

Theoretical Developments in Criminology

by Charles R. Tittle

Twentieth-century theoretical developments in four categories are reviewed: theories of individual differences in offending, theories of variation in offending through the lifecycle, theories of diversity of crime rates among social entities, and theories of differences among social situations in criminal outcomes. The essay notes temporal changes and shows integrative trends and cross-fertilization. It concludes that criminological theorists have made large strides, particularly in the past two decades, and as a result are now able to broadly outline the causes of crime-relevant phenomena. However, much work remains, particularly in more effectively articulating theories for precise explanations and predictions. Favorable trends suggesting continued improvement are identified.

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One reason for studying crime-relevant phenomena is to answer questions of “why?” and “how?” about them. Providing those answers is the job of theory. This essay traces theoretical developments in this century, particularly the last few decades. Two points are emphasized: First, theories have become increasingly sophisticated, mainly by merging insights from preexisting formulations; second, still more development is needed. Four categories, demarcated by the main phenomena the theories are trying to explain, are discussed:

- Differences in criminal behavior among individuals.
- Differences in crime at different times in the lifecycle.
- Differences in crime rates among societies, cities, communities, neighborhoods, or other sociopolitical units.
- Differences among social situations in criminal outcomes.

Some theories explain two or more categories simultaneously, but they are discussed within the categories reflecting their main focuses. Theories explaining how and why some acts are illegal, why there is differential enforcement of law, why there are differences in offending between males and females, and theories about numerous other phenomena are not discussed. Although such theories are important, this review is necessarily selective, not only in the categories addressed but also in the specific theories noted within each category. It would be impractical to try to describe all the theories in criminology. I review the main efforts to explain variations in crime-relevant phenomena, taking for granted the definitions of crime in any given society.

Any intellectual account can be regarded as a theory. However, efforts range from simple one-statement principles focused on specific events or phenomena to elaborate, intricately interwoven explanatory systems applying to wide ranges of different phenomena. Furthermore, the adequacy of theories can be evaluated in many ways. Some regard a good theory as one that can be mathematically expressed; others think of good theories as those that provoke challenge and criticism. Some evaluate theories by the number of predictions that can be made from them; others believe that identification of an important variable or demarcation of some aspects of things to be explained represents good theory. And still others assess theories according to principles of “integration.” How one evaluates theories influences whether the theoretical enterprise is judged as more or less adequate. Since the criteria are somewhat arbitrary, there are great disagreements about which theories are the best or the most important. This essay only notes temporal changes, shows integrative trends,

and suggests that further improvements could be accomplished by incorporating more elements from competing theories.

Theories To Explain Differences in Offending Among Individuals

The most intense theoretical efforts have focused on individual variations. Those theories can be classified by their dominant themes, although few theories can be regarded as completely limited to the theme they emphasize. The various themes appear to reflect prevailing modes of thought in academe and the larger society at the time the theories featuring them were first enunciated. Yet articulations have evolved beyond the intellectual contexts out of which the themes emerged, and some theories within each of the themes now incorporate elements from other themes.

Criminal behavior has been attributed to personal defects—either physical or psychic. Deficiencies have been traced to genetic inheritance, to such damaging influences as premature birth or environmental poisoning, and to life experiences that distort psychic or social development.

The themes of individual-level theories

Six major themes in theories of individual differences in criminal behavior have emerged:

- Personal defects.
- Learning.
- Strain/deprivation.
- Identity.
- Rational choice.
- Control/integration.

Each promotes a fundamental idea, or causal process, that is plausible and empirically viable, at least given the limited bounds within which it has been tested. And each of the themes has shown steady evolution and improvement.

Personal defects

The earliest theme was dominant until the late 1930s. Beginning with Lombroso (1878), but also encompassing psychoanalysis (for example, Abrahamsen 1944; Aichhorn [1925] 1968) and other psychological arguments (for example, Eysenck and Gudjonsson 1989; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985), criminal behavior has been attributed to personal defects—either physical or psychic. Deficiencies have been traced to genetic inheritance (for example, Mednick and Kandel 1988; Raine 1993), to such damaging influences as premature birth or environmental poisoning (for example, Kandel and Mednick 1991; Moffitt 1990), and to life experiences that distort psychic or social development (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, and Finkelhor 1993; Smith and Thornberry 1995; Widom 1989; but see Zingraff et al. 1993).

Although this theme has faded in prominence, it has remained alive, particularly among psychologists, and recently has regained some of its earlier influence. Most criminologists now recognize that personal defects are important, though most assume that deficiencies, rather than being primary causes, interact in some way with influences identified in other explanatory themes (Cullen et al. 1997). Articulations, however, have not yet incorporated the full range of such interactions. Scholars have isolated one or another deficit that sometimes comes into play for some offenses or some offenders (for example, Caspi et al. 1994; Moffitt, Lynam, and Silva 1994). Yet there is no coherent synthesis of forces underlying such factors.

Modern theories featuring personal defects usually contend that pathology alone is not enough to produce crime, and they attempt to spell out how personal defects come about and get translated into criminal outcomes, often incorporating insights from a variety of other themes. These features can be seen most clearly in Moffitt's (1993) two-path theory.

The theory identifies two causal paths to misbehavior. One characterizes the "lifecourse persistent" offender, who is already antisocial at an early age and continues so throughout life. The second is exemplified by the "adolescence limited" offender, who does not start offending until mid- or late adolescence, and typically stops in early adulthood. Careers of the two types of offenders, therefore, differ greatly.

Moffitt proposes distinct, but linked, explanations for each pattern. The various neuropsychological deficits of the persistent offender, many present at birth, hamper development. These children are so difficult to manage that their parents are frequently unable to cope. A behaviorally difficult child with an overwhelmed or deficient parent often ends up poorly socialized (Nagin and

Paternoster 1994; Simons et al. 1998). With inadequate skills and weak self-control, the child has additional difficulty in school. Hence, those with early behavior problems fail to acquire personal and social capital that might help them adjust conventionally later in life. As a result, problem children, who make up a relatively small proportion of any birth cohort, grow into rebellious teenagers, eventually becoming deviant, antisocial adults.

The much more prevalent adolescence-limited offenders usually exhibit few early conduct problems, and so are effectively socialized. When these generally “normal” youths enter adolescence, however, they begin to suffer a maturity gap because the adult roles they wish to occupy are inconsistent with their adolescent status. At the same time, they come into greater contact with, and are inspired to imitate, the lifecourse-persistent offenders. The maturity gap and consequent desire to act adultlike motivates the adolescence-limited offender to mimic the misbehavior of lifecourse-persistent offenders who are behaving rebelliously.

Since persistent offenders are already illegitimately enjoying the rewards of maturity, such as recreational drugs, sex, and autonomy, they “assume social influence over youths who admire and emulate them during adolescence” (Moffitt 1993, 687). Consequently, a majority of youths try deviance (sometimes involving crime) that allows them symbolically to claim maturity. Eventually, the experimenters realize that the costs of adolescent deviance can be high, and they also begin to acquire adult statuses that legitimately provide the rewards of maturity acquired only illegitimately while they were adolescents. For most of them, misbehavior then ceases.

As a culmination of personal defect theorizing, Moffitt’s formulation goes much further than most previous efforts. She ties personal defects to other processes, drawing on notions about learning and social control as well as on cultural patterns of age change. Her theory does not, however, pull in as many potential causal factors as it might. The theory could probably be made even more effective by incorporating causal processes from theories of strain and identity, for example, and it might explain how the processes she identifies are conditioned by community and situational circumstances.

Learning

Explaining crime as a product of learning emerged to counter simplistic statements about personal defects that dominated thinking in the early part of this century. Since then, numerous thinkers (for example, Akers 1985; Conger and Simons 1997) have accounted for criminal behavior as an expression of internalized criminogenic values, attitudes, skills, and normative standards. Some

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theorize that learning results from conditioning, or reinforcement, and others see it stemming from repetitive instruction or from imitation, often of cultural elements to which an individual is more or less exclusively exposed. There are also notions about what, among the things people might learn, is most relevant to criminal behavior. Some focus heavily on criminogenic messages, particularly observation of criminal behavior (Sutherland 1924; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985); others emphasize cultural standards that predispose people to act criminally under specific conditions (for example, Miller 1958; Anderson 1999; Luckenbill and Doyle 1989); a few identify linguistic or other mechanisms that come into play to help produce criminal outcomes under various condi-

tions (Sykes and Matza 1957; Matza 1964); and still others emphasize the extent to which personal traits that predispose one to crime, such as weak self-control or aggressiveness, are learned (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Furthermore, some learning arguments give priority to everyday interpersonal, family, neighborhood, or school influences (Akers 1985; Anderson 1999; Andrews and Bonta 1994; Bandura 1977; Conger and Simons 1997); others emphasize subcultural contexts (Miller 1958; Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967); and a few focus on large-scale cultural milieux (Gastil 1971; Hagan et al. 1998; Matza and Sykes 1964). Finally, arguments differ in their attention to conditions, such as opportunity and social expectations, that might activate behaviors consistent with learned traits.

No single learning formulation pulls together the various strands noted above. In fact, most theories based on learning principles focus mainly on how learning occurs, neglecting the conditions that provide inputs to the learning process as well as those that activate learned responses. Despite this, there has probably been more continuity in the learning theme than any other theme. This continuity has unfolded mainly around a central causal process of reinforcement/conditioning.

