

Understanding Criminology: Unveiling the Interplay between Crime and Society- Level 2

Section 2: Theoretical Perspectives in Criminology

In this section, we will delve into the core theoretical perspectives that have shaped the field of criminology. Understanding these theories is crucial for analysing criminal behaviour, the criminal justice system, and society's response to crime. We will explore a range of theories, from classical and biological to sociological and modern integrations, each providing a unique lens through which to understand the nature of crime and criminality.

2.1 Classical Criminology

Classical criminology, originating in the 18th century, is founded on the work of thinkers like Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham. It posits that individuals are rational actors who weigh the costs and benefits before committing a crime. According to this perspective, crime occurs when the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs. The classical school advocates for a legal system that is predictable, with proportionate punishments designed to deter criminal behaviour. It also emphasises the importance of legal rights and due process in the criminal justice system.

2.2 Sociological Theories

1. Anomie and Strain Theories: Building on the work of Émile Durkheim, Robert K. Merton's strain theory suggests that crime occurs when there is a disjunction between societal goals and the legitimate means to achieve those goals. This "strain" may lead individuals to engage in criminal acts as an alternative way to fulfil their aspirations.
2. Social Disorganisation Theory: Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay proposed that high crime rates are linked to the breakdown of social institutions, such as the family, education, and employment, particularly in urban areas. These disorganised communities may lack the social cohesion necessary to regulate behaviour and prevent crime.
3. Differential Association Theory: Edwin H. Sutherland's differential association theory posits that criminal behaviour is learned through interaction with others. Individuals commit crime because they are exposed to an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavourable to violation of law.
4. Labelling Theory: This perspective, associated with Howard Becker, suggests that crime and deviance are not inherent qualities of an act but are instead the result of society's reaction to that act. Being labelled as a "criminal" can have profound consequences for an individual's self-identity and future behaviour.
5. Control Theories: Control theorists, like Travis Hirschi, ask why people do not commit crime. Hirschi's social bond theory contends that strong social bonds to family, school, and other institutions reduce the likelihood of criminal behaviour. People conform because of an investment in conventional activities and a fear of jeopardising their social relationships.

Theoretical Perspectives in Criminology



2.3 Modern Integrations and Developments

Modern criminology recognises the limitations of single-factor explanations and often adopts an integrated approach, combining multiple theories to understand the complexity of criminal behaviour.

1. Rational Choice Theory: Building on classical criminology, this theory assumes that offenders choose to commit crime after considering both personal factors (such as need or greed) and situational factors (such as the likelihood of being caught).
2. Routine Activity Theory: This theory, developed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson, focuses on the opportunities for crime that arise in everyday life. It suggests that for a crime to occur, there must be a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian.
3. Life Course Theory: Life course theorists, such as Terrie Moffitt, examine how individual behaviour is shaped over time by a multitude of personal and environmental factors. They consider how life events and transitions can influence the onset, continuation, and desistance of criminal behaviour.
4. Feminist Criminology: Feminist perspectives critique the male-dominated field of criminology and highlight how the intersection of gender with other social identities, such as race and class, influences both crime and responses to crime. This perspective also examines how traditional criminological theories can fail to account for the experiences of women and other marginalised groups.

2.4 Case Studies for Application

To help consolidate your understanding of these theories, here are some hypothetical case studies. You don't need to provide an answer, just use these case studies to think through what you have learnt earlier in this section.

1. Johnny is a teenager who lives in a deprived area of a large city. Several of his friends have been involved in minor thefts. Which of the theories above do you think best explain Johnny's situation?
2. Sarah has been charged with shoplifting. She is a single mother struggling to provide for her children after losing her job. Which theories might provide insight into the factors contributing to her behaviour?
3. Mark has been arrested multiple times for public disorder offences. He has a history of substance abuse and comes from a broken family. What might a life course theorist say about the factors influencing Mark's criminal behaviour?
4. Alice was convicted of embezzlement at her workplace. She had opportunities to manipulate financial records due to lax oversight. How would routine activity theory and rational choice theory explain the occurrence of this white-collar crime?

Section 2 Conclusion

In this section, we have examined the rich tapestry of criminological theory that seeks to understand the multifaceted nature of crime. Each theory offers valuable insights, but it is through their combination and application to real-world situations that we can fully appreciate their explanatory power. As we continue through the course, we will revisit these theories and apply them to specific crime types and issues within the criminal justice system. By understanding the theoretical underpinnings of criminology, we are better equipped to analyse and address the complexities of crime and criminal behaviour.

1. Which theory suggests that crime occurs when there is a disjunction between societal goals and the legitimate means to achieve those goals?

- A. Differential Association Theory
- B. Labelling Theory
- C. Rational Choice Theory
- D. Anomie and Strain Theories

2. What does the social bond theory, proposed by Travis Hirschi, suggest about criminal behavior?

- A. Criminal behavior is a rational choice based on cost-benefit analysis.
- B. Criminal behavior is learned through observation and imitation.
- C. Strong social bonds reduce the likelihood of criminal behavior.
- D. Criminal behaviour is a result of unconscious conflicts.

3. Which theory posits that criminal behavior is learned through interaction and exposure to an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law?

- A. Anomie and Strain Theories
- B. Social Disorganisation Theory
- C. Differential Association Theory
- D. Control Theories

4. Theoretical perspectives in criminology that emphasize the social environment as a key factor in understanding crime are known as:

- A. Biological Theories
- B. Psychological Theories
- C. Sociological Theories
- D. Modern Integrations

5. Which theory developed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson suggests that crime arises from the everyday opportunities that occur when there is a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian?

- A. Routine Activity Theory
- B. Rational Choice Theory
- C. Life Course Theory
- D. Feminist Criminology

Answers:

1. Which theory suggests that crime occurs when there is a disjunction between societal goals and the legitimate means to achieve those goals?

D. Anomie and Strain Theories

2. What does the social bond theory, proposed by Travis Hirschi, suggest about criminal behavior?

C. Strong social bonds reduce the likelihood of criminal behavior.

3. Which theory posits that criminal behavior is learned through interaction and exposure to an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law?

C. Differential Association Theory

4. Theoretical perspectives in criminology that emphasize the social environment as a key factor in understanding crime are known as:

C. Sociological Theories

5. Which theory developed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson suggests that crime arises from the everyday opportunities that occur when there is a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian?

A. Routine Activity Theory