appreciation goes out to the many distinguished criminologists, some of whom are no longer with us, who patiently offered us their insights and commentary. At this point, we also realize the special nature of opportunities that will never again occur with many who helped us place things in context (frequently over beer or wine at a conference bar, or in the case of the late Leslie Wilkins, a large glass of breakfast gin). We would also like to thank our reviewers Addrain Convers, Marist College; John Curra, School of Justice Studies/College of Justice & Safety/Eastern Kentucky University; Susan Hodge, University of North Carolina at Charlotte; and Adam Trahan, University of North Texas. We would especially like to recognize the continued support and guidance of scholars and colleagues Freda Adler, Ron Akers, Jeff Ferrell, Mark Hamm, Rob Mutchnick, Hal Pepinsky, and Frank Scarpitti. Additionally, we would be remiss not to remember and express our appreciation for the wonderful conversations we had with our late colleagues Al Cohen, Sy Dinitz, Gil Geis, Ray Jeffery, Al Reiss, and Austin Turk. Finally, thanks are also in order to those who used our text in their classes and provided us commentary, or otherwise helped with their ideas and thoughts, including a number of very bright students and colleagues. And as is Richard Quinney, we are once again grateful to the Lone Ranger (some of you will have an idea of how many beers have gone under that particular bridge).

## INSTRUCTOR SUPPLEMENTS

**Instructor’s Manual with Test Bank.** Includes content outlines for classroom discussion, teaching suggestions, and answers to selected end-of-chapter questions from the text. This also contains a Word document version of the test bank.

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*Trey Williams and  
Marilyn McShane*

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# Introduction

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

**Objective 1.1:** Describe some of the characteristics of a good theory.

**Objective 1.2:** Summarize the various ways to classify criminological theories.

**Objective 1.3:** Explain the difference between a macro- and a microtheory.

**Objective 1.4:** Discuss the relationship between theory, research, and policy.

**Objective 1.5:** Explain what is meant by the social context of a crime theory.

## INTRODUCTION TO THEORY

The study of criminological theory is an opportunity to analyze and critique the way others have looked at crime through history. Today, the quest to understand crime is as close to us as the latest newspaper headlines and television reports. As we will see, however, theory is not just a popular belief, opinion, or value-driven explanation. Instead, theory as we will discuss it here is a product of the scientific approach.

The effective use of theory is found in the everyday activities of the criminal justice system. Police departments have designed their patrol patterns around various theories that predict criminal events. Each day judges hand down sentences based on their understanding of the character of a defendant and the environment in which that defendant lives. Jurors decide whether to give the death penalty based on their assumptions about the future dangerousness of the defendant. Probation officers send their clients to treatment programs to improve work skills or to resolve their use of drugs or alcohol. Prison authorities attempt to instill discipline, teach proper work habits, and deter inmates from future criminality. Finally, as reflected in the media, the public seems to attribute criminal behavior to such things as drug use, a depressed economy, poor family life, the influence of bad friends, and, sometimes, even the immigration and ethnic status of people. All of these activities and explanations are found in the implications of various criminological theories over the past century.

As you can see, theory does not have to be abstract. Furthermore, and despite public opinion to the contrary, theory is applicable to the “real world.” We all use theory as part of everyday life but normally not the scientific versions of it. When you see a dark cloud in the sky and say that it is going to rain, you have just expressed a theory. To be sure, it is a relatively simple theory, but it does express the relationships among clouds in general, clouds that are dark, and the falling of drops of water from the sky. This simple explanation meets two criteria for the simplest version of theory: (1) the use of objective evidence and systematic observation and (2) a rational explanation of that evidence. In other words, we know from many observations that dark clouds are systematically associated with rain, and a rational person could assume that if dark clouds occur first, then rain will follow. Similarly, if you have ever been about to go in a door when someone on the other side of door bursts through (and you were then hit in the face by the door), you associate the sound of someone on the other side of a door as a reason to be cautious. Here, you are theorizing on the basis of evidence (your past experience) that sounds indicating the presence of someone could be followed by their opening the door.

