

**The Challenges of Integrating Criminology:  
A Commentary on Agnew's *Toward a Unified Criminology***  
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In an article entitled "Thinking Seriously about Crime: Some Models of Criminology" British critical criminologist Jock Young (1981) delved beneath the foundations of criminological theories to explore their differing assumptions. He identified six theoretical paradigms in criminological theory and analyzed each according to their various positions on six core dichotomies. The dichotomies identified in each of the theories were: "their view of human nature," as free will or determined; their view of society or "social order" and whether this was depicted as a "consensus or conflict;" their "definition of crime" and whether this was based on legal or social criteria; the extent and distribution of crime as either limited or extensive; "the causes of crime" and whether these were individually or societally based; and their criminal justice policy with regards to whether they advocated punishment or treatment. These dimensions are the same or similar to those at the core of Bob Agnew's new book.

Building on Jock's systematic analysis Werner Einstadter and I (Einstadter and Henry, 1995; 2006) developed a book-length treatment derived from Jock's analytical framework: *Criminological Theory: An Analysis of its Underlying Assumption*. We expanded the analytical categories, acknowledging that within each dimension there were multiple variants rather than simple dichotomies. For example, in the view of human nature we considered whether a theory saw humans as governed by internal or external forces, and whether they are naturally or socially differentiated or culturally produced products, whether they are isolated individuals or interconnected beings and whether they are similar to or different from other species and, if so, what are the implications for the nature of their agency: free rational choice, self-interested actors, or cooperative and collaborative social beings. In examining the criminologists' views of society embodied in their theories we identified six societal types based on different distributions of power ranging from consensus

societies through conflict pluralistic, class hierarchy and dual power class hierarchy. The latter were segmented and contained a plurality of interest groups, with varieties of both consensus and conflict, revolving around different issues. We not only looked at how law defined crime, but also at the different criminological definitions of crime and their views of how criminals differ from non-criminals, itself rooted in the kind of assumptions that were made about human nature. In examining the dimension of causality we identified four core causal relationships between phenomena: linear, multiple, interactive and dialectical. We also expanded the dimension of criminal justice to include not only the different policies that logically follow from a causal theory, but also the criminal justice system implications and the techniques of crime control; though some, notably Kraska (2004; 2006), have argued that theories of criminal justice need not be tied to theories of crime causation.

We applied the analysis of underlying assumptions to twelve different theoretical frameworks from demonology, to postmodernism; including classical theory, biological theory, psychological theory, social ecology theory, strain theory, social control theory, social constructionist theory, conflict and Marxist theory and feminist theory. We also pointed to the variations within each of these paradigms that reflected sub-differences in their assumptions. Our final chapter was on integrative theory but we did not apply the framework to that approach (though we did apply it to exemplars of such as Tittle, 1995's Control-Balance Theory), since integrative theory's contributions to criminology was in its synthesis of several of the other theories analyzed in the preceding chapters. We pointed out that integrative theory in criminology, which can be traced back to 1979, and particularly to more recent developments (Messner, Krohn and Liska, 1989, Barak, 1998b; 2006, and Robinson, 2004; 2006), was starting to become a prolific field. Indeed, by the 2006 edition of our book we identified 16 integrated theories, each drawing on two or more other theories, with the most popular theories included being learning and social control, followed by strain and conflict. Hunter and Dantzker (2002) went even further identifying 21

integrated and “holistic” theories. Indeed, “We now no longer bob from theory to theory in our failure to transcend one-sided interpretations of reality, but scamper from one integrated theory to another in an attempt to transcend the transcendents” (Einstadter and Henry, 2006: 330-31). But, importantly, as Agnew points out, none of the integrated theories have attracted wide support, partly because the integrations have been selective and partial, reflecting the division and politics of the discipline (p. 191). By drawing on the dimensional approach of analytical assumptions underlying theory Agnew seeks to transcend criminology’s theoretical divisions by unifying its assumptions about crime, people and society. While we meticulously analyzed each theory’s underlying assumptions along these same dimensions, what we failed to do was to assess the ways the assumptions themselves could provide the basis for integration into one unified position. This is precisely what Bob Agnew (2011) does in *Toward a Unified Criminology: Integrating Assumptions about Crime, People and Society*.

Agnew takes the reverse approach in that instead of organizing his book around theories, he organizes it around the key dimensions of analysis: the definition of crime, free will or determinism, human nature, view of society and the nature of reality. Along each dimension Agnew tries to assess the contributions of each theoretical position to the holistic overall unified theory. He is careful to include both mainstream and critical criminology’s contributions, pointing out that each explains different parts of the overall etiology of crime.