Several lines of theory—utilitarian/deterrence, behavioral psychological accounts, rational choice, and social learning—share the basic premise that people are always striving to maximize benefits and rewards, while minimizing costs or problems. In learning theories, however, when an action produces more reward than cost, it is repeated and is thereby said to have been reinforced. Through repetition and continuous reinforcement, patterns of behaviors become fixed and predictable. And sometimes when reinforcements are paired with verbal or other kinds of stimuli, certain attitudes, skills, and values are also learned so that they then activate the behaviors connected with them. Such theories

suggest that to explain and predict criminal behavior, one has only to understand the pattern and extent of reinforcement to which a person has been exposed. But understanding reinforcement histories requires knowing the things that gratify or cause pain for an individual in various contexts.

Various scholars have added to this general formulation. Sutherland (1924) did not use principles of reinforcement, but Burgess and Akers (1966) showed that his scheme could be expressed that way. Glaser (1978, 126), tried to show why various things have reinforcement value, concluding that “anticipations” about criminal behavior are determined by some combination of a person’s social bonds, differential learning, and perceived opportunities. Still later, Akers (1985) brought modeling and vicarious reinforcement (see Bandura 1969, 1977) into the criminal learning scheme. Wilson and Herrnstein (1985) noted that learning may be linked to genetically determined factors or to biological processes. They contend that personality traits, such as impulsivity, cause some people to discount potential negative consequences. Moreover, the reinforcement values of different acts and reactions may depend on concepts of equity and justice as well as on the actual distribution of rewards and costs within a given social environment. Finally, they recognize that a reinforcer may be powerful or weak, depending on how many other reinforcers are at work.

Still more conditions were added by Pearson and Weiner (1985), who identified elements in the deviance process and showed how each element connected with reinforcement/conditioning. In addition, they theorized that social structure determines the production and distribution of many of the components incorporated in the reinforcement/learning scheme. Since individual factors influence how structural variables are interpreted, Pearson and Weiner depict actual behavior as a complicated interaction between individual and structural conditions playing on various elements in the deviance process. Yet, they do not articulate how these elements mesh to produce specific outcomes under particular conditions.

Conger and Simons (1997) recently used the “matching principle” to show how learning can account for time spent in various contexts and how counter-reinforcement can overcome negative inputs, all in response to different contingencies associated with different stages in the lifecycle.

The general plausibility of the conditioning/reinforcement argument has been empirically established (including Akers 1985; Bandura 1969), and it stands as a clear example of development. It spells out how learning occurs, and it links external conditions, some structural and some situational, to internal outcomes—which, in turn, are reflected in behavioral responses. Developments have been exceptionally integrative because reinforcement can stem from many sources, and the theory potentially explains all criminal (and other) behavior by

channeling causal forces through the learning filter. Despite this, theorists have not incorporated as many additional elements as they could. Personal defects that might inhibit learning are conspicuously scarce, as are notions about strain and social control, which may sometimes enhance learning and sometimes inhibit it, and about community disorganization, which could produce ineffective teaching. Moreover, learning theory now consists of a plethora of segments emphasized by different scholars. Fitting all of the pieces together into a full, coherent statement remains to be done.

The integrative trend of learning theories is reflected in adoption of their principles by theorists not directly concerned with learning. Whether encompassed in the reinforcement formulation or not, learning has found its way into most attempts to build theory. For example, even Merton's (1938, 1957) anomie formulation, which emphasizes strain stemming from societal-level disjunctures between culturally encouraged goals and available means to achieve those goals, presupposes that people learn cultural expectations for success and that their specific adaptations to discrepancies between goals and means are, to some extent, influenced by what they have learned.

Strain/deprivation

The strain/deprivation theme is very old (Bonger 1916), but it attained particular prominence during the 1940s and 1950s and has recently gained renewed vigor with reformulation and expansion (Adler and Laufer 1995; Agnew 1992, 1999; Messner and Rosenfeld 1997). Applied to individuals, it concerns the effect of troublesome, depriving, or straining events or circumstances. When problems such as social failure, loss of positively valued things, abuse, or extreme poverty (Agnew 1992, 1999; Merton 1938, 1957) fall on individuals, theoretically they seek relief or boil with rage (for example, Baron and Hartnagel 1997; Bernard 1990). Criminal behavior is one vehicle for relieving such distress or for venting the emotion associated with it.

Theorists have identified conditions that potentially produce strain for various people, as well as the most important contexts for strain production, and they have explained when and why strain or deprivation leads to crime. Focuses include strain and emotional deprivation in interpersonal relations (Broidy and Agnew 1997; Matsueda and Heimer 1997); stress produced by cultural and social expectations (Greenberg 1981a, 1981b; Merton 1938, 1957); strain from failure or loss (Agnew 1992); strain stemming from control and regulation (Brehm and Brehm 1981; Tittle 1995); and strain from material, social, or psychological deprivation (Bernard 1990; Kovandic, Vieraitis, and Yeisley 1998). Furthermore, some see immediate contexts as primary (Cohen 1955), while others focus on larger milieux (Merton 1938, 1957); Messner and Rosenfeld [1994] 1997; Short forthcoming).

Theorists have not made it clear whether strain predisposes one to criminal behavior that must be brought forth by peculiar activators or whether it directly generates illegal conduct. Moreover, strain hypotheses have mixed empirical support (see Agnew 1997; Clinard 1964; Fowles and Merva 1996). An association between some kinds of deprivation and crime appears to be well established (Hagan 1997; Short 1997), however, and partly because of that, this theme has been especially popular among activists. Critical, radical, feminist, and humanistic thinkers have identified many conditions that are regarded as unjust, depriving, and productive of criminal behavior. They include capitalism, unequal distributions of wealth, absolute poverty, patriarchy, hierarchies of power, racism, sexism, parental neglect or abuse, unemployment, and absence of love. Theories, however, have not fully shown how, why, and under what conditions those depriving conditions cause or contribute to crime.

The most complete and best articulated strain/deprivation theory is that formulated by Agnew (1992, 1997, 1999). He expands previous thinking, first by identifying numerous sources of strain. In addition to the structural inconsistencies discussed by Merton (1938, 1957), strain-generating conditions include negative relations with others. These negative relations may arise when one person has blocked another person's goals, has endangered things that are valued, or is responsible for stimuli that are noxious to the individual. Strain can also result from unpleasant physical conditions, personal or environmental. All of these different kinds of strain can stimulate negative emotions, such as anger, depression, or anxiety, that then must be managed in either conventional or deviant ways.

Agnew's account assumes that strained individuals want to alleviate the strain or transcend the emotions it causes. Criminal behavior may do that, but it is not the only option. Of three ways to cope—cognitive, emotional, and behavioral—only the last one involves the possibility of crime. In cognitive coping, the person mentally adjusts to reinterpret the straining inputs. In emotional coping, the person relieves the discomfort stemming from the strain or the feelings it produces. In behavioral coping, one actually tries to get rid of the straining element or tries to adapt to it. Almost everybody, most of the time, copes with strain or negative emotion by noncriminal means. Under some conditions, however, coping takes the form of criminal behavior.

General strain theory attempts to identify the conditions that can lead from strain to crime. One such category involves aspects of the strain itself: its magnitude, how recently it began, how long it has lasted, and the extent to which different straining stimuli converge. But the theory also emphasizes accumulation of unresolved strains, as well as the relative balance of positive and negative factors in one's life.

Conditions affecting the kind of coping employed by a strained person help determine criminal or noncriminal outcomes. Styles of coping reflect personality, learning history, and other characteristics of individuals, as well as the kind of social support available. The specific form that coping takes in particular circumstances depends partly on how constrained or costly deviant coping is and partly on the cultural or social encouragements for deviant coping, particularly from peers.

Because so many things can affect strain, the theory has been extraordinarily integrative. Moreover, the strain theme is woven into many theories not directly focused on strain, though it is less pervasive than the learning theme. For example, theories about personal defects often suggest that individual deficiencies come into play mainly under stressful circumstances (Raine 1993). Labeling arguments portray crises of self as stimuli for identity change (Gove 1980; Payne 1973). And even learning theories—especially subcultural ones (Cohen 1955; Miller 1958)—often see behavioral responses, which eventually come to be shared and passed on to those in similar circumstances, as reactions to strain. Since strain theories overlap with other theories, it is reasonable to imagine that all would benefit from explicit integration.

Identity

A fourth motif in explaining individual differences in crime concerns formation, maintenance, and change in personal identities. Though rooted in symbolic interactionism, which emerged much earlier, this theme was particularly prominent in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly because of the popularity of “labeling” (see Gove 1980). That theory actually consists of two parts, one concerning rule enforcement and the other concerning reactions to having been the object of social control efforts. Perhaps labeling theory is best known for suggesting that deviance is problematic and negotiable and for its contention, shared with conflict theory, that those lacking power and resources are more likely to be officially processed and stigmatized. Nevertheless, it stimulated much thinking about the consequences for individuals of having been legally processed, and one of those consequences bears on identities. Later, as unfavorable responses accumulated (for example, Gibbs 1966; Wellford 1975), labeling theory declined in influence, along with the identity theme in general. Nevertheless, interest in a self-deviance linkage continues (Jang and Thornberry 1998; Matsueda 1992; Paternoster and Iovanni 1989), and although labeling is still the best known version of the identity theme, modern formulations of that theme are more intricate and sophisticated (Matsueda 1992).