Theories can be very simple or very complex, depending upon the number and types of relationships expressed by them. A more complex theory of rain would be that, under certain circumstances, surface water evaporates and rises into the atmosphere. Certain atmospheric conditions cause the water to condense, first into “clouds” and ultimately into drops of rain. The complexity in this version of a theory of rain is in specifying the conditions and processes involved in evaporation and condensation.

Theories can also be concrete or abstract. Theories about rain tend to be concrete, even if complex. Theories about simple behaviors such as throwing a ball through a window also tend to be concrete. Abstract theories, however, are more difficult to tie directly to reality. For instance, Einstein’s theory of relativity is an abstract concept. We have difficulty in directly testing the concept that time gets slower the faster one travels, and certainly we cannot test velocities beyond the speed of light. Similarly, theories about the effect of social structure on crime rates are abstract. Social structure is an invented concept (we doubt that you have ever seen a social structure), and crime rates are a mathematical concept derived from dividing the number of crimes by some standard population size.

The most important thing about theories is that we need them to live or to live better. Theories allow us to develop and test potential solutions to problems we encounter in life. True, some of the problems are more critical than others, for example, addressing global warming versus predicting who will win an Oscar. But we do need the many theories we have learned about our environment to accumulate knowledge and effectively allocate resources. Imagine what life would be like if you could never generalize about things, if every time you saw a cloud you had to get wet to conclude that it was going to rain. And suppose you could not assume that a door represents a way to enter a building. Theories, then, are really generalizations of a sort; they explain how two or more events are related to each other and the conditions under which the relationship takes place. For example, the statement that seat belts reduce deaths in automobile accidents expresses a relationship between two events. The seat belts alone will not reduce deaths, however. There must be a condition that they be worn (we could also add that the seat belts have to be installed properly, worn correctly, etc.).

The way we express these generalizations, or think about things, depends on the form of knowledge we are using at the time. We know things through experience (often referred to as “empirical knowledge”), intuition, common sense, or science, or because someone important to us (or even an important book) has told us so. The causes of crime, for instance, are assumed to be “known” by everyone. They include broken homes, lack of religion, hanging around with the wrong crowd, poor upbringing, and so forth. While you probably don’t think of these explanations as theories, they all are. At the same time, they are not good theories because they are too simplistic. If they were correct, then everyone whose life has these causes would be criminal (or delinquent), and, of course, we know that is not true. Even more important is the fact that such theories also imply the reverse; that is, people who are raised in a good family environment, who are religious, and who associate with the right people will *not do* anything criminal (or delinquent). This is not true either, since self-report studies (Akers, 1964; Gold, 1970; Reiss & Rhodes, 1961; Short & Nye, 1958) tell us that most young people at one time or another do things that are against the law. Unfortunately, public “theories” such as these are derived from concepts of “good” and “bad” and contribute to the way we view others. One of the basic criminological truths is that there is generally no such thing as noncriminals and criminals. Every person who has committed their first criminal act was previously a noncriminal and at the time of that commission was not necessarily any different than previously. Thus, the assumption that we know who is criminal and noncriminal is patently false.<sup>1</sup> From this, you can imagine the complexity required of any theory that purports to be a good explanation of behavior.

The problem with most of our day-to-day theories is they are often illogical or they are the product of selective observations. They may work some of the time and even often enough to be used as a general rule of thumb for making decisions. But when we need to be accurate or more

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<sup>1</sup> As with all statements, this is not universally true. There is a small group of people (criminological studies have consistently put the percentage at 6% or so of the population, and mostly male) who consistently engage in criminal behavior. Even so, predicting who they are and when their first delinquent/criminal act will occur is very difficult. Finally, there is an exceedingly rare group of individuals who are simply dangerous and criminal; but, again, predicting who will be one of these individuals is not within our capabilities.

careful about making policies, these theories will fail us. Human behavior is complex, and any simplistic theory will be incorrect. Therefore, theories about crime and criminals tend to be complex and are based on what we know (or in the case of older theories, what was known at the time) from research on crime and criminals. This, then, is a characteristic of scientific theories that is not normally shared by everyday theories. In fact, everyday theories are rather speculative and are rarely based on careful observation and evidence. In this regard, many people mistake the lay use of the word “theory”—as a speculative wondering about something—for scientific theory and they think that scientists also use the word “theory” in the same way. Actually, the two uses of the word are quite different.