Here I am not going to intensely review Agnew’s whole work, but instead assess how far his integration overcomes the various challenges that have been leveled at integrative theory. In our previous works (Einstadter and Henry, 2006; Lanier and Henry, 2010) we and others (Barak, 1998; Liska, Krohn, and Messner, 1989) identified several of these challenges as follows:

1. *What is to be integrated?* Is the object of integration the theoretical concepts or their propositions and how do we know that the meanings of the elements integrated are the same? If they are merged but they are different, how far does that merger distort the original concepts? The same problem faces any researcher trying to synthesize the core concepts of a field though say the Delphi method. Individual concepts are distilled and lose their integrity as the new emergent synthesis of common ground takes place.
2. Integrating propositions rather than concepts has its own challenges, since the propositions derived from just two theories, for example, differential association and social control, amount to at least 13 and if other theories are included "the number of potential variables in the analysis would soon approach 50!" (Shoemaker, 1996: 254).
3. *Linking propositions.* According to Liska, Krohn, and Messner (1989: 5-15), propositions can be linked in at least three ways. *End-to-end*, which is also called sequential integration, links propositions depending on distance from the crime to be explained. So the immediate cause of crime is linked to a more distant cause of crime and that to an even more distant cause and so on. *Side-by-side*, or horizontal integration, involves using different theories to explain different aspects of a crime, or different types of crime. *Up-and-down*, or deductive integration, attempts to explain crime by generalizing from a range of different explanations such that the propositions in one can be derived from a more abstract form of the theory.
4. *Types of causality.* What is the nature of the causal assumptions that integrative theory draws on: linear, multiple, interactive or dialectical or reciprocal causality or a combination of these? If a combination, how is that configured and how does the combination vary by level of analysis and type of crime?
5. *Levels of Integration* At what analytical levels are the concepts and theories to be integrated: Should all micro-level theories be integrated, so that we combine say

rational choice, with biological and psychological causes; should theories at the meso-level such as groups, organizations and institutions be integrated; and should different macro-level theories be integrated such as Marxism and Structural-Cultural Feminism? (Hagan, Simpson and Gillis (1987). Alternatively, should theories be integrated across various levels such as macro-meso-micro or multi-level integration? (Colvin and Pauly, 1983)?

6. If multi-level, then how do the levels relate to each other and do we need a bridging concept as in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory of childhood development in which the concept of exosystem is developed to comprehend the connection between micro- meso- and macro-systems, as well as the concept of chronosystem to explain the dynamic of changes in the relationships and their effects over time, such as the lifecourse or over historical periods.
7. *Relative Strength of Explanation and Policy Contribution.* Finally, a critical question is to assess the contribution of each theoretical explanation to the totality of an integrated explanation of crime. In explaining a particular crime or criminal behavior, what is the relative explanatory strength of each theory, at each level, to the overall integrated explanation, and does that change for different crimes, or different crime types, or different contexts? As Agnew acknowledges "most theories have some merit, explaining a portion of the variation of some crime" (p. 191). The key question is how much is explained and to what extent does each explain the phenomenon? Related to this, if an effective policy is developed it would seem that the components of the policy should be included to the extent that they address the strength of causal explanations. If this varies across crimes, populations and contexts, that presents challenges unless policies are adapted and multi-variegated.

So, how far does Agnew's unified criminology overcome or side-step these challenges to integration? Agnew argues that recent developments in science and social

science knowledge make it easier for criminologists to assess the relative contribution of each theory's underlying assumptions, though he notes that criminologists have not done this. He points out that while all underlying assumptions have some empirical support, even though they are different and often oppositional, "there is some truth to each of the underlying assumptions. . . but that each assumption only captures part of the truth. . . Each theory or perspective typically has some support but falls far short of providing a complete explanation of crime" (pp. 193-94). Moreover, since many theories make assumptions that are contradictory, these cannot be integrated unless the differences in underlying assumptions are first resolved. It is toward just such a resolution that Agnew's work is directed.