All such theories explain criminal behavior as a consequence of the search for meaningful self-concepts. Crime sometimes reflects poor self-esteem, and sometimes it is a maneuver to overcome negative self-attitudes (for example, Kaplan 1975, 1980; Rosenberg and Rosenberg 1978). In addition, criminal behavior has been interpreted as a way to claim and sustain a prestigious identity (Katz 1988), or as an adaptation to a stigmatized identity (Becker 1963; Lofland 1969). Yet, the self is portrayed as dependent on reactions and appraisals from others, and workable self-concepts are said to be crucial for psychological well-being. Therefore, developing and sustaining self-concepts are key motivators of behavior, including crime.

Theories of self contend that crime is useful to the perpetrator, not because of the direct products of crime, but because it potentially enhances self-esteem or confirms self-concepts.

Recent articulations represent the culmination of a long trend toward improvement of theories emphasizing identity (Heimer and Matsueda 1994; Kaplan 1995; Matsueda and Heimer 1997). The various elements of the identity theme are probably most completely brought together in Kaplan's (1980, 1995) description of self-derogation. According to his account, humans are compelled to maximize positive self-attitudes and avoid negative ones. The theory outlines the main influences on the direction and magnitude of personal evaluations as well as the prior conditions that affect them. When these influences produce negative self-evaluations, people's commitment to the normative system in which they are embedded weakens, and they become motivated to violate its norms. Criminal urges, therefore, come from a combination of absence, or weakening, of desire to conform to the norms of an aversive social context and of openness to possibilities that might improve the person's self-esteem.

Some misbehavior—like interpersonal contentiousness, which is not necessarily criminal—permits a self-derogating individual to elude people and circumstances that could reinforce any negative self-feelings (*avoidance*). Criminal acts such as violence, vandalism, or theft represent direct *attacks* on the sources of negative inputs and permit the self-derogator to express contempt for, and rejection of, the networks of norms that helped produce bad self-feelings. Finally, some forms of delinquency, such as gang fighting or drug dealing, reflect involvement with those whose norms contradict the ones that helped produce the person's negative self-attitudes, and those delinquent behaviors stem from efforts to find alternative networks with a greater likelihood of providing self-enhancing feedback. Some network *substitutions* involve new contexts that are inherently criminal, such as revolutionary groups, while others

produce criminal behavior indirectly, as the individual tries out various methods for pleasing the substitute group.

Theories of self contend that crime is useful to the perpetrator, not because of the direct products of crime, but because it potentially enhances self-esteem or confirms self-concepts. However, when a person tries to improve self-images through crime, such attempts may not work at all or may backfire. If specific criminal acts bring about the desired effects, an individual will probably continue them. If, on the other hand, specific misdeeds fail to solve the person's problems, other misbehavior is likely to follow.

Kaplan notes that whether misbehavior helps solve problems of self-attitude depends on a number of conditions, including the severity and certainty of punishment (which can exacerbate the situation), the nature of the criminal act itself (some criminal acts may make one lose still more self-esteem and may change how others react), and various characteristics of the person (such as accurate perception and moral considerations).

The self theme has strong intuitive appeal to many criminologists. Moreover, it enjoys some empirical support even though there is contrary evidence (for example, Jang and Thornberry 1998; Kaplan 1978; Heimer and Matsueda 1994; Rosenberg, Schooler, and Schoenbach 1989; Wells and Rankin 1983). In its fullest articulation, self-theory can potentially explain almost any kind of crime, delinquency, or deviance. In addition, although the theories emphasize deviant motivation, they accommodate a number of causal forces. Nevertheless, a number of central issues remain that could be addressed if self theories were more accommodating of other theoretical processes, such as general strain, learning, and social control. Why and how the search for identity turns toward self-definitions that result in criminal behavior is still not clear, the situational forces that activate deviant behaviors remain incompletely developed, and the convergence of self-phenomena with other variables, such as fear of sanction, deviant opportunities, or moral feelings, could be specified more completely by borrowing from other theories.

Rational choice

A fifth major theme in accounting for individual differences is as old as criminology (Beccaria [1764] 1963, Bentham [1780] 1948). The rational choice idea—that people weigh potential benefits against possible costs and decide rationally whether to commit crimes—was in disrepute among criminologists for the better part of this century. But beginning with a surge in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Andenaes 1974; Becker 1968; Chambliss 1967; Zimring and

Hawkins 1973), theorizing about rational decisions and criminal behavior has continued at a consistent pace (for example, Cornish and Clarke 1986; Geerken and Gove 1975; Grasmick and Bursik 1990; Stafford and Warr 1993). In addition, the basic notion of cost-benefit assessment has been incorporated into many accounts centering on the other themes discussed in this essay. For example, Kaplan's (1980) self-derogation theory specifies that the chances of being caught and punished affect whether crime is a viable option for those seeking to improve their self-esteem, and Agnew's (1992) general strain scheme identifies legal jeopardy as one contingency that affects the direction that solutions to the problem of strain take.

Despite much theorizing, the ubiquity of rational choice ideas, and a lot of empirical work (with mixed results) (including Bailey 1998; Foglia 1997; Weisburd and Chayet 1995), this theme has not yet spawned a definitive summary theory. It is presently expressed as a loose collection of principles expanding on three basic propositions sometimes referred to as the "deterrence doctrine" (Gibbs 1975). That doctrine assumes that people strive to maximize their pleasure (benefits, rewards) and minimize their pain (costs, disadvantages), so the probability of criminal behavior varies with the extent to which its benefits exceed the costs. In simple form, the scheme portrays humans like automatons with calculators in their heads. They constantly assess the costs and benefits of various potential actions, choosing those that register the greatest excess benefit and avoiding those that show more cost than benefit.

Traditionally, three contingencies for this process were identified: certainty (the probability of cost or reward), severity (the magnitude of potential cost), and celerity (the swiftness with which costs will accrue). Since most scholars have concentrated on cost, assuming the potential benefit to be a constant from person to person and situation to situation, "vulgar" deterrent thinking sees crime as an additive function of the certainty, severity, and celerity of punishment. Contemporary accounts, however, portray the process less cleanly (for example, Johnson and Payne 1986; Lattimore and Witte 1986; Tallman and Gray 1990), identifying four broad categories of variables that intrude into the basic rational choice process and influence evaluation and response to negative consequences:

- Characteristics of potential outcomes.
- Variations in psychic organization of individuals.
- Individual attributes.
- Situational variations.

The most obvious influences have to do with the nature of bad consequences. In addition to certainty, severity, and celerity—which some now think must be considered interactively rather than additively—outcome characteristics are presumably affected mainly or exclusively by subjective, rather than objective, evaluation. Furthermore, the source of the bad consequences is crucial—whether from people about whom a potential offender cares or from formal, impersonal authorities. Finally, consequences have different effects, according to the sequences and types of consequences. Rewards or costs, for example, may have cumulative effects or may lose effectiveness due to saturation.

Psychic organization concerns differences in what individuals interpret as rewards or costs, as well as variations in perceptual abilities and modes of information processing. Some experience as rewarding those reactions that are intended to be punishing, and people differ in how accurately they perceive the likelihood of various consequences. Furthermore, people may make irrational choices because of faulty information, because they lack the ability to manipulate probabilities correctly, or because they overvalue recent or personally poignant inputs (Cherniak 1986; Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982; but see Koehler 1996).

Contemporary thinkers also note that the likelihood of rational choosing varies by individual attributes, such as personality, moral commitments, and various demographic traits (Grasmick and Bursik 1990; Tittle 1980; Zimring and Hawkins 1973). Impulsivity, risk taking, and intelligence all affect the process, and theoretically there are differences in moral feelings that make some things more costly and less rewarding. In addition, individuals differ in their emotional commitments to certain behaviors (Chambliss 1967). There are also reasons to expect gender differences in assessment of costs and benefits, as well as variations by age, with youths perhaps being less sensitive to cost and more sensitive to reward. Finally, these theories point toward disparity in deterrence among cultural groupings around race, ethnicity, region, religion, and marital or family status. In general, those with more social responsibilities presumably anticipate more potential cost from criminal behavior, while the deprived presumably fear costs less and appreciate the potential rewards more.

Situational contingencies—such as the type of crime, shared perceptions, opportunity, the influence of role models and audiences, and social bonding—are theorized to affect the decisionmaking process. Some behavior, like addictive drug use, appears so compelling that rational thought fades into the background. Sometimes, groups mutually stimulate shared misperceptions, either of the rewards to be gained from illegal conduct or of its potential costs. At other times, group processes transform would-be costs into injustices that provoke defiance. Sometimes, people follow role models without personally assessing costs and benefits, and when people are tightly bonded to peers, the desire to

please them, to demonstrate courage, or to protect prestige (Short 1963) may divert rationality. Other situational or process variables sometimes come into play (Birkbeck and LaFree 1993; Luckenbill 1977; Strodbeck and Short 1964). Thus, spur-of-the-moment behaviors are common, responses to provocative “victim precipitation” are well established, and interaction sequences seem to have a logic of their own, which does not necessarily correspond with conventional concepts of rationality.

