Conclusion

Chapter Overview

In this book, we have provided what we hope is a comprehensive yet accessible review of the many theories in criminology. By organizing these theories using our seven-step approach, we have shown the similarities and differences between the history and assumptions of these theories and the kinds of criminological problems they attempt to explain. We have also examined how research on these theories depends on specifying the terms and concepts in each theory and applying them through different kinds of research designs. However, as has been suggested, the application of criminological theories depends on more than empirical research. Theories and approaches are more likely to be adopted when they offer a complete view of crime and especially when they offer clear, practical suggestions for agencies, communities, and individuals who work in criminal justice and related fields.

Today, rational choice, biosocial, and developmental and life course theories continue to be popular. In addition, in the past decade, several cross-level and cross-disciplinary approaches have emerged in the field of criminology; these approaches build on the integrated approach to theorizing. They also draw upon a combination of many of the theories reviewed in this textbook, and so it seems appropriate to review them in the concluding chapter. Figure 16.1 provides an overview of these new approaches.

New Directions in Criminological Theory

Integrated Systems Theory and Criminology

Robinson and Beaver’s (2008) integrated systems theory is a cross-level integrated theory of criminal behavior. The basis for this theory is Vila’s (1994) evolutionary-ecological paradigm, which suggests that a variety of ecological, micro-level, and macro-level factors determine the likelihood of criminal behavior. He also argues that humans are “self-reinforcing systems” and that once they get set on a path of criminal behavior it may become part of their strategic style. Robinson and Beaver (2008) liken strategic style to the concept of criminal personality.
This theory attempts to explain the formation of a criminal personality by using a number of different factors. It also incorporates ideas from systems theory perspective as the framework for a theory of criminal behavior. Systems theory is an interdisciplinary and integrative approach that attempts to connect findings from numerous disciplines and fields of study. This perspective identifies six levels of analysis: cell, organ, organism, group, organization, and community/society. Each level represents an individual system, but all of the systems interact with and influence their neighboring systems. At this point, Robinson and Beaver (2008) group different variables and factors into the different levels of explanation.

The most basic levels incorporate biological and psychological factors. For example, at the cell level we would examine the impact that genes can have on criminal behavior; the organism level would focus on neuroscientific factors associated with brain function and neurotransmitter levels. To carry the example further, the organism level would look at the formation of personality and how this affects the choices we make about diet and nutrition and drug consumption (gene–environment interactions). Social and environmental factors are located at the higher levels of explanation. Group-level variables include factors derived from social learning and social control theories, while community-level variables are drawn out of disorganization, routine activities, and lifestyle theory, which focus on how certain areas and neighborhoods produce high levels of crime. Labeling and deterrence theory also contribute to community-level factors associated with crime. Finally, larger societal-level variables are derived from more macro theories, such as strain and culture conflict theories.

**A Systemic Approach to Criminological Theorizing**

In recent years, several criminologists have argued that the field has become stuck in the risk factor mode (Caspi & Moffitt, 2006). In other words, the embrace of the risk factor approach in
theory-building has hampered the emergence of fresh, new, and innovative ideas in criminology. Others have questioned the logic of this approach and contend that many risk factors are nothing more than spurious correlations (Wikstrom, 2006). In order to address these problems, Wikstrom and Sampson (2006) have proposed using a systemic approach developed by physicist and social scientist Mario Bunge (2004). This approach identifies a new conceptual framework for criminology that consists of three interrelated concepts: mechanisms, context, and development. The goal of this approach is to identify key mechanisms that produce high levels of crime (in places) and criminal behavior (in people). These mechanisms may be socially, developmentally, or biologically based, and they must be specific and precise.

This mechanistic approach consolidates key insights from a diverse group of criminologists and other social scientists with a specific emphasis on integrating criminological knowledge. Although different disciplines, theories, and methodological approaches contribute to the understanding of crime, the uncoordinated accumulation of ideas confuses and does not assist in the process of theory integration. For example, some traditions in criminology search for the probabilistic causes of crime in characteristics of individuals, while other traditions investigate how social contexts are criminogenic. Wikstrom and Sampson (2006) argue that simplifying different approaches into coherent theories of crime causation would result in better explanations based on the integration of existing approaches that have found support.