Agnew's first task is to review and integrate definitions of crime and in doing so he arrives at an integrated definition of crime that contains three elements. Crimes are acts that: 1. cause blameworthy harm; 2. are condemned by the public and 3. are sanctioned by the state. As he acknowledges, this goes a little, but not much, further than Hagan's (1977; 1985) original statement in his "pyramid of crime," and not quite as far as our own "prism of crime" (Henry and Lanier, 1998; 2001), with the exception that it draws on international law to define blameworthy harm. However, as far as addressing the issue of what is to be integrated, all we have is an end-to-end list of elements rather than one integrated definition. What is problematic about this is the relativity of the definition, and its failure to define crime other than by political process. Determining harm is anchored to the variable politics of a legal process, albeit international. Public condemnation can be mediated by so many factors from mass media to knowledge of harm, to perception of loss; its relativity is reflected in its changing assessment depending on who is the perceiver and what is their social context, cultural and spatial location and historical period. Finally, acts determined by the state are part of a power mediated political process, which hardly

addresses the harms created by corporations or the state, or those omitted from criminalization because of the interests of those with lobbying power over that process.

So what might an integrated definition look like? First it has to be anchored to intentional or avoidable harms that are independent of definition by a political process. This necessitates defining what it is to be human, so that denying or undermining that is the harm that constitutes crime. Such harms represent an avoidable loss to persons or groups as human beings, who are biologically, socially, economically and culturally constituted. Elsewhere my colleague Dragan Milovanovic and I developed an example of such an integrated, anchored, but politically independent definition of crime (Henry and Milovanovic, 1996; Milovanovic and Henry, 2001). We first defined what determined humanity, as distinct from other species, as the ability to make a difference to their environment and to the others with whom they engaged. We then developed a harm-based definition of crime as an intentional or avoidable act that reduces or represses another's ability to make difference, and we defined the act of avoidable harm as an expression of power over others that reduces, represses or results in a loss of their humanity. Our integrated definition of crime is:

the expression of some agency's energy to make a difference on others, and it is the exclusion of those others who in the instant are rendered powerless to maintain or express their humanity. . . crimes then are nothing less than moments in the expression of power, such that those subjected to them are denied their own contribution to the encounter, and often to future encounters, are denied their worth, are simultaneously reduced and repressed in one or several ways. Crime then is the power to deny others their ability to make a difference (Henry and Milovanovic, 1996:116)

The implication of such a definition is that difference making, which might otherwise be called exercising agency, both defines humanity, and is an expression of power, yet the kind of difference-making that reduces or represses other's ability to make a difference, what we call excessive investments in power, constitutes crime. Such a definition is integrated, but not dependent on a political process of definition as it is tied to a definition of humanity and its denial. Such an integrated definition takes account of both street crimes, where property is taken from another through theft, force or deception (economically reducing a person from what they were) or crimes of violence (such as rape or murder that reduces a person, socially and biologically). But such an integrated definition also includes "suite" crimes by corporations and crimes by governments and state agencies who exercise power over others, including deprivations administered through the criminal justice system. The integration of mainstream and critical criminologies is hereby integrated, in ways that do not diminish either, but nor do they privilege one over another because of the current structure of the political process. The point here is not to assert that this particular definition of crime is correct, for it depends on current values and how we define humanity, but to illustrate that an integrated definition needs to go beyond simply stringing together elements of other different definitions and to become transcendent and inclusive.

The next dimension tackled by Agnew is whether crime (or for that matter other action) is determined by forces or voluntarily chosen by active human agents. This is a version of the classic free will versus determinism debates, applied to crime. Agnew argues that recent research does not settle this issue but suggests that "behaviors fall along a continuum, ranging from fully determined to somewhat agentic" (p.195). As rational choice theorists say, human agents are not fully free but have limited or bounded rationality, what Agnew calls "bounded agency." Agnew says that although research does not prove the existence of agency it shows that, "humans exercise greater agency when they: (a) are



motivated to alter their behavior, (b) believe they can produce change, (c) have the traits and resources to exercise agency. . . and (d) are in environments that have weak or countervailing constraints, provide numerous opportunities for agency and encourage agency” (p. 195). Moreover, he says the exercise of agency is subject to guidance and influence and that “we would expect behavior to be more unpredictable and somewhat more likely to involve crime when conditions favor the exercise of agency” (p. 195). Apart from this being somewhat tautological in that the evidence for agency is the very definition of agency: acting freely is stated to be more likely occur when there is less constraint, it also begs the question of causality. If agency is more likely when there is motivation to make behavioral change and belief that change can occur, and that this is facilitated by resources, then what explains the motivation and belief, and are those subject to internal or external forces, and if so, how much agency is left? If lack of controls or confusion about controls and availability of resources to make change are factors, then the presence or absence of these can be seen as contributing causes of action, so again, how free is the agency to act, and how much is a part of the overall equation? Moreover, from the policy perspective, if agency is subject to this amount of influence or the absence thereof, how can a person seen to be acting agentially and thus be held accountable for his or her actions? Clearly they cannot be held fully accountable, since the definition here does not leave agency free from a variety of conditions. However, an even more disturbing part of this agency versus determinism picture is that the very conditions that result in highest agency are the same ones that produce the highest levels of creativity, innovation and art; they are the hallmarks of think tanks, and the substance of positive deviance. Indeed, rather than being more likely to produce crime, they are as likely, or even more likely to be expressions of the very essence of humanity as we have defined it, to make a difference. The problem with this integration of agency and determinacy, then, is that it assumes agency acting freely is dangerous and harmful, and that constraint and control and influence produces conformity, stability and reduced deviance. However, as we know, some of the worst atrocities of