Overall, then, utilitarian/deterrence theory is composed of a unitary organizing principle—balancing of cost and benefit—and a large number of contingencies that may come into play. Unfortunately, this collection of insights has not yet been integrated into a coherent synthetic general theory that shows how and why they all fit together. When that integration is attempted, no doubt many of the other theories in criminology will be helpful. For instance, strain may affect whether people think rationally or not, and theorizing about identities may help account for apparently irrational decisionmaking.

Control/integration

The final theme to explain individual criminal conduct concerns the inhibiting effect of social and psychological integration with others whose potential negative response, surveillance, and expectations regulate or constrain criminal impulses. This theme was first enunciated by Durkheim ([1893] 1933, [1895] 1951) and, as we will see later, has been prominent in theories about community, city, and societal differences in crime rates. It has also been a major focus for theories explaining why some individuals are more prone to crime than others. Perhaps more than any other theme, this one has maintained a steady influence in criminology. Its popularity may stem from the extraordinarily clear presentation of its theoretical rationale by Hirschi (1969), whose work has epitomized social control theorizing for nearly three decades.

Hirschi captured the arguments of a number of theorists when he specified that those with strong bonds to conventional social groups or institutions will be less likely to violate the law because they have less freedom to do so (Horwitz 1990). According to his synthesis, freedom stems from four sources:

- Absence of concern about other people and what they think or might do in response to deviant behavior (for example, Felson 1986; Freudenburg 1986; Reiss 1951).
- Not sharing moral beliefs with others (Braithwaite 1989; Hirschi 1969; Nye 1958).

- Limited investment of time and energy in trying to obtain conventional goals that would be jeopardized by misbehavior (Toby 1957).
- Not being involved in conventional activities that take up time and energy (Hirschi 1969; Reiss 1951; Toby 1957).

Though Hirschi did not call attention to it, people may also be freed to offend by situational circumstances that prevent misbehavior from being seen or that make it unlikely offenders will be recognized by anybody who might do something about it (Simmel [1903] 1971; Wirth [1938] 1969).

Control theories usually ignore the motivation, or strength of motivation, for criminal behavior, assuming that everybody is at least sufficiently inclined toward crime that it need not be treated as a variable. Some see differing degrees of motivation as an important contingency, but they often do not specify how strong the motivation must be in the face of different degrees of constraint in order for crime to occur. Clearly, this is one aspect of the theory that would benefit from some incorporation of causal arguments from other theories about criminal motivation. In addition, many theories with this theme focus exclusively on the central process of control, neglecting contingencies that might come into play.

There is enough empirical support for the overarching notion to lend it plausibility (Kempf 1993), and modern formulations do more than state general principles of control. Braithwaite (1989), for example, theorizes about combinations of conditions affecting social control, and he integrates a wide range of causal forces. His theory features informal control, which is made possible by social integration, and it explains the variation in rates of crime from one social unit to another as well as differences in crime among individuals. Here we are concerned with explaining differences among individuals, which are attributed to variations in integration (interdependency). Personal integration enhances the chances that individuals will be deterred from crime because they anticipate emotionally painful shaming.

A key process underlying both interdependency and deterrence is gossip. Gossip theoretically crystallizes norms, especially those that might not come into play very often in the individual's personal experiences, and it enunciates the potential consequences for violators. Participating in gossip, therefore, simultaneously strengthens commitment to the norms, reinforces conscience, and generates awareness that social disapproval will follow misbehavior. Although potential shame is portrayed as the chief mechanism deterring initial criminal conduct, its effect on those who go ahead and break the law is contingent on whether they are afforded opportunities for later redemption. Shaming

coupled with potential for reunification with the group is “reintegrative”; that accompanied by permanent stigma is “disintegrative.” Reintegrative shaming discourages recidivism by reinforcing social bonds, and it deflects the appeal of criminal subcultures. Stigmatizing shame, on the other hand, encourages criminal subcultures and high rates of recidivism.

The theory specifies a large number of influences on interdependency, reactions to crime, and exposure to criminal subcultures, and it suggests how various combinations of those conditions affect the probabilities of individual criminal behavior. In addition, it draws on anomie theory to explain why criminal subcultures are likely in societies where legitimate opportunities are systematically blocked for segments of the population. Thus, this formulation brings in original insights about gossip and shaming, and it synthesizes the causal effects of several themes already discussed.

Theories To Explain Lifecycle Changes

Although the bulk of theoretical work has focused on differences among individuals, criminologists have recently begun to focus on criminal propensity as it varies throughout the lifespan (for example, Blumstein et al. 1986; Laub and Sampson 1993; Loeber and Le Blanc 1990; Thornberry 1997b; Sampson and Laub 1993). Developmental issues have always been of concern to some criminologists, but it was not until the mid-1980s, with the publication of Hirschi and Gottfredson’s (1983) paper on age and crime and the Blumstein et al. (1986) volume on criminal careers that lifecycle changes and continuities attracted widespread attention. Hirschi and Gottfredson asserted that there is an invariant pattern of criminal liability by age that varies little from person to person, while Blumstein and his associates argued that there are marked individual differences in offending rates that do not necessarily follow the typical aggregate age-crime curve. Blumstein et al. and others (Blumstein, Cohen, and Farrington 1988; Loeber and Le Blanc 1990) identified a number of parameters about lifecourse offending—such as age of onset, rates of offending for different time periods, and lengths of criminal careers—but neither they nor Hirschi and Gottfredson offered explanations. In fact, Hirschi and Gottfredson claimed that explanation was both unnecessary and impossible.

Some attempts were made to use explanatory principles from theories about individual differences to explain lifecourse patterns. Despite recognition of an aggregate age-crime relationship resembling an inverted J-curve, the main generalizations were that individual misbehavior tends to be continuous from childhood to adulthood and that illegal behavior and social responses to it have reciprocal effects (for example, Sampson and Laub 1992; Tittle 1988;

Thornberry 1997a). Soon, however, more systematic attempts to explain developmental issues emerged.

Two-path theory

The most innovative approach to age-crime relationships and lifecourse patterns (Moffitt 1993) was described earlier. Recall that Moffitt's two-path theory contends that, as a result of neuropsychological deficits, some people have a more or less constant pattern of misbehavior throughout life. Others go through limited periods where they have high probabilities of offending, primarily in the teen years. Offending for this second group stems partly from structural disadvantage. Adolescents begin to desire the autonomy of adulthood but are prevented, by the nature of modern society, from realizing it legitimately. At that point, they are presumably influenced by the lifelong deviants who are already autonomous. Later, the adolescence-limited offenders gain autonomy legitimately and realize that the costs of misbehavior are too great. Thus, this theory combines insights about personal problems evident in early childhood with ideas about the status anxiety of teenagers (Greenberg 1981a; Sebold 1992) to provide explanations for two lifecourse patterns.

The two-path theory enjoys some research support (Moffitt 1997), though the crucial hypothesis of imitation has not been established. However, it does not explain other lifecourse patterns, such as youths without neuropsychological deficits who deviate from the typical paths that most adolescents take, or neuropsychologically deficated individuals who nevertheless settle into patterns of conventionality. To do that, the theory will probably have to incorporate additional causal elements.

Age-graded theory

A fuller account of lifecourse variation has been provided by Sampson and Laub (1993, 1997), who bring to the discussion of developmental issues ideas about informal social control. This theory emphasizes that career patterns of offending stem mainly from the nature and quality of an individual's social bonds as they intersect with, and help create, turning points in the lifecourse. For Laub and Sampson (1993), the lifecourse is a probabilistic set of linkages. Like Moffitt, they argue that people differ in initial human and social capital, which can influence patterns of development up to and through adulthood. However, changes toward or away from criminal behavior can also occur when role transitions and new environments lead to social investment or divestment or to the acquisition or loss of social capital in institutional relationships.

For example, someone with a history of offending may nevertheless become conventional due to a good marriage that binds the individual into networks of obligation and caring (not just marriage per se) or as a result of stable, meaningful employment. By contrast, those who have histories of conventionality may offend in response to events and circumstances that undermine previously restraining social bonds. Such conditions might include long periods of separation from home and family or prolonged periods of unemployment. Continuities and changes over the lifecourse result from episodic intersections of social and cultural capital with luck and chance. Also important are confluences of objective circumstances and subjective interpretations of what those circumstances mean, as well as macrolevel distributions of opportunities, both criminal and conventional, that may vary historically and by race and class.

This formulation is sufficiently broad to accommodate Moffitt's argument as well as previous ideas relevant to lifecourse variations. In fact, its authors have shown how it plays on numerous ideas current in criminology. Despite this broad sweep, age-graded theory does not explicitly integrate all of the variables necessary to specify relevant interacting conditions.

Other theories

Other attempts to identify causes of lifecourse transitions or stabilities have also appeared in recent years, and now most major theorists of individual differences try to show how the explanatory processes of their specific theories can be applied to lifecourse variations (Thornberry 1997b). For example, parenting has been identified as a crucial linkage (Simons et al. 1998) and, following the lead of Laub and Sampson, different theorists have shown how, in different ways, gaining and losing social or cultural capital might be a key link between various developmental stages and transitions (Matsueda and Heimer 1997; Nagin and Paternoster 1994; Sampson and Laub 1997). Most of those expanded formulations also synthesize parts of different theories of individual variations. In that same spirit, Le Blanc (1997) has identified a wide range of variables that interlink at various levels and in various ways to affect individual differences and lifecourse variations.