This approach is organized around three components to facilitate the integration of criminological knowledge: (1) how social context can be criminogenic, (2) how risk factors influence the individual development of criminal behavior, and (3) mechanisms by which social context and individual development interact to explain crime. Context refers to structural, cultural, and situational factors that may be related to crime. This portion of the framework incorporates ideas and variables from macro-level structural theories, such as social disorganization, social strain, and routine activities theory. One may derive underlying social mechanisms from these theories that set the conditions for crime (Sampson, 2006). Development consists of developmental and individual-difference factors that may cause a person to commit crime. In this case, biological and psychological characteristics discussed in early chapters may be important, and particular attention is paid to within-individual changes in accordance with the tenets of the developmental and life course theories. Mechanisms explain exactly how variables associated with context and individual development interact with each other (Wikstrom & Sampson, 2006).

The ultimate goal of this approach is to better identify causal factors that might lead to high crime rates or high levels of individual criminality. Wikstrom and Sampson (2006), like Robinson and Beaver (2008), hope to specify how different mechanisms from different levels of explanation interact with and influence each other. For example, how can one's environment influence development and produce characteristics that might give rise to high levels of criminality?

Is a Unified Approach to Criminology Possible?

Another important development in modern criminology can be found in Agnew’s (2011) Toward a Unified Criminology. According to Agnew (2011), many of the base assumptions that criminological theories are based upon are poorly understood and unclear. This should come as no surprise; very few criminologists consider the underlying foundations on which they build their theories. Agnew claims
that this has contributed to disharmony in the field and a lack of progress in criminological theorizing. He also contends that most theorists often fail to incorporate modern findings that might be important and relevant to debates that criminologists have about how to define crime, free will and determinism, and the nature of human nature.

Agnew (2011) suggests that a reexamination of assumptions in the field of criminology is in order. He provides some illustrations of how to do this by reviewing a number of recent studies from various disciplines and fields, including biology, psychology, anthropology, and political science. Based on this review, he was able to make suggestions about the scope and problem foci of criminology. According to Agnew (2011), criminologists ought to use a definition of crime that goes beyond simple legal definitions dictated by the criminal justice system and that offers an integrated definition of crime. He says that crime can be defined as acts that cause blameworthy harm, are condemned by the public, and/or are sanctioned by the state.

The hope is that considering these three aspects will cause criminologists to view certain acts in a different light. For example, victimless crimes often cause questionable amounts of harm and yet are often not universally condemned in society. This is complicated by the fact that in some cases these activities are also sanctioned by the state. For example, prostitution is legal in some rural areas of Nevada but not in any other US states. Are people who visit prostitutes in Nevada considered criminals? In some cases of minor drug use, the only crime committed by the individual is the drug use itself. To put it differently, if we consider the fact that the only crime most marijuana users commit is smoking marijuana, it is unclear how studying their behavior will tell us something about crime more generally (Shafer Commission, 1972). Further, the states of Colorado and Washington have both legalized marijuana; this, however, conflicts with federal law prohibiting marijuana. How can we understand criminality in these situations? How should we classify tourists who visit those states and use marijuana? This implies that some acts that are considered criminal may be less important to understanding general criminal behavior because many individuals involved in these behaviors do not commit other types of crime. This also has ramifications for acts that are not considered crimes but that still may cause massive amounts of harm to society. Consider the numerous white-collar and corporate behaviors that are not defined as crimes. What good are theories of crime that omit blameworthy, harmful acts that are condemned by the public?