In general, scientific theories reflect systematic observation (observation made through the use of certain rules), repeated evidence, and careful logic. Indeed, scientific theories are frequently “factual” but share a dislike for saying that they are “proven.” Even though the evidence may have been in favor of a scientific theory for each of 1,000 tests, there is still the possibility that the next test will not be supportive and that the theory needs to be modified. Theories as we will discuss them here, then, are *never* proven—primarily because scientists are too conservative and cautious to use that word. But, these theories are always supported by systematic observable evidence. This notion that a theory must be “proven” to be valid is one of the main reasons that nonscientists misunderstand theory. Scientists talk in terms of probability and, for them, a likelihood of something being true 95% of the time is a (usually standard) minimum criterion for accepting it. That’s the same thing as saying scientists prefer to have a maximum of 5% error in their statements.<sup>2</sup>

Another issue in criminological theory lies in the sheer variety of behavior defined as criminal. When we use the term “crime,” the reference is often to a wide range of illegal behavior. The individual criminal acts, though, may have very little in common except that someone, at some time, disliked each of them enough to have a law passed against them (of course, sometimes the reverse occurs and criminal behaviors are made legal again). Murder and petty theft, for example, have about as much in common as a rock and an orange. Just because one can find a common thread—they are both matter, for instance—doesn’t mean that they are alike in any meaningful sense.

Another problem is that criminal behavior may be merely one of a variety of similar behaviors. For instance, if we argue that some criminal behavior is thrill-seeking behavior, then a theory that predicts behavior on that basis must also include legal behavior. Assuming that any thrill-seeking behavior is equally likely, committing a crime would be no more likely than someone going bungee jumping, skydiving, hang gliding, or drifting. From this perspective, even though a thrill-seeking behavior might be relatively predictable, any one of those behaviors—such as crime—remains relatively unpredictable. Thus, theories of crime and criminal behavior must encompass a wide range of human activity. For this reason, some criminologists advocate limiting theories to specific criminal acts or harmful behaviors.

## WHAT IS GOOD THEORY?

Because more than one theory usually purports to explain criminality at any given time, how do we know which one is best? In fact, how can we tell what is good theory in general? The most common answer is that a good theory is one that *can be tested* and that best *fits the evidence of research* (Akers & Sellers, 2008; Blalock, 1969; Gibbs, 1972). This makes sense, because our theories are scientific and should already be based on research evidence. In fact,

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<sup>2</sup> For those who are curious, this 5% allowable error is not just a conveniently chosen percentage. It is derived from a statistical distribution called the “normal curve” and the way standard deviations occupy space under it. Two standard deviations occupy approximately 95% of the area under the curve, beginning in the middle and spreading in both high and low directions. This leaves 5% of the area at each of the two extreme ends of the curve. In nonstatistical terms, the extremes are, by definition, least likely to happen. So, usual events and behaviors can be comfortably eliminated by using this objective standard. Of course, now we have the problem of asking what makes a person “comfortable” when coming to a conclusion about something. This same statistical model can be used to produce a 1% error rate or even something much smaller like .001% error—that clearly would be even better probabilities of being incorrect in making a statement. But, remember that “probabilities” also mean that something *can* happen by error, just at the error rate mentioned. Thus, there is always the “chance” of being wrong, no matter what error rate you choose, and therefore nothing is ever proven and certain.

these criteria are derived from the natural sciences, where they are used as the standard for good theory. There is really no difference between the natural and social sciences in determining good theory. There are, however, measurement problems in the social sciences because some variables, such as social class, cannot be as accurately measured as can distance, time, or hardness and the like. Under these generally accepted criteria, if a theory is not testable or if evidence does not support it, then the theory is not a good one. While this sounds clear enough, the issue is, unfortunately, not that simple.