Though some disagree (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1986, 1990), recent trends suggest that theories of criminal behavior now must do more than explain differences among individuals. They must also explain why offending is more or less likely at different times in life, as well as how those patterns differ among individuals and in various social contexts. Such efforts will no doubt require further applications of the principles now embodied in theories of individual differences in offending, additional cross-fertilization among existing theories, and perhaps some innovative ideas concerning the lifecourse itself.

Theories To Explain Variations in Rates of Crime

A third prominent line of theorizing in criminology tries to explain why crime rates vary from society to society or among such social units as cities or communities. These theories can be broadly divided into three categories:

- Those that focus exclusively on macrolevel phenomena and processes (exclusive).
- Those that apply at the macro level but have individual-level analogs (mixed).
- Those that simply reify individual-level explanatory principles for application to aggregates (reified).

Exclusive macrolevel themes

Social disorganization/integration

Although most of the earliest criminologists (Beccaria [1764] 1963; Bentham [1780] 1948; Lombroso 1876, 1878–96) tried to explain why individuals commit crime (Rafter 1992), criminology in the United States is rooted in the study of urban settlements and communities. Scholars at the University of Chicago in the early part of this century were interested in why cities have higher crime rates than smaller places and why some neighborhoods and communities within cities persistently have higher rates of crime and delinquency than others. Building on previous work by Durkheim ([1893] 1933), Toennies ([1887] 1957), and Simmel ([1903] 1971), as well as on work by human ecologists (Hawley 1984), they (Wirth [1938] 1969; Shaw and McKay 1969) formulated a basic theory emphasizing collective levels of social control.

Cities were said to have more crime (and other “pathology”) than smaller sized places because large numbers, heterogeneity, and rapid population movement and turnover made it difficult for people to establish close relationships that could restrain misconduct. Crime rates of communities and neighborhoods within cities were also theorized to reflect within-city variations in heterogeneity and population turnover, but economic deterioration was substituted for large population size as a primary structural variable affecting intercommunity processes. According to the general theory, cities and deteriorated, unstable communities not only experience elevated levels of crime because of weak ability to regulate behavior, but they also contain unconventional role models (mainly because weak organization prevents efforts to keep them out) that stimulate criminal motivation. Thus, disorganized, noncohesive ecological units end

up with large numbers of their residents being highly motivated toward crime or delinquency and able to act on those motivations with impunity.

Despite the impetus to urban studies and criminology that it provided, the basic theory of social disorganization was, for a time, regarded by many as fatally flawed. The community version of the theory was heavily criticized, especially for obscuring differences between ecological and individual influences and for assuming unchanging ecological structures characteristic of Chicago at a particular point in history (Bursik 1988). At the same time, the intercity version of the theory was faulted for attributing outcomes to structural conditions when crime and other forms of “urbanism” may be simple reflections of population composition (Gans 1962; see Fischer 1984). In addition, charges were made that it exaggerated urban pathology, overestimated levels of personal isolation, and overlooked other sources of criminal conduct (Fischer 1975).

Consequently, the theory of social disorganization declined in influence. However, beginning in the 1980s and continuing to the present, the neighborhood version of the theory has attracted much attention, and a number of scholars have expanded and refined the original notion. Among those refinements are better specifications of the meaning of social organization/disorganization and the mechanisms by which it produces social control and regulation. Important contributions (Greenberg, Rohe, and Williams 1982, 1985) have been made in elaborating the importance of mutual surveillance, cultural understandings of neighborhood movement, and direct confrontations of suspicious behavior. Sampson (1987) extended to the intercommunity focus one element of the intercity version of social disorganization—the emphasis on interactions with strangers—contending that they not only make interpersonal bonds more tenuous, but also reduce the chances of intercession in instances of crime.

Building from Freudenburg (1986), Sampson and Groves (1989) also specified the importance of friendship networks and an individual’s long-term community ties, and Sampson (1986a, 1986b) more explicitly brought in family functioning and linkages with formal social control. Bursik and Grasmick (1993)

Large, concentrated, heterogeneous populations enable those with unconventional interests to find and interact with one another. Such interactions lead to subcultures around shared interests.

Subcultures stimulate motivations for law-breaking activities and help create opportunities for them. Moreover, the presence of many unconventional subcultures in an area helps create tolerance, leading to weakened social control.

noted the importance of membership and participation in voluntary associations, as well as the formal capacity of communities to elicit attention and resources from larger, more powerful external entities, such as the city government. Skogan (1990), Wilson and Kelling (1982), Greenberg (1986), and Taylor and Covington (1993) emphasized how fear among people in a neighborhood affects social control and generates perceptions of the lack of community organization, encouraging misbehavior. Taylor (1997) theorized that the mechanisms of social control are tied to small spatial units within neighborhoods, and he and Covington (1988) suggested that conditions of disorganization are linked to community change, not simply to population movement. Bellair (1997) imported into criminological theory the idea that even weak ties among neighbors are important for crime control. Finally, Wilson (1987, 1991) pointed to the connections between community organization and stable employment.

The neighborhood/community version of social disorganization, then, has become far more elaborate with the addition of elements and processes neither specified nor envisioned by Shaw and McKay (1969), and it has garnered considerable support (see Bursik 1988; Veysey and Messner 1999). Despite this, there is not yet a single coherent statement of the theory that incorporates all of the incremental refinements made by individual scholars. By contrast, the intercity version of social disorganization theory has experienced little development. Instead, issues that might have been addressed through elaboration of social disorganization have been expressed in separate, competing theories, and many of the premises of city-level social disorganization have been siphoned off into other formulations.

Though some continue to find favorable test results (Tittle 1989) for city-level social disorganization theory, competing theories have become more prominent. One of them (Gottdiener and Feagin 1988) emphasizes political and economic forces in the world economy. Though its contentions are provocative, there is no well-articulated formulation. The other competing theory (Fischer 1975) is more explicitly stated and now enjoys at least modest empirical support (Fischer 1995).

Fischer's subcultural theory contends that large, concentrated, heterogeneous populations enable those with unconventional interests to find and interact with one another. Such interactions lead to subcultures around those shared interests. Subcultures, in turn, stimulate motivations for unconventional, law-breaking activities and help create opportunities for them. Moreover, the presence of many unconventional subcultures in an area helps create tolerance, leading to weakened social control. The causes of variations in rates of crime and delinquency from one urban place to the next, then, are traceable mainly to differences in the size

and heterogeneity of populations, as the social-control theorists maintained. However, subcultural theory poses a different intervening variable—a “critical mass” for subcultures, which promotes crime and other deviance.

Although Fischer’s subcultural theory uses many of the variables from social disorganization theory, it pays little attention to overall community organization, which is central to the mother theory. Nevertheless, his contention that the conditions of urban living (size, heterogeneity, density) force people to bifurcate their social contacts into public and private realms implies that cities will vary in overall degree of organization. In addition, disorganization probably interacts with the tolerance generated by competition among subcultures to produce weak social control. Therefore, it would appear important for the intercultural version of social disorganization theory to incorporate Fischer’s insights, or vice versa.

Routine activities

A second line of thinking to explain crime rate variations among social units arose in the late 1970s. The routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979; Cohen, Felson, and Land 1980; Felson 1998), sometimes called the opportunity theory, contends that rates of predatory crime reflect how three specific variables are distributed in time and space. Crime occurs when motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of guardianship converge. Whether or not the three come together presumably reflects how people in a given social context conduct their lives and pursue sustenance activities.

Weak guardianship occurs when many activities take place outside the home and when people are frequently in the company of strangers. The suitability of targets for predatory crime has to do with the value and size of objects to be stolen or with the attractiveness of objects of rape or assault. The third element, motivated offenders, has generally been assumed to be constant among places and times. That is, the theorists have more or less conceded that there are always potential offenders who—given the opportunity created by suitable, unguarded targets—will act. Some researchers, on the other hand, have assumed that minorities, males, and youths have more motivation for illegal conduct and have therefore employed demographic measures as proxies for criminal motivation. In any case, rates of crime theoretically vary among societies, cities, communities, and local areas in accordance with the way the variables of the theory converge.

Because the theory does not specify which routine activities, of all that are practiced, should be relevant to crime, development has consisted mainly of efforts to identify the routine activities that actually affect crime rates. Felson

(1986) has also expanded the theory to show linkages between routine activities, informal control, and community organization and characteristics. This expansion illustrates how the theory could be improved by incorporating still other elements from extant theories. The neglect of causal arguments about why motivation for crime might vary represents a particularly important deficiency. More closely aligning routine activities and social disorganization theories would seem natural, since the same conditions that social disorganization theorists posit as causes of weak organization and ineffective social control are implicated in convergences of motivated offenders, suitable targets of crime, and poor guardianship.

Conflict

Causal processes and variables in the macrolevel theories reviewed so far all bear some similarities. A major departure, however, occurred in the 1960s, as a number of "conflict," "Marxian," or "radical" scholars discovered and applied ideas originated by Karl Marx. There are numerous versions of conflict theory and several styles of Marxian analysis. The most important conflict formulations are devoted to questions of criminalization and enforcement, but some aim to explain variations in rates of crime from society to society or place to place within societies (Bonger 1916; Quinney 1970; and several essays in Greenberg 1981b). In explaining rate variations, they focus on the structural conditions of competitively based economic systems (more specifically, capitalism) that both motivate citizens for crime and "de-moralize" them, thereby freeing them of constraints on their criminal impulses. These theories imply that rates of crime among societies vary with the degree to which their economic systems are capitalistic, or internally competitive, and they imply that within societies, variations in rates of crime among regions or cities will reflect market-oriented decisionmaking (see Greenberg 1981b, part 2).