Agnew (2011) also offers reformulations of several base assumptions in criminology. First, he specifies situations and factors that influence the use of free will and suggests that criminologists view human behavior in terms of bounded agency. This is a more refined version of the soft determinism that many modern theories (e.g., rational choice theory) rely upon. Second, he suggests that criminologists abandon looking at society in either purely consensus or conflict-oriented terms. Instead, he encourages criminologists to further examine the extent and nature of conflicts in society and the different groups whose values give rise to consensus and conflict. Third, he argues that while people often do exhibit high levels of self-interest, they also demonstrate high levels of social concern, especially for members of their intimate groups.

The assumptions offered here are viewed as integrated in nature. Further, Agnew (2011) speculates that both mainstream and critical criminologists will see some value in them since insights from each side have been taken into account. He does not attempt to produce a full-blown integrated theory of crime and criminal behavior, and he cautions that such an endeavor will be a long-term task that will require a great deal of further research to ensure a solid foundation for the theory. Figure 16.2 provides a more detailed overview of contemporary criminological theories.
What is the state of contemporary criminological theory? Several criminologists have recently suggested that theory development is lacking or even nonexistent in the field (Laub, 2004; Weisburd & Piquero, 2008; Young, 2011). This is surprising given the number of raw materials that criminologists have to work with—the field is interdisciplinary, drawing from several different disciplines and fields. Others have argued that criminological theory cannot progress until it integrates the understanding that, first and foremost, we are biological organisms and there is the potential that extreme experiences can at least temporarily engrave themselves in our neurological systems, complicating both free will assumptions and belief in the power of society to shape individual behavior. In this view, biosocial criminology must move beyond previous formulations in which “conservative bio-criminologists naturalize vices and culturalize virtues, [while] left-liberal immaterialists culturalize
vices and naturalize virtues” (Hall, 2012, p. 253). New theories and formulations of older theories must take neither for granted.

We argue that it is important to analyze theories for a number of different reasons. First, it allows us to understand where theories originate and how they develop over time. Second, it can help clarify the logic behind various criminal justice system practices. Most policies and programs have some sort of theoretical justification either attached to them or that could be attached to them. Third, it helps us create new theories; we can't break new ground without knowing what we have already covered and how we have done so. In recent work, we have proposed three approaches to supplement existing efforts to make criminological theory more accessible, more integrated, and more accountable (Wheeldon, Heidt, & Dooley, 2014).

The first approach taps into the rising interest in visual tools and techniques in criminology (Carrabine, 2012; Lippens & Hardie-Bick, 2013; Sampson et al., 2013). This includes the role of documentary photography to explore punishment, art as a process to understand and experience criminological theorizing phenomenologically, and policy graphs to integrate the theoretical and policy arms of criminology to advance policy translation. Indeed, this book is a part of a broader effort to make better and more nuanced use of visual tools and techniques for the presentation and consideration of data on crime, social control, and public policy. Our focus on criminological theory and the seven steps of criminological theory builds on numerous past efforts to describe data, tell stories, and present information (Wheeldon, 2010b; Heidt, 2008; Harris, 2013; Maltz, 2009; Sampson et al., 2013; Wheeldon, 2011a, 2011b, 2013).

Our effort is based on the assumption that visualization will play an increasingly important role in the social sciences generally and in criminology more specifically. The ubiquity of small, high-powered computing power is already allowing this to occur through tools such as data visualization and infographics. As people increasingly engage visually with phones, tablets, computers, and various forms of entertainment and social media, the expectations about and potential for visual techniques are likely to grow. We believe that visual criminology can best be harnessed to serve future goals for students, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers if existing approaches are organized and key assumptions outlined in criminological theory. This book is one effort toward this larger goal.