Suppose, for a moment, that Einstein had lived and had proposed his theory of relativity two centuries before he did. It would not have been testable at that time, nor would the theory have fit the research evidence. Obviously, his theory would not have been considered a good theory at that time. Therefore, as changes in research evidence and the ability to measure and test occur, so do the common criteria for a good theory. In other words, it sometimes takes a while before our ability to measure and produce evidence catches up with a theory. Until that time, the theory may appear to be a “bad” one because evidence will not be available to support it. This means we might discard theories that are really good ones because our measuring capabilities cannot yet adequately test them and provide the necessary support. Therefore, as our measuring capabilities and techniques change, we may need to reexamine and retest theories to see if new research evidence provides a better fit. Of one thing we can be sure, however: If there is no current way to measure something, it is unlikely to appear in a theory—regardless of how important that something might be.

Another concern with testing is the use of a single approach to measure theoretical concepts. If one uses only one measure, and that measure is not a good one or does not adequately represent the theoretical concept, the theory may be rejected (even though the theory may be valid). A similar problem arises when a theory is affirmed by a single-test approach or measure. What is being measured may generate an erroneous result, but if the measurement is done the same way time after time, the result will always be the same, thereby creating the false impression of consistently valid results. Multiple methods and measures are always better ways of testing than any single approach.

If our approach to assessing a theory is based on measuring and testing, we refer to it as quantitative validation. A different approach, one that focuses on the substance of a theory, is called qualitative validation. It is these qualitative criteria that help us resolve the problem of time-specific and measurement-specific evidence. They include such factors as *logical soundness*, *the ability to make sense out of several conflicting positions*, and even *the degree to which the theory may sensitize people to things they otherwise would not see*. While these criteria are not often mentioned, they are no less important for the utility of a theory than quantitative tests are. Most theories of criminology do not do well on the criterion of empirical testing.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, almost all these theories made sense out of things that had been puzzling people before, and they sensitized criminologists to new and important ways of looking at the phenomenon of crime. Let’s explore these qualitative criteria more closely.

*Logical soundness* means that the theory does not propose illogical relationships, and that it is internally consistent. One of the most common logic problems is that of time order, in which an event that occurs after another event is assumed to have caused the first event. For instance, if we ask marijuana users about the chance of being arrested for drug use, they will probably tell us that the probability of arrest is low. We might then think that people use marijuana because they think they have very little chance of being arrested (i.e., they are not deterred). In reality, however, a low estimate of the chance of arrest is really a reflection of the fact that they have used marijuana many times and have not been arrested. The low estimate of being arrested, then, came after the drug use and could not have caused it. In a more general example of logical soundness, if someone examined evidence that criminals in an institution for the criminally insane have

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, as the previous discussion suggests, the problem with “fitting” the research evidence may be as much with the way we test and measure as it is with the theory itself. However, we are certainly not taking the position that all criminological theories are simply ahead of their time and merely waiting for research capabilities to “catch up” to them. There are similar problems with using existing research evidence to create theory. If the existing research has systematic errors, thus producing what appears to be valid evidence, then any theory created to explain that evidence is actually explaining a phenomenon that doesn’t exist. In one sense, then, all theory is a product of what we believe to be true, using our most valid information at the time.

irrational thinking patterns and then proposed that irrational thinking causes criminal behavior, the theory would be illogical. Very few criminals are insane, and those who are placed in insane institutions are different by their very nature. Actually, if the theory were correct, the author of the theory would then be engaged in irrational thinking, and we would expect him or her to become a criminal! In another example, criminologists DeFleur and Quinney (1966) even used a special form of logic called “set theory” to analyze the logical soundness of one of the more popular theories of criminal behavior (they found that it was, indeed, internally consistent).

*The ability to make sense out of several conflicting positions* means that when evidence seems to indicate that there are two or more opposing facts, a theory that can reconcile those facts is a good one and is better than having different theories to account for each fact. Differential association theory (Chapter 5), for instance, brings together the concepts of disorganized social areas and organized interaction in small, intimate groups and makes sense out of differing crime rates among various groups of people. As another example, official crime statistics and self-report studies (asking people what they have done) suggest two different pictures of “the criminal.” Labeling theory (Chapter 8) makes sense of both forms of evidence by pointing out that official statistics give a picture only of those who have been reacted to and that self-report information gives a picture of those who are officially criminal as well as those who have not yet been caught. A noted philosopher and historian of science, Thomas Kuhn (1970), said that accepted new theories almost always make sense out of conflicting evidence that older theories cannot explain.