humanity have been produced by the exercise of control under the guise of producing stability. What this integration doesn't help us explain is how some exercising agency relatively freely do so creatively and positively, and others do so in ways that harm others and negatively impact humanity; nor does it explain how some conditions of constraint and control limit others excesses, and yet other systems of constraint, guidance and influence are themselves harm producing. Integrating agency and determinism and recognizing there is a continuum in which some of both are present is certainly an advance over mono-theoretical positions. But until we know in what proportions, and what kinds produce negative outcomes, we will not only be unable to prevent such outcomes. but we will have raised serious questions about a criminal justice system that, with a few exceptions, holds individuals as though they are fully accountable, even when the conditions were contributing factors. Yet we do not, except in some restorative justice processes, ensure that the producers and systems that contributed to the behaviors are also held accountable.

In turning to the issue of human nature (though some of the previous discussion is embodied in this) Agnew points out that research supports the view that humans are not discretely classifiable but are constituted by more or less degrees of (1) self-interest and rationality, (2) social concern for others, especially those members of an in-group, with whom they empathize, protect, cooperate and engage in reciprocal activities mutual support, and (3) capacity for social learning: "So people show evidence of social concern, self-interest and social learning--with the strength of these traits varying across individuals and social circumstances" (p. 196). Along with other integrative criminologists Agnew holds a more complex view of human nature suggesting that "all theories of crime are relevant, including those that focus on the constraints to crime and on the motivations for crime. . .[and] that criminologists need to pay much attention to bio-psychological factors, since the underlying traits that cause crime vary across individuals for reasons that are in part biologically based" (p. 196). This seems to privilege some components over others, not

least because there is no explanation of the ways that concepts are linked and no analysis of causal type or direction, nor a recognition that biology and psychology does not stand separately from the more meso- and macro-levels within which it is enmeshed. Agnew recognizes these levels affect or impact one another, but not that they are or can be mutually constitutive, implying an interactive rather than a dialectical or even dialogical coproduction. For example, are the biological and psychological traits independent of the culture and structure of a society, and if so why do societies have very different rates and kinds of crimes? Can individual biology and psychology be, in part, a product of the kind of group, place in organizations, kind of culture and social structure, and even the discursive patterns that characterize a people's way of life. When Agnew says criminologists should pay attention to the ways social concern and social interest affect crime, and how social circumstances that foster them affect crime, this must also refer to how these elements are interrelated with each other and coproduce the very human agents whose behavior becomes manifest as "individuals" identities and human subjects in the total social matrix. An integrative theorist would want to know the relationship not just of these elements to crime, but to each other over time. They would want, in the words of Gregg Barak (2003; 2006) to know the reciprocal interactive effects at different levels of the structure and culture over the life course and over time. For example, in his analysis of pathways to violence and non-violence Barak points out that in spite of clear evidence that violence is cumulatively interrelated across a range of societal levels, most analyses are "un-reflexive," tending to "focus on one particular form of violence, without much, if any reflection on the other forms." He argues "these fragmented and isolated analyses seek to explain the workings of a given form of violence without trying to understand the common threads or roots that may link various forms of violence together" (Barak, 2003, p. 39). He argues that pathways to violence (and nonviolence) range "across the spheres of interpersonal, institutional and structural relations as well as across the domains of family, subculture and culture" and that these pathways "are cumulative, mutually reinforcing, and inversely

related" (Barak, 2003, p. 169). Unifying criminology then requires more than a simple additive or even interactive process; it requires us to examine the interrelated complexity of the multiple ways we are constituted as human agents and to explore ways to reconstitute our social, cultural, biological and psychological production to be a less harmful species.

