

5.1. What is Theory?

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A **theory** is an explanation to make sense of our observations about the world. We test hypotheses and create theories that help us understand and explain the phenomena. According to Paternoster and Bachman (2001), theories should attempt to portray the world accurately and must “fit the facts.”^[1] Criminological theories focus on explaining the causes of crime. They explain why some people commit a crime, identify risk factors for committing a crime, and can focus on how and why certain laws are created and enforced. Sutherland (1934) has referred to criminology as the scientific study of breaking the law, making the law, and society’s reaction to those who break the law. ^[2] Besides making sense of our observations, theories also strive to make predictions. If we understand why crime is happening, we can formulate policies or programs to minimize it.

The building blocks of any theory are concepts. Crime, delinquency, and deviance are all concepts that need to be defined. We seek to explain these concepts with other concepts. For example, some theories may link crime with self-control. Self-control is another concept that needs to be defined. Once we define “crime” and “self-control”, we need to measure them. Operationalization is the process of determining how we will measure concepts, which are called variables. We could measure self-control in a number of different ways. For example, we could test a person’s ability to resist temptation ([The Marshmallow Test](#)). Once we test the relationship between two variables, we also need to make sure another variable is not affecting the results. Spuriousness is when a third variable is causing the other two. We know that ice cream sales and murder rates are positively correlated; when one goes up the other goes up. At first glance, someone may claim that ice cream is causing people to kill. However, what do you think might be a better explanation? Can you think of a third variable that might cause ice cream sales and murder rates to increase?

When we try to explain why crime occurs, we can look at it from many different perspectives. We can create macro-level explanations and micro-level explanations. Macro-level explanations focus on group rate differences. For example, why do some countries have more (or less) violent crime than others? Why do young people commit more crime than older people? Why do males commit more crime than females? Micro-level explanations center on differences among individuals. Macro-level explanations focus on societal structures while micro-level explanations focus on processual differences.

It’s “Just” a Theory Exercise

Many laypeople will give their opinions on the relationship between phenomenon based on their hunches or observations; these are not theories. A theory explains and interprets the facts. A proper scientific theory must be falsifiable. Criminologists who create theories test their hypotheses. Many times the theorist will modify his or her theory based on the research. Upon more investigation, those theories that have yet to be falsified become accepted as a valid description between the phenomenon.

Darwin's theory of evolution has yet to be falsified. There are numerous unanswered questions, but as time goes by, scientists are discovering more and more evidence to support the theory.

When I was an undergraduate student, I majored in Psychology; I thought I was in control of everything about me. However, when I took my first criminology class, I realized the social environment also had an impact on who I was becoming. For example, I did not choose my parents, their income, how many siblings I had, or where I lived. Each of those had an impact on who I was and who I became friends with in my childhood. Most of my childhood friends, who are still my friends, may have been based solely on how far away they lived from my parents instead of their character, interests, or personality. What do you think?

1. Paternoster, R., & Bachman, R. (Eds.) (2001). *Explaining criminals and crime: Essays in contemporary criminological theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ↵
2. Sutherland, E.H. (1934). *Principles of criminology* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott. ↵

5.2. What Makes a Good Theory?

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Numerous criminological theories attempt to explain why people commit a crime. What makes one better than another? How do we judge theories against each other? The natural and physical sciences mostly agree on the knowledge of their disciplines. However, criminology is interdisciplinary, and many criminologists may not agree on what causes criminal behavior. For instance, Cooper, Walsh, and Ellis (2010) have looked at the political ideology of criminologists and their preferred or favored theories. Even one's political leanings can influence a person's set of beliefs about the causes of crime.^[1]

We must apply the scientific criteria to test our theories. Akers and Sellers (2013) have established a set of criteria to judge criminological theories: logical consistency, scope, parsimony, testability, empirical validity, and usefulness.^[2] Logical consistency is the basic building block of any theory. It refers to a theory's ability to "make sense". Is it logical? Is it internally consistent? A theory's scope refers to its range, or ranges, of explanations. Does it

explain crimes committed by males AND females? Does it explain ALL crimes or just property crime? Does it explain the crime committed by ALL ages or just juveniles? Better theories will have a wider scope or a larger range of explanation.

A parsimonious theory is concise, elegant, and simple. There are not too many constructs or hypotheses. Simply put, parsimony refers to a theory's "simplicity". A good scientific theory needs to be testable too. It must be open to possible falsification. "Every genuine *test* of a theory is an attempt to falsify it or to refute it. Testability is falsifiability; but there are degrees of testability: some theories are more testable, more exposed to refutation than others; they take, as it were, greater risks...One can sum up all this by saying that *the criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability*" (Popper, 1965, pp. 36-37). [\[3\]](#)

After many tests and different approaches to research, those theories supported by evidence have empirical validity. Thus, according to Gibbs (1990), the verification or repudiation of a given theory through empirical research is the most important principle to judge a theory.[\[4\]](#)

Finally, all theories will suggest how to control, prevent, or reduce crime through policy or program. The premise of a particular theory will guide policy-makers. For example, if a theory suggested that juveniles learn how to commit crime through a network of delinquent peers, policymakers will try to identify juveniles at-risk for joining delinquent subcultures.

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1. Cooper, J., Walsh, A., & Ellis, L. (2010). Is criminology ripe for a paradigm shift? Evidence from a survey of American criminologists. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 2, 332-347. [↵](#)
 2. Akers, R.L., & Sellers, C.S. (2013). *Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application*. New York: Oxford. [↵](#)
 3. Popper, K.R. (1965). *Conjectures and refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge*. New York: Harper Torchbooks. [↵](#)
 4. Gibbs, J.P. (1990). The notion of theory in sociology. *National Journal of Sociology*, 4, 129-159. [↵](#)