*Sensitizing ability* refers to focusing people’s attention on a new, or even forgotten, direction of inquiry, or perhaps suggesting a different way of looking at and interpreting a fact they already know. Sometimes we concentrate so hard on a particular direction for explaining crime that we need to be reminded that there are other directions as well. One value of a sensitizing theory is that it serves to reacquaint criminologists with other facets of the problem. Using labeling theory again to illustrate, theorists in the 1950s were so focused on lower-class, urban, male, gang delinquents that all delinquency seemed to be a product of those kids. Labeling sensitized criminology to the importance of asking who gets reacted to and how we react to them. This served to remind criminologists that certain types of people are more likely to be closely observed and arrested for their behavior. In other words, labeling theory sensitized criminologists to the fact that criminality is due as much to how we react to people as it is to their personal characteristics. Thus, there was another explanation for urban, minority, male delinquency than the strain and stress of social structure.

Finally, one other qualitative criterion for a “good” theory is worthy of discussion. This criterion is very different from the others, and it should be used with a great deal of caution. This one is *popularity*. Simply put, if a theory becomes popular with criminologists, then by definition it seems to be a “good” theory. The problem here is that popularity comes from a

### A Note for Graduate Students

The discussion of methodology preferences and the kind of evidence they produce has a parallel in the broader context of theory production and what we do in criminology. Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) concept of paradigms, as applied by the social sciences, and Alvin Gouldner’s (1970) concept of domain assumptions both suggest that scientists, just like everybody else, have belief systems they buy into with necessarily knowing they are doing so. For instance, a criminologist raised in a strict, middle-class, religious, and Caucasian family might have an underlying belief system that values hard work, deferred gratification, and “proper” child rearing. If so, our imaginary criminologist might have a tendency to gravitate toward a theory that says crime is caused by a failure to discipline children and coddling or ignoring their bad behaviors, resulting in their growing up with a self-centered mindset and a focus on self-gratification. In other words, if a theory fits into our underlying belief systems, we are much less critical of it and tend automatically to ascribe “validity” to it. This carries over to a lack

of being critical of the research on the theory and having the perception that the theory is “well-supported.” As you continue your graduate education and read through the criminological literature, the various theories, the research on them, and related pronouncements about what is “good” and “bad,” keep these comments in mind and remember that, as scientists, we all try to be objective but our underlying belief systems tend to mislead us into subjectivity. Indeed, this is precisely what much of postmodern critique is all about. Finally, take the time to read Kuhn’s work. Yes, it is “old” but you might learn that your graduate education itself is a form of paradigm, teaching you to think of things in a certain way and to devalue other perspectives. There is a bit more on these ideas later in this chapter but we thought you might benefit from an earlier discussion, particularly if you keep this in mind as you read further. By the way, make it a point to read the footnotes in this text as most of them contain nuances that were written specifically for you.



variety of factors, some of which have little to do with any of the other criteria mentioned. For instance, a theory can simply echo our gut-level feelings about the causes of crime, and we would tend to give it credence regardless of its logical soundness and empirical support. In fact, it is just this problem that we must watch for. The notion that something must be correct because it seems correct is one of the biggest mistakes that laypeople make about theories. Nevertheless, popularity must be included as one of the criteria for determining a “good” theory because many criminological theories do not meet the testability requirement very well yet were, and still are, very popular.

Good theory, then, is logically constructed, is based on the evidence at hand, and is supported by subsequent research. Empirical evidence should not be confused with personal ideology, such as religious sentiments or political leanings, or even with what some authority figure tells us. Theory development allows us to make sense out of various facts and serves to make us aware of the surrounding circumstances of the phenomenon it is attempting to explain. In making your assessment of how valid a theory seems to be, keep in mind the problems associated with each of these criteria and be flexible in making your final judgment.