Capitalism theoretically promotes selfishness and greed, which motivates people toward crime. At the same time, it undermines moral feelings or sentiment that might inhibit criminal behavior. The result, presumably, is selfish decision-making and a high rate of deviance in all capitalist societies, with rates of crime among them varying by the actual extent to which their economies are capitalistic. In addition, rates of crime among cities, regions, and communities within given societies reflect capitalistic economic decisions and their consequences for workers.

The dominant theoretical stream stemming from social disorganization theory has not incorporated the political and economic decisionmaking variables that are at the heart of Marxian conflict theory. And conflict theorists have paid little attention to the ideas of social disorganization, instead devoting their efforts to

pinpointing specific manifestations of capitalist activity affecting crime rates. Yet, each of these streams could benefit from taking the other seriously. For example, insights about capitalist decisionmaking could enhance social disorganization theory in the same way that the “new” urban sociology’s emphasis on global and local corporate decisionmaking might. Alternatively, Marxian conflict theory could be energized by admitting the influence of informal community networks or such structural conditions as population size and heterogeneity.

Mixed macrolevel themes

The theories reviewed above were designed for exclusive application to macrosocial units. Others, however, contain explanatory principles to account simultaneously for differences in criminal behavior among individuals, situations, social categories, and societies. Here, I focus only on the implications of these broader theories for explaining variations in rates of crime among large social entities, such as societies.

Anomie

Perhaps the most influential criminological theory of all time is that articulated by Merton (1938, 1957). His anomie formulation was inspired by Durkheim’s ([1895] 1951) observations that suicides increase during periods of social turmoil or rapid change, when the norms that guide people’s conduct are disrupted. Merton expanded this notion of normlessness to characterize societies in which social goals are not consistent with the objective realities of life. He contended that social entities can be classified by their relative emphases on the goals their members should seek to attain, compared with emphases on the appropriate or acceptable means for achieving these goals. A cross-classification yields four types of societies, one of which is well balanced or integrated (nonanomic) and three of which are malintegrated or unbalanced (anomic). Anomic societies overemphasize the means (ritualistic), have mixed emphases on goals and means (retreatist), or disproportionately stress goals (innovative). High rates of deviance would be predicted for all of the anomic societies, while lower rates would be expected for nonanomic societies; in one particular kind of anomic society—the innovative type—deviance is especially likely to take the form of predatory criminal behavior.

Not only are large numbers of people inspired to try to achieve culturally approved goals of success by illicit means (innovation), but the widespread effort to do so produces a culturally shared mentality of immorality.

Nonanomic (integrated, balanced) societies place more or less equal stress on the goals to be achieved and on the means to achieve them, thereby minimizing strain and misbehavior. Anomic societies produce higher rates of deviance because people do not know what they are supposed to try to accomplish, because they do not know how to do it, or because they do not have the specified means available to them to accomplish what they know they are expected to do. In other words, the members of anomic societies are under a lot of strain. That strain is especially likely to produce criminal behavior in a society, such as the United States, that places relatively greater emphasis on goal achievement than on the means for such achievement. Therefore, rates of predatory crime should vary directly with the extent to which societies place more stress on goal achievement than on the means for achieving those goals, and this should be particularly true when the cultural goals are for financial success, as they are in the United States. Alternatively, the theory can be interpreted to imply that rates of crime among smaller units, such as cities or communities, within anomic societies will be greatest where income or socioeconomic inequality is greatest (Agnew 1999).

Although Merton's work has macrolevel, microlevel, and cross-level implications and, in fact, was conceived to have mainly macrolevel import, its application to individual differences has been most popular. As a result, there have been few macrolevel developments of the basic ideas, and direct tests have focused only on variations in socioeconomic distributions in subsocietal units (Agnew 1999, 125). Recently, however, Messner and Rosenfeld (1997) have elaborated the Mertonian argument as it applies to U.S. society. They contend that an unbalanced emphasis on goals of financial success leads to two criminogenic consequences not anticipated by Merton. Not only are large numbers of people inspired to try to achieve culturally approved goals of success by illicit means (innovation), but the widespread effort to do so produces a culturally shared mentality of immorality. In addition, overemphasis on institutional domains governing financial matters makes it difficult to develop and sustain alternative institutional arrangements that might restrain drives toward predatory crime. The result is almost inevitably a high rate of crime. Their provocative analysis illustrating these points has already stimulated research (Chamlin and Cochran 1995) and will no doubt lead to further developments concerning the macro aspect of anomie theory.

General strain theory

The Mertonian argument has also been extended by Agnew, who has gone beyond anomie theory to produce a general formulation concerning various kinds of strain, not just that stemming from inconsistencies between culturally defined goals and available means for achieving those goals. As shown earlier,

Agnew's formulation concerns the effects of strain on individuals (1992) and on crime rates (1999). He contends that some social units have more crime than others partly because their features—including their organization and social, economic, and cultural characteristics—lead to the presence of large numbers of strained individuals who are motivated toward crime. Such communities are also less likely to exercise effective informal social control. He spells out seven conditions that promote widespread strain leading to higher crime rates. At the macro level, Agnew's work clearly demonstrates a developmental line from anomie theory, with integration of theories of social disorganization and routine activities, among others.

Shaming

Another recent theory with cross-level applications is that set forth by Braithwaite (1989), whose argument is partly borrowed from social disorganization and partly from anomie theories. Recall from the section on theories of individual differences that Braithwaite begins with the notion that highly interdependent social groups (those that are cohesively organized) generally have lower rates of crime, in part because social bonding enhances the effectiveness of informal social control. However, he adds two elements to the basic argument.

First, he theorizes that a key mechanism for binding people to each other and for preventing criminal behavior through deterrence is gossip; hence, a society with widespread patterns of gossip should have lower crime rates than one that fully respects privacy. Second, Braithwaite maintains that even though socially integrated societies will generally have lower rates of crime than those that are less cohesive, crime rates should also vary among reasonably well integrated societies, depending on *how* they deal with offenders. Societies may ignore offenders, they can punish them to cause pain or discomfort, or they can shame them. Shaming consists of efforts to make offenders take responsibility and feel genuine regret for the harm caused by their delicts. Other things being equal, rates of predatory crime should be greatest where nothing is done about it, second greatest where offenders are punished, and least where offenders are shamed. Shamed offenders are often motivated to atone for their misbehavior, but not all shaming has the same effect. Indeed, when shame is long term and stigmatizing, it frequently leads to recidivism, particularly if there are deviant subcultures populated by similarly stigmatized rule breakers. Only when shame is followed by procedures and efforts to reintegrate its recipients does it produce low rates of crime. Hence, those societies that shame violators and provide the means for their redemption will have the lowest rates of crime.

In addition to expanding the theory of social disorganization and bringing in new explanatory variables, Braithwaite integrates the macro version of anomie

theory. Criminal subcultures with which stigmatized law violators might affiliate are theorized to be most likely in anomic societies where large numbers experience blocked goal achievement.

Defiance

A further development draws from social disorganization and builds on the notion of shame. Sherman's defiance theory (1993) was intended to explain why sanctions imposed on individuals sometimes deter, sometimes have no effect, and sometimes have the opposite of their intended effect. Nevertheless, it also explains variations in crime rates. The theory implies that all societies impose or threaten negative sanctions for misbehavior, and the deterrent success of sanctioning accounts for differences in crime rates. Deterrence, however, depends on three conditions that must converge:

- Sanctions must be imposed with due respect for the dignity of alleged offenders.
- The recipients of sanctions must be bonded to the community or society whose representatives are imposing the sanctions.
- Offenders must be able to accept the shame implied by sanctions and, therefore, become motivated for reintegration with society.

Crime rates will vary among societies according to whether or not those three conditions typically hold.

Drawing on several bodies of theory, Sherman shows how and why these three conditions matter and how they fit together. Defiance theory, therefore, is a good example of the way contemporary theory is the culmination and integration of past work. Beginning with notions of community cohesion rooted in social disorganization theory, Sherman weaves in ideas about subcultures, shaming, and access to law. Moreover, his formulation includes additional components borrowed from deterrence and self theories. Yet it is not fully articulated, and it does not incorporate explanatory themes to account for initial acts of crime that might lead to sanctions.

Social learning

While social learning theory mainly explains the behavior of individuals, some theorists have also used it to try to explain variations in crime rates among social entities (Akers 1998; Sutherland 1924; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985). Sutherland introduced the idea of "differential social organization" for that

purpose. Borrowing from notions of “culture conflict,” he assumed that a heterogeneous cultural arena necessarily implies that for large numbers of individuals, crime-favorable messages will exceed messages unfavorable to crime. The theory is quite undeveloped, however, because it does not spell out how structural arrangements interface with differential learning to produce higher rates of crime in some social units than in others.

