Sherman argues that criminology has been, and is, overwhelmingly analytical (theory-generating and testing) rather than experimental (“show me evidence from the real world”). Although he maintains that the strength of experimental criminology will rest on the strength of analytic criminology, he believes that the growth and acceptance of criminology will rest more on its experimental results than on advances in its basic science.

**Summary**

- Criminology is the scientific study of crime and criminals. It is an interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary study, although criminology has yet to integrate these disciplines in any comprehensive way.

- The definition of crime is problematic because acts that are defined as criminal vary across time and culture. Many criminologists believe that because crimes are defined into existence we cannot determine what real crimes are and criminals are. However, there is a stationary core of crimes that are universally condemned and always have been. These crimes are predatory crimes that cause serious harm and are defined as *mala in se*, or “inherently bad” crimes, as opposed to *mala prohibita*—“bad because they are forbidden” crimes.

- The history of criminology shows that the cultural and intellectual climate of the time strongly influences how scholars think about and study crime and criminality. The Renaissance brought more secular thinking, the Enlightenment more humane and rational thinking, the Industrial Revolution brought with it more scientific thinking, and the Progressive Era saw a reform-oriented criminology reminiscent of the classical school.

- Advances in any science are also constrained by the tools available to test theories. The ever-improving concepts, methods, and techniques available from modern genetics, neuroscience, and other biological sciences should add immeasurably to criminology’s knowledge base in the near future.

- Theory is the “bread and butter” of any science, including criminology. There are many contending theories seeking to explain crime and criminality. Although we do not observe such theoretical disagreement in the more established sciences, the social/behavioral sciences are young, and human behavior is extremely difficult to study.

- When judging among the various theories, we have to keep certain things in mind, including predictive accuracy, scope, simplicity, and falsifiability. We must also remember that crime and criminality can be discussed at many levels (social, subcultural, family, or individual) and that a theory that may do a good job of predicting crime at one level may do a poor job at another level.

- Theories can also be offered at different temporal levels. They may focus on the evolutionary history of the species (the most ultimate level), the individual’s subjective appraisal of a situation (the most proximate level), or any other temporal level in between. A full account of an individual’s behavior may have to take all these levels into consideration because any behavior arises from an individual’s propensities interacting with the current
environmental situation as that individual perceives it. This is why we approach the study of crime and criminality from social, psychosocial, and biosocial perspectives.

- Criminologists have not traditionally done this, preferring instead to examine only aspects of criminal behavior that they find congenial to their ideology and, unfortunately, often maligning those who focus on other aspects. The main dividing line in criminology has separated conservatives (who tend to favor explanations of behavior that focus on the individual) and liberals (who tend to favor structural or cultural explanations). The theories favored by criminologists are strongly correlated with sociopolitical ideology.

- All theories have explicit or implicit recommendations for policy because they posit causes of crime or criminality. Removing those alleged causes should reduce crime, if the theory is correct, but the complex nature of crime and criminality makes policy decisions based on theory very risky indeed. Policymakers must consider many other issues demanding scarce resources, so the policy content of a theory should never be used to pass judgment on the usefulness of theory for criminologists.

**EXERCISES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Which of the following 10 acts do you consider mala in se crimes, mala prohibita crimes, or no crime at all? Defend your choices.

   - A. drug possession
   - B. vandalism
   - C. drunk driving
   - D. collaborating with the enemy
   - E. sale of alcohol to minors
   - F. fraud
   - G. spouse abuse
   - H. adult male having consensual sex with underaged person
   - I. prostitution

2. Why is it important to consider ideology when evaluating criminologists’ work? Is it possible for them to divorce their ideology from their work?

3. The following table presents a list of seven acts that are considered criminal offenses. Add three more offenses that interest you to this list. Then, rate each of the 10 acts on a scale from 1 to 10 in terms of your perception of each one’s seriousness (with 10 being the most serious). Give your list to a member of the opposite gender without letting him or her see your ratings, and ask him or her to rate the offenses on the same 10-point scale. After he or she is finished, compare the two ratings with the other person present, and discuss each inconsistency of 2 or more ranking points. Write a one- to two-page double-spaced report on what you learned from this exercise about how you and the other person differ and resemble one another in your thoughts about the seriousness of crime. Is there a gender difference?
4. Go to http://www.lsus.edu/la/journals/ideology/ for the online journal *Quarterly Journal of Ideology*. Click on *Archives* and find and read “Ideology: Criminology's Achilles' Heel.” What does this article say about the “conflict of visions” in criminology?

**Useful Web Sites**


**Chapter Glossary**

**Constrained vision:** One of the two so-called ideological *visions* of the world. The constrained vision views human activities as constrained by an innate human nature that is self-centered and largely unalterable.

**Correlates:** Factors that are related to the phenomenon of interest.