## KINDS OF THEORY

One distinction needs to be made before engaging in a discussion about kinds of theories. There are two general forms of theory: unit theory and metatheory (see Wagner, 1984). By and large, this is a book about unit theories. “Unit theories” emphasize a particular problem (such as crime and delinquency) and make testable assertions about that problem. Metatheories, on the other hand, are rarely testable and are best viewed as ways of looking at and interpreting reality. In another sense, they can be seen as “theories about theories.” They discuss the kinds of concepts that should be used in unit theories, the general approach to using those concepts, and the way unit theories should be constructed. As an example, a criminological metatheory might specify that explanations of criminal behavior should emphasize social concepts rather than psychological and biological ones, and that social class should be used as the dominant variable. Furthermore, our metatheoretical example might specify that official statistics should be used as appropriate evidence for unit theories and that “good” unit theories should be developed in a propositional format. While there is an occasional discussion about metatheory in contemporary criminology, when the word “theory” is used, in most cases a unit theory is meant. Therefore, we drop the term “unit” and simply use “theory.” Any reference to a metatheory will use the full term.

There are different varieties of theory, but there is no single, accepted scheme that describes the kinds of theory. As if the problem of understanding the various theories were not difficult enough, attempts by various writers to group them by some simple differences have, ironically, made matters worse by making those differences appear to be the most important characteristics of the theories. Nevertheless, categorizing and classifying theories is a necessary endeavor.

Because theories are complex and because the threads from which they are woven are not always self-evident, theories can be classified in many ways. Students of criminology will read one textbook and think that they know the theories pretty well; then they look at another textbook, find theories classified differently, and end up confused. In fact, almost every criminology textbook offers a somewhat different twist to classifying theories. Most use a system of three basic types of theories: biological, psychological, and social (although they devote most of their coverage to social perspectives). Within the discussion of sociological theories, there is a tendency to divide perspectives into social process and social structural approaches (Adler, Mueller, & Laufer, 2009; Reid, 2011; Tibbetts, 2014; Vito & Maahs, 2011). Other common schemes include the use of various forms of sociological and social-psychological categories or a variety of broad approaches with numerous subcategories (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 2010). With all these different approaches, students may begin to feel that their instructor does not know the subject unless he or she uses a classification scheme that matches their textbook. Clearly, the classification of theories has done as much as anything to muddy the theoretical waters for beginning students. It has also been a problem for some of the more experienced criminologists.

Since these classifications exist, however, they must be dealt with. It should be noted that no classification is *real*, because the world does not exist in black and white. There are many factors to consider, and the result is a forcing of theories into one category or the other when they might not fit any category very well. The end result is almost always an artificial scheme of

classification (Williams, 1984, 2015). In addition, by “changing” the classification of theories, a theory may be viewed in a way its author never intended. Regardless, and even though it may sound strange to say so, such diversity is probably good. The reason for categorizing theories is to establish similarities and differences among them. If many different categorizations are being used, it means that the theories are rich enough to defy simple classification and therefore they contain many valuable nuances, concepts, and ideas.

We discuss three different methods for categorizing theories. Hopefully, they will assist those new to criminology in understanding the relationships and connections among the various theories. At the same time, a warning is in order: treat each classification scheme as nothing more than an attempt to highlight similarities and differences. These schemes are not to be used as the last word in grouping, or establishing types of, theories.

## Levels of Abstraction

As we have already noted, some theories are more abstract than others. The most abstract can be called macrotheories. Macrotheories are broad in their scope and perhaps are best characterized as those that *explain social structure and its effects*. They paint a picture of the way the world works, fit the structure of society into that picture, and suggest how crime is related to that structure. Macrotheories focus on rates of crime (called “epidemiology”) rather than on criminals and their behavior. Macrotheories are simply not interested in individual behavior. Examples of macrotheory are anomie and conflict theories.

Other, more concrete theories can be referred to as microtheories. These theories are based on the assumption that a particular way of characterizing society is best; that characterization is then used directly to *explain how people become criminals* (called “etiology”). The focus may be on specific groups of people (but usually *small* groups) or on the individual. Likewise, microtheories may range from purely social to purely psychological to purely biological. In any case, they tell us how people become criminal. Microtheories are not interested in social structure and crime rates. Examples of microtheory are social control and social learning theories.