The second approach we propose is the view that criminology must move beyond the “method wars,” in which some criminologists fervently adhere to either quantitative or qualitative methods to the exclusion of the other. We agree with Agnew, who calls for mixed methods as part of a détente in the method wars:

The multiple perspectives approach (MPA) therefore draws on both the positivistic and constructionist approaches, incorporating the advantages of each. Drawing on the positivistic approach, it assumes that there is an objective reality. That is, people really do possess certain characteristics, live in certain types of environments, and have certain experiences. Or, in the words of Pinker (2002: 203), “the world really does contain ducks, who really do share properties.” And while it may not be possible to measure this reality in a way free of all biases, it is possible to construct reduced-bias measures of it. Drawing on the constructionist approach, it argues that the subjective views of respondents are also important. While such views are affected by a wide range of factors beyond objective reality, they nevertheless guide behavior. So they too affect outcome variables, even after reduced-bias measures of reality are taken into account. (2011, p. 181)
In this book, we have highlighted important mixed-methods research and tried to ensure one methodological orientation has not overwhelmed the others. While quantitative methods remain primary in criminology, there are important voices suggesting a more pragmatic approach. Some “truths” may in fact exist. Pragmatism, however, is far more interested in determining how to ground the various postmodern, antifoundationalist critiques into practical goals. Those interested in pragmatism are suspicious of claims about universal or generalizable truths from which to uniformly proceed. Perhaps criminology can embrace integration by moving beyond efforts to discover one universal truth and instead apply the idea that the solutions to the problems of society require that multiple descriptions of the world be leveraged to focus on real-world problem solving (Rorty, 1998). Rorty’s view may have profound implications for criminology (Wheeldon, 2014).

A third approach considers the potential for debate and dialogue as a means to move beyond the stubborn adherence to one set of assumptions about human nature or one approach to data collection and analysis. To answer the call for more practical theorizing and reflexive criminology, we suggest expertise be reconsidered. Instead of allowing scholarship (and scholars) to simply promote one preferred view over all others, true criminological expertise should require weighing and balancing some of the key theories and practices described in this text. Expertise might be best seen as the quality of the debate it sets out. By presenting two competing views, experts are those who don’t advocate per se, but who instead organize existing scholarship into credible and accessible arguments based on the needs, interests, and inclinations of the stakeholders involved (Wheeldon et al., 2014, pp. 123–124).

This view may offer a way out of entrenchment in one theoretical, methodological, or professional perspective. It can be applied whatever one’s opinion and integrated into the work of students and researchers in a variety of settings (Wheeldon, Chavez, & Cooke, 2013). Expertise should be re-imagined and assessed based on the extent to which individuals take personal responsibility for acknowledging themselves in the research process. This includes considering how interests, interactions, and beliefs may shape and influence specific research decisions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). We believe that adopting a common means to debate, discuss, and respectfully consider core criminological questions could promote a better quality of criminological conversation.

Together, these three approaches can promote greater accountability. Ensuring that underlying theoretical assumptions are acknowledged, theories are tested based on their stated propositions, and theories are implemented in ways that are cognizant of the historical context in which they arose can allow criminological theory to better inform criminal justice policymaking. Likewise, by ensuring the testing of theories is attempted in ways that consider the value of numeric and narrative data-gathering and analysis, criminologists can avoid myopic either/or conceptions of what good research requires. Finally, science works best when those who contribute do so in modest ways, aware that all results are tentative and all inferences shaped by those who make them. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses within various criminological policies, programs, or practices, we can model a process of more constructive reflection. This can assist students, researchers, and practitioners alike.

\section*{Conclusion and Review Questions}

In this book, we have reviewed the major theories in criminology. All of these theories are still being used, tested, and reformulated in some capacity by modern criminologists. In order to clearly understand theories, it is not only important to be familiar with their central argument and key concepts but
also with their underlying assumptions, scope, level of explanation, problem focus, and relationships with other theories. It is also important to understand the research supporting these theories and the research that these theories have stimulated. Perhaps most important is cultivating in students the ability to theorize and think independently. This can only be done by encouraging people to think critically about criminological theories and the practices employed by criminal justice systems. Ideas matter, and they shape everything around us.

**CHAPTER REVIEW**

1. Briefly summarize the three approaches to making criminological theories more accessible, integrated, and accountable.

2. Where did the approaches discussed in this chapter originate? How are they similar and what are the differences between them?

3. Why is the analysis and study of theories so important in criminology and criminal justice? List three major ways analyzing and studying theories can help criminologists better understand crime.