Other learning theorists have gone a little further. Wilson and Herrnstein (1985, 430–437) contend that criminogenic learning will vary depending on whether communities and societies emphasize institutions dedicated to impulse control and character building, which are somewhat linked to urbanization. Akers (1998) theorizes that variations in social structure and culture affect crime rates through their influences on the average reinforcements for criminal behavior that individuals within societies or other social entities experience. Among the structural characteristics that impinge on the overall likelihood of criminal learning, he includes such things as demographic composition, regional and geographical attributes, and other characteristics that concern the way social entities and subcultural systems are organized. This latter category could include weak neighborhood and family organizations.

To some extent, then, contemporary social learning theorists are drawing on the same pool of ideas that have inspired most other theories of rate variations; they simply identify different intervening processes and interpret effects as they bear on learned characteristics that impinge on crime.

Deprivation of law

A final theory of ecological variations was developed in the late 1970s (Black 1976, 1983) and is of interest mainly because it, like conflict theory, departs from the developmental pattern rooted in theories of social disorganization. Black’s deprivation-of-law theory proposes that rates of crime vary inversely with the availability of law for resolving disputes. Without law, inevitable human conflict will produce high rates of crime as individuals and groups seek to redress their own wrongs. Law, which is tied to the development of strong political entities with power over large populations, enables—indeed requires—disputing parties to submit personal arguments to third parties for resolution. The decisions that functionaries make are supposedly impartial, which gives disputants—who nearly always assume they are right—hope for victory. Although, as Black has shown, legal decisions actually closely follow lines of status and therefore are not impartial, they are upheld by force exercised by state authorities who claim a virtual monopoly on its use. Because of the appeal of law as a vehicle for settling disputes once and for all (eliminating or at least reducing the possibility of feud) without undue cost, and because of the

coercive element that requires the use of law and enforces its decision, rates of deviance are theorized to decline as states and their accompanying legal apparatuses grow. Therefore, the greater the development of law, the lower the rates of crime.

The apparent historical decline in crimes of violence (Gurr 1981) in some modern societies, the high rates of crime in some simple societies (Edgerton 1976, 1992), and patterns of change in concentrations of offenses (Cooney 1997) lend support to this argument. Nevertheless, the theory needs further development to spell out how variations in types and distributions of law in different societies produce varied effects. Moreover, the theory could be broadened by bringing in variables and conditions from other theories we have discussed. In return, other theoretical streams, such as social disorganization, could benefit from deprivation-of-law ideas.

Reified macrolevel themes

Some macrolevel theories are simply applications of those that explain microlevel phenomena, but with the assumption that whatever applies to individuals can be aggregated to explain rates of crime from one social entity to another. For instance, deterrence theory basically explains why individuals commit crimes. However, some scholars contend that differences in crime rates among social entities stem from differences in characteristics of enforcement bearing on the certainty and severity of punishment. Similarly, since demographic characteristics are influential in predicting individual probabilities of law violation (for various theoretical reasons encompassed in individual theories of crime), one can explain variations in rates of crime from place to place by considering the age and proportion of the population that is male, minority, and freed from familial and institutional affiliations (Steffensmeier and Harer 1999; Wellford 1973). Hence, almost any of the causal processes of the individual-level theories previously reviewed can be aggregated to explain variations in crime rates.

No single individual-level process alone, however, can provide adequate explanation at the macro level. Simple aggregation overlooks the potential interconnection between structural phenomena and individual behavior. Some potential connections may be contained in the various macrolevel theories we have been considering, so integration at that level is promising. But between-level integration must be considered as well. For example, social disorganization theory might benefit from fuller use of deterrence theory. Formal control imposed by authorities from an organized external entity could, under some conditions, compensate for weak informal control within neighborhoods. Alternatively, there may be important interactions between informal and formal social controls.

Theories About Differences in Criminal Behavior Among Situations

Scholars have often noted that even when all of the signs point toward a possible crime, it does not always materialize, and occasionally even when nobody would expect criminal behavior, it nevertheless transpires (Cohen 1966). Moreover, what may start out as an attempted theft sometimes ends up as a homicide or an assault (Miller 1998). Despite such observations, theories about situations have not shown a high level of development (Birkbeck and LaFree 1993; LaFree and Birkbeck 1991; Short 1998). Indeed, after the initial work of Short and Strodbeck (1965), situational analysis languished until the mid-1980s. Since that time, however, some effort has been devoted to explaining why crime emerges in some situations but not in others (Birkbeck and LaFree 1993; Short 1997, 112–115, 136–141). This renewed attention to immediate contexts is important, because most of the other theories reviewed in this essay set the stage for criminal behavior without explaining how the script is played.

Situations can be thought of as unique arrangements of physical and social stimuli emerging from the various social settings to which individuals are exposed (Birkbeck and LaFree 1993, 129). Because they are always changing, and because they involve chance factors, criminal outcomes that evolve from various situations are not fully predictable. The challenge for theorists, then, has been to identify relevant aspects that come into play and to explain how and why those aspects fit together, either to produce criminal behavior or to lead away from crime. Birkbeck and LaFree also note that situations involve both objective and subjective components, but that the focal point is decision-making by potential offenders. They set forth four principles governing situational influences:

- Crime-relevant decisions are partially, but not wholly, determined by situational contingencies.
- Decisionmaking involves evaluation by potential offenders.
- The influence of situational factors varies by crime type.
- The level of attention that potential offenders pay to situational factors varies by both offender characteristics and crime type.

They go on to identify two major lines of theoretical development concerning circumstances leading to crime: symbolic interactionism and opportunity.

Symbolic interactionism

A major component of many, but not all, crime-relevant situations is interaction among two or more persons. Symbolic interactionist theory focuses on sequential, reciprocal response patterns in which interactants adjust to each other's behavior, note responses to their actions, interpret the meanings of those responses, and then adapt their next moves in accordance with those interpretations (Blumer 1969; Stryker 1980). A major process presumably guiding these sequences of actions is an individual's attempt to gain or preserve a meaningful sense of self (Kaplan 1980; Matsueda 1992). Interaction sequences, especially if they threaten identity claims, can sometimes lead to illegal behavior even though no criminal intent was originally intended, and the path that interaction takes can often determine the extent and specific form of criminal behavior (Felson and Steadman 1983; Katz 1988; Luckenbill 1977; Short 1963).

In the spirit of symbolic interactionism, if not with explicit acknowledgment, theorizing about crime-provoking situational characteristics has most often focused on events and actions interpreted by participants as threatening their status positions or their ideas about self. Short and Strodtbeck's theory, growing out of research on Chicago gangs, emphasizes that much violence and other criminal behavior is sparked by events interpreted as threats to the status of gang members or to the reputation of the gangs themselves (Short 1963; Short and Strodtbeck 1965). Such incidents often emerged more or less by chance (Strodtbeck and Short 1964), and some remarks or actions that might have been trivial were sometimes interpreted quite differently by various individuals.

In a similar vein, Luckenbill (1977) interprets homicide incidents as the end products of "character contests" that unfold in sequential steps. There is an initial attack on someone's identity, usually challenging that person's claim to a particular status. The attacked person takes offense and responds in kind, often with threats to harm the challenger if the attack is not withdrawn. The original party, feeling that retreat would be denigrating, continues or intensifies the attack. The conflict then proceeds to combat, with one or another of the participants eventually resorting to deadly force.

Katz (1988) portrays criminal behavior by those trying to create an "awesome presence" as an effort to achieve moral dominance by overcoming challenges to autonomy. And Anderson (1999) characterizes interaction among disadvantaged people as a constant struggle for respect in which individuals try to gain symbolic status advantages by attacking or challenging others, which leads to retaliation and destructive criminal outcomes.

All of these theorists regard the status/self concern as a subtext-guiding interaction, noting that outcomes of interaction sequences are not predetermined. There are spontaneous events and responses that can lead in a variety of directions, only some of which are criminal. Moreover, status or prestige contests are not the only events that can ultimately lead to in criminal outcomes (Luckenbill and Doyle 1989; Stafford and Gibbs 1993); indeed, disputes of all kinds seem to have a lifecourse that inclines toward criminal outcomes (Felstiner, Abel, and Aarat 1981). First, somebody experiences a negative event, which he perceives to be the fault of somebody else. Second, the injured party names the injury and blames the alleged wrongdoer, thereby creating a grievance. Third, the namer demands that the harmdoer fix the problem, which is called “claiming.” If the accused party refuses to redress the wrong, a dispute is born. To deal with the dispute, the victim may then either capitulate, a choice that is often rejected because it represents a loss of face, or go on to use other tactics to try to prevail. When force is employed, the result is likely to be criminal. It has been suggested that the likelihood of this sequence being activated and spiraling to the level of violence is connected with cultural patterns of “disputatiousness” (Luckenbill and Doyle 1989).

Theoretical expectations are often wrong, or they rest on probabilities little better than chance; and in the best outcomes, predictions apply mainly to large aggregates.

Opportunity

A second line of theoretical work, though not always explicitly so stated, has been guided by the explanatory mechanisms embodied in routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979). Various scholars have tried to isolate the elements in situations that attract or create motivated offenders and influence whether they perceive targets of crime as being possibilities that would justify the risk of offending (for example, Brantingham and Brantingham 1984; Cornish and Clarke 1986). Such factors as degree of lighting, presence of observers, location of houses on a block, police patrolling patterns, availability of valuable things to be stolen, and lifestyles of potential victims have been identified as relevant to these decisions.