Finally, as is the case with any classification scheme, there are theories that do not fit neatly into either of the two categories and are “in-between.” We will call these bridging theories. These theories attempt to tell us both *how social structure comes about* and *how people become criminal*. In fact, bridging theories are often both epidemiological (explaining differing rates of crime) and etiological (explaining criminal behavior itself). Examples of bridging theory are subculture theory and differential opportunity theory. Depending on the way in which they are viewed, or the direction of emphasis a writer finds in the theory, bridging theories can be classified as either macrotheories or microtheories. Doing so establishes one focus of the theory as more dominant than the other but, because it is not the author of the theory who is specifying the dominant focus, be aware that the emphasis on a focus may be because of a vested interest of the person doing the classification.

## Levels of Explanation

These three general forms of theories can be further examined on the basis of their explanatory focus. What, for instance, is a theory attempting to explain: social structure in general, classes of people in society, small groups, or individual criminality? This problem is referred to as the level of explanation of a theory, or what the theory attempts to explain. Most theories cannot be directly compared with each other because they do not focus directly on the same subject.

Theories are often said to compete with each other in best accounting for crime and criminals. It should make sense that, in most instances, this is really not the case. Some theories explain how social events give rise to crime in society but do not attempt to explain how particular individuals become criminals; others do the opposite. Some explain the social factors important in creating criminality, others explain the psychological factors, and still others the internal biological factors. Further, some theories attempt to account for *crime* as a social phenomenon or a legal phenomenon, while many focus directly on *criminals* and their behavior. Obviously, these various theories are not in competition because they apply to different levels of the crime-and-criminals problem.

Unfortunately, criminology has done little thus far to integrate these various explanatory levels (but Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985, and Pearson & Weiner, 1985, have tried). And,

except for Williams's (1999) critical incident metatheory, there is no metatheory that puts them all together in a coherent fashion. The problem of which level a theory explains has not yet been generally recognized in criminology, even though James Short (1985) commented on the issue over 30 years ago. For those beginning the study of criminological theory, however, the idea of levels of explanation is crucial because it helps to make sense out of the differences among theories. A good understanding of the area each theory deals with will help you grasp what the theorists were writing about.

### Other Common Classification Schemes

The more popular classification schemes usually have two mutually exclusive categories, or dichotomies. One of the oldest of the classification schemes is to separate theories into "classical" and "positive." The names come from two schools of thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and the subject of Chapters 2 and 3). Classical theories focus on legal statutes, governmental structures, and the rights of humans. A classical orientation to a theory suggests that the theory is less concerned about traditional scientific notions of testability and more concerned about the essence of the human condition. Positivist theories focus on pathology in criminal behavior, on treatment, and on the correction of criminality within individuals. Positivism also derives from the use of the scientific method to study phenomena. In that sense, most of today's theories are positivist ones.

Another common scheme is to separate theories into those of structure and those of process. Structural theories are those that focus on the way society is organized and its effect on behavior. Some of these are also referred to as *strain theories* (a term popularized by Travis Hirschi, 1969, and Ruth Kornhauser, 1978) because of their assumption that a disorganized society creates strain that leads to deviant behavior. Not all strain theories are structural theories though; for example, Robert Agnew (1985, 2005) has created a strain theory that is clearly focused on the process of developing delinquency. Process theories attempt to explain how people become criminal or delinquent. While it is sometimes difficult to classify theories in this scheme, the major orientation is on the starting point of the theory. As a rule, a structural theory does not emphasize the individual criminal and a processual theory does not emphasize social structure. These two forms correspond closely to the macrotheories and microtheories we have already discussed.

The final major classification approach is that of consensus and conflict, once even referred to as the "old" and the "new" criminology (Gibbs, 1966). Consensus theories are those based on the assumption that there is agreement among people in a society. At the least, they assume that members of a society hold common values. You could point to the fact that most people believe we need traffic laws as evidence of consensus in our society. Also, surveys asking respondents to rank the seriousness of various crimes often find tremendous consensus about what people believe the most serious crimes are. Conflict theories, on the other hand, are based on the assumption that disagreement is common and people hold conflicting values. Laws that seem to benefit only small groups of elites or powerful business owners are often pointed to as evidence of a conflict orientation. As we will see, most conflict theories emphasize the differences that are found among social classes in our country. Since any society may have agreement and conflict at the same time, the crux is not whether agreement exists but whether it *originally* existed. A conflict theorist may discuss a society in agreement (Marx's false consciousness), or a consensus theorist may explain how conflict exists (Cohen's delinquent subculture). Thus, this scheme is somewhat like the chicken-and-egg controversy: one simply believes that either conflict or consensus is more natural to society and asserts that humans are naturally oriented toward one or the other.

### SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THEORY

The final approach to understanding theory lies in an examination of social history. Writers commonly discuss theories in the abstract, especially in introductory textbooks. Because they do, it may seem that the theorist sits in isolation, inventing and creating his or her new theory. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just as there are people who have helped mold your thoughts and views of the world, so there are for the theorist. Indeed, it should be clear that any important

influence in your life will leave its mark on the way you perceive the world. Your college courses, for instance, are designed to do exactly that. Your parents also provided important attitudes and viewpoints for you. Moreover, just as you respond to the latest fads and social events, so does the theorist. In short, those who create theories are probably as susceptible as you are to influences in their lives. Criminological theorists are practicing social scientists and may be even more sensitive to social movements and trends than most of us. As a result, no theory can really be understood and appreciated without an awareness of the context within which it was created.

Further, each theorist makes certain assumptions about the way the world really is, the nature of humans, and the value of particular concepts (an unspoken metatheory). Gouldner (1970) argued that these assumptions so severely affect the direction of theorizing that entire areas of evidence and thought can be ignored. For this reason, the effect of assumptions can be seen as similar to blinders on a horse: You can see only what is right in front of you, everything else might as well not exist. If a theorist's assumptions were spelled out, this might not represent a major problem because you could see what was included and what was omitted. Unfortunately, assumptions are not always obvious, and even the theorist may not be aware of them. Therefore, to better understand any theory, we must find ways to determine what the assumptions of that theory are. One of the best ways of doing this is to examine the context within which the theory was created.

Context has two major forms, social and intellectual. Both are handy terms for identifying areas of influence on an individual. Social context refers to the world about us: the ways people in a society are thinking, the things they are doing, the events taking place, the fads and fashions that are popular, and even the way society is structured. For example, right after World War II, it would have been difficult for people in the United States to criticize either the nation or the government; there was a general feeling of satisfaction with ourselves and a relative agreement about how good our values were. During the early 1970s, the opposite was common; people were uncertain about government, their lives, and their values. In both times, a theorist would have been affected by the events of the time and written into the theory some of the contemporary ideas (Williams, 1981). Since 1980, social conservatism has become more popular and you might expect recent theories to be influenced by that perspective.

The second form of context, the intellectual, refers to the personal influence of teachers, friends, family, and colleagues. Sometimes that influence extends to people whom the theorist has never even met; but the theorist has read their work and has been impressed with what they had to say. For this reason, many people have been said to follow in the footsteps of their teachers. The major criminological theorists have undeniably done some "footstep following," but at the same time, their theories are popular at least in part because these theorists were also creative.

Now it is time for a statement that may surprise you. The comments above about social and intellectual context are actually part of a metatheory we developed when outlining the first edition of this book. That metatheory says the way people (theorists) respond to information has to be viewed through the lens of what they believe. Their beliefs are colored by their intellectual and social context. Even how they view evidence and, in particular, how they characterize evidence as good evidence is a product of this context. Thus, you may find theorists looking at the same evidence and perceiving its meaning in multiple ways. Acceptance of theory is governed in a similar fashion. As a result, this book discusses theories in a chronological order primarily because of a need to set each theory into its social context as a mechanism for understanding it. You will find it difficult to understand a theory, and its policy implications, unless you also have an appreciation of the times and major social movements. With this in hand, you can imagine the forces producing the theory and the reception it received from those at the time. If you try to understand a theory using today's perspectives, you will misunderstand it.

## **THEORY, RESEARCH, AND POLICY**

Theory is the logical starting point for any examination of potential strategies for improving the criminal justice system. With our theory, we can develop experiments or research protocols that allow us to test the ideas to see if any are promising or worthwhile. Carefully constructed research studies that are based on rigorous scientific principles will give us insight into the areas of a theory that may need to be clarified and revised. Once we have identified some of the significant theoretical concepts that have been supported by research evidence, and these studies have been