LaFree and Birkbeck (1991) suggest that criminal choice is two staged: (1) the decision to enter a situation and (2) subsequent decisions in response to subjective evaluations of particular emergent features of that situation. They contend that individuals start with notions about how to assess situational contingencies.

Such predispositions, especially those concerning probable outcomes from specific behaviors in particular circumstances, are learned through experimentation and observation. Learned inclinations also include rules of conduct, such as expedience and morality, that the person might have internalized. These predispositions, however, interact with contextual events and circumstances. Behavior is seen as a continual process of matching actions to situations in order to maximize desired outcomes. Using these principles, LaFree and Birkbeck derive generalizations about situational clustering of criminal behavior.

Overview

Despite these efforts to explain situational variations, there is not yet a formulation that successfully brings all of the objective, subjective, and group process variables together into one coherent theory. As Short (1998) suggests, background (including things learned, cultural context, and personal characteristics) clearly matters, as do aspects of larger social contexts (such as neighborhood organization) but criminal behavior cannot be fully explained until theorists are able to specify how situational variations interact with those other influences. Since there are at least two classes of situational factors—opportunity and symbolic interactionist processes—they, too, probably interact among themselves as well as with variables representing individual characteristics and those of larger social contexts.

Signs of Progress and Directions for the Future

Criminological theorists have made huge strides in the past two decades and, at least within a probabilistic framework, are now able to broadly outline the causes of criminalization, criminal behavior, and variations in rates of crime among situations, communities, societies, and other social entities, as well as across the lifecourse. Despite this, theories are not yet developed enough to provide fully satisfying explanations or predictions. Theoretical expectations are often wrong, or they rest on probabilities little better than chance; and in the best outcomes, predictions apply mainly to large aggregates.

Additional efforts hold the promise of producing explanatory systems that can account for myriad criminal manifestations in precise and efficient ways. This optimistic appraisal comes from noting five important trends. First, over time, more and more scholars have become committed to theory development. Few criminologists are now content with ad hoc accounts, conceptual exercises, identifying risk factors, and directly investigating policy issues. Many have come to recognize that effective criminology systematically compiles knowledge within

theories that summarize, organize, and arrange evidence and thinking within coherent general explanatory schemes.

In addition, there are encouraging signs that criminologists are coming to demand more from theories. Yet continued progress will depend on still-wider appreciation for well-structured theories and for what they must be able to do. Consider, for example, Hirschi's version of control theory (1969). It sets forth a simple, universal causal process: Those strongly bonded to conventional social groups will refrain from acting on their natural impulses toward crime or delinquency. Though important and extremely popular, it ignores so much that effective application is difficult. Among other things, it pays no attention to possible variations in motivation for crime, disregards opportunity and other situational variables that may intensify or activate impulses for misbehavior, does not tell how people become bonded in the first place, and implies that control has the same effect, and to the same degree, for all kinds of crime and in all circumstances.

Clearly, numerous accouterments to the social bond theory are necessary to bring it to bear on specific issues about criminal behavior. At best, it predicts that for a large aggregate of individuals, those with the strongest bonds will be least likely to commit a crime. But without additional considerations, and without specifying the way these additional influences interact with social bonds and among themselves, Hirschi's behavioral principle does not provide good explanation of specific crime-relevant phenomena. (See Sheldon, Tracy, and Brown [1997, 39–40] for an attempt to apply the theory to explain why youths become gang members.) Similar incompleteness, to one degree or another, is characteristic of other theories. If the good ideas and powerful themes abundant in our discipline are to bear fruit, they have to be bundled within more complete formulations. It is customary to assume that "other" variables or conditions are to be "held constant" in testing, and that consumers of theory are to fill in the missing elements and make the specific applications. But in social life, conditions are not, in fact, constant, and different consumers make varied assumptions about the operation of other variables and contingencies, which is one reason tests and applications take so many incompatible forms. The goals of explanation, prediction, relevant tests, and application require that theories themselves actually do what consumers of those theories are now expected to do for them.

A third promising trend is the attempt to improve theories by merging parts or ideas from a variety of existing accounts. Sometimes this has been done self-consciously and with declaration (for example, Braithwaite 1989; Colvin and Pauly 1983; Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton 1989), but most often it has occurred naturally as scholars tried to improve existing formulations. In fact, almost all of the theoretical developments reviewed in this essay involve some form of integration, though the theorists do not always recognize or acknowledge it.

For progress to continue, scholars must be able to measure such things as reintegrative shaming; self-control; general strain; human, social, and cultural capital; and control ratios.

Theorizing typically starts with limited causal processes, but later expands to include larger numbers of variables, processes, and contingencies. Such developments have led to overlaps among various theories, along with wider recognition of the advantages of bringing diverse ideas together and of borrowing from various extant accounts to create theories with more scope and more precise explanatory application.

Integration to join theories at different levels of generality, such as those describing individuals' behavior and those about group rates, however, has lagged behind (Le Blanc 1997; Short 1998). Some theories presumably explain things at various levels of generality (Agnew 1999; Braithwaite 1989; Merton 1938,

1957; Le Blanc 1997), but this often means that the explanatory principles are simply applied to two separate phenomena. Articulation between levels in some theories is accomplished by treating higher level conditions as contingencies for the operation of causal forces at lower levels of explanation, by thinking of different-level processes as interacting to affect outcomes (Short 1998), or by conceiving of mid-level phenomena as mediators between higher level and lower level phenomena (Elliott et al. 1996). But integrating various levels of explanation has never been completely successful. Moreover, it is common for theorists to slip from one level of explanation to another without recognizing errors that may occur. Ecological fallacies in drawing inferences from data are well known, but few recognize the theoretical parallels. Consequently, ideas like culture of violence and anomie are sometimes forced to explain individual behavior, with an ill-fitting result. Even less well recognized is the individualistic fallacy of trying to use causal mechanisms affecting individuals to explain societal phenomena that may have a reality beyond the aggregation of individual effects.

An additional indicator of progress is the increasing emphasis on theoretically driven research. More scholars now start with theoretical issues, frame their data collection and analysis to address those concerns, and assess the implications of the results for theory. Further progress depends on acceleration of this trend. Research oriented around theory serves two essential purposes. First, it helps in evaluating those theories. Theoretical success is partly based on predictive power—the ability to assert relationships among two or more variables that prove to be empirically accurate. If hypotheses appropriately deduced from a given theory repeatedly fail, the theory must be deficient. Typically, however, derived hypotheses prove to be partially true, or true under some conditions but not others. Such results can then be used to revise the theory. Through

continuous feedback, revision, derivation of new hypotheses, testing, and feedback, theories acquire greater adequacy. Second, theory tells researchers what to look for. Without theoretical guidance, much research is isolated, with little relevance to cumulating bodies of knowledge.

Finally, there is an emerging awareness that research practice is now lagging behind theory, a situation quite different from three decades ago. For one thing, contemporary theoretical developments involve key concepts that require data not now available, especially not in the large datasets on which so many researchers rely. For progress to continue, scholars must be able to measure such things as reintegrative shaming (Braithwaite 1989); self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990); general strain (Agnew 1992); human, social, and cultural capital (Matsueda and Heimer 1997; Nagin and Paternoster 1994); and control ratios (Tittle 1995). Identifying a single item or adding together a few indicators conveniently available in a data archive will no longer suffice.

In addition, despite contrary argument (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1986), adequate testing of the causal implications of all contemporary theories requires either experiments or temporally separated, repeated measurements of key variables. But researchers typically must employ data with inappropriate causal lags (see, for example, Chamlin et al. 1992; D'Alessio and Stolzenberg 1998). For example, to a large extent, Agnew's general strain argument portrays a short-term process. Strain is provoked by immediate events (though sometimes strain accumulates over a longer period of time), which generate emotional reactions. Those emotions must be managed (sometimes by criminal behavior), though the theory does not say how soon. The best test of the theory, and one that would also provide helpful feedback for more precisely specifying causal intervals, requires measures of strain (or a series of experiments), followed quite soon by measures of emotion, and then measures of various alternative behavioral and cognitive responses at multiple times. Yet researchers have been forced to use data with a time interval of a year or longer (Agnew and White 1992; Brezina 1996; Paternoster and Mazerolle 1994).

Weak data are not the only impediment. Even if perfect measurements at multiple times were available, many would probably still analyze them as if the theories predicted only linear, unidirectional effects. That is partly because theorists do not spell out other possibilities, but it is also because researchers are constrained by their analytic tools or their mindsets. Improvements in theory, which are essential to accomplish the goals that most criminologists endorse, depend somewhat on continued research advancements, and good research needs better theory to guide it.

Summary and Conclusions

Criminological theory has shown remarkable growth and progression over the past several decades, particularly by means of cross-fertilization and integration, and it now appears to contain the necessary elements to effectively explain crime patterns. Nevertheless, some of the most pressing questions remain unanswered, and reasonably accurate predictions seem to apply only to large aggregates. Signs are favorable for continued improvement, however. Criminologists are coming to recognize the necessity of good theory, becoming cognizant of the elements it must possess, and growing committed to its development. In addition, most of them are embracing integration as a style of work and a procedure for theory building and are showing they understand that research must be a handmaiden to, and dependent on, theory. Finally, the linkage between research methods and theoretical growth is becoming clearer, as more scholars are realizing that reliance on traditional types of data and on linear, unidirectional analyses must be transcended. If these trends continue, the outlook for future success is good.

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