This leads us to consider what an integrative view of society looks like. While it is important to recognize that societies have a core consensus and a common condemnation of personal theft and violence and "beyond that the extent and nature of consensus and conflict vary" (p. 197) there is an assumption, based on research, that harms and crimes are accentuated by conflict and that "Group conflict generally increases crime among oppressors and oppressed, although certain types of conflict might reduce crime among the oppressed" (p. 197). What is neglected here is not just the harm produced by some kinds of conflict such as discrimination, that Agnew acknowledges needs more research, but research on the ways consensus imbued with power produce harms, and the ways that conflict can be productively healthy in reducing power differentials and balancing opposing interests. A consensus about the value of a power hierarchy that is legitimated by the fear of a chaos of competing interests in its absence, is likely to produce numerous harms of repression of the very subjects it claims to be protecting, as we have seen too often in regimes around the globe. So it is not enough to say consensus is good and conflict is bad (not that Agnew is this simplistic), but rather to examine the distribution of power in a society and to assess what harms are created by different distributions of power, both those subject to it and those expressing it, which is a point which Agnew makes.

Agnew then attempts to integrate the conflict or consensus in society with theories of causation recognizing that it is important to examine not only a range of macro- and micro-causes, but also "the relationship between these causes, thereby providing a better sense of why they vary and how they work together to cause crime" (p. 162). He states that whereas conflict theory tends to focus on the larger social environmental causes, it often

neglects individual or micro-level mechanisms. In contrast mainstream theories, including those rooted in a consensus perspective, focus on individual-level causes, neglecting the ways these are impacted by the wider social environmental causes. He says "since the integrative theory draws on both conflict and consensus perspectives, it provides a good vehicle for cross-level integration" (p. 162). Importantly, Agnew also recognizes that causes do not necessarily apply to all people and all types of crime, but that an integrative approach suggests that "the applicability of the causes sometimes depends on the nature of society, the groups to which people belong and the type of crime being explained. . . societies differ in the extent and nature of consensus/conflict. And this difference has *some* effect on the causes of crime that are most applicable" (pp. 162-163). Indeed, he says causes differ across groups, particularly across more or less advantaged groups, across types of group affiliation, and vary depending on the type of crime. He says integrated theory needs to pay more attention to the role of context in facilitating or mitigating crime causation and how this varies across different societies. He emphasizes too, that integrative theory needs to recognize that not all causes of crime increase its likelihood, since crime is only one response to these causes and, indeed, the motives for such action may be not to harm others as much as reduce their own pain, frustration, or oppression: "The response taken is shaped or conditioned by a range of factors. . . [I]ntegrative theory should describe those factors that condition the responses to the causes of crime" (p. 163).

Insofar as the research on crime, human agents and society is subject to the assumptions about whether social reality can be measured, raises questions about the extent of its socially constructed nature. Agnew sees this as a problem of designing more effective measurement techniques to take account of both objective and subjective features of reality, since both affect the way crime is produced and the effectiveness of prevention and intervention. Importantly, he recognizes the value of tapping multiple knowledge producers, seeing these not only as objective disciplinary based knowledge by criminologists

in organized academia, but also spontaneous and less organized professional and subjective knowledge produced by practitioners and professionals in communities, in order to reduce the bias of existing measures (See Henry, 2012 on moving from interdisciplinary to transdisciplinary producers of knowledge in criminology).

Overall, the goal of Agnew's book "is to lay the foundation for a unified theory of crime, one that examines a broad range of crimes and incorporates the key arguments of all major theories and perspectives" because all have some relevance (p. 201). How far he succeeds in this endeavor is open to interpretation. In arriving at that assessment there are a number of observations to be made. First, it was surprising to me that this book attempts integration of criminological thought without first systematically reviewing previous attempts at integrating criminological theory that have occurred over the past 33 years. It is also surprising that the book which proposed integration around core assumptions of theory and advocates "criminologists actively discuss the assumptions proposed," does not review previous criminological discussions of these assumptions (that have also occurred during the past 30 years). So, how new the foundation of a unified theory is, remains questionable. What is new, and is to Agnew's great credit is that he marries these two approaches using the core assumptions as a vehicle for theoretical integration. This has not been done before and represents a major innovation in criminological thinking. However, because he fails to systematically review the previous literature on integrative theory Agnew does not address the core questions raised by this previous work, but rather side-steps them. Nonetheless, as a mainstream theorist responsible for one of the central theories in criminology, general or revised strain theory, *Toward unifying criminology* represents a major shift recognizing not only the value of the mainstream contribution, but also the contribution by critical criminology to the field. Ironically, that Agnew does not tell us precisely what concepts and propositions should be integrated, in what ways, and at what level, or how much contribution each theoretical explanation makes to the overall causal explanation of what

kinds of crimes or offenders, and in what ways this combination varies for different agencies, entities or peoples, may be less significant to the field than the symbolic impact that one of its leading single-theory advocates has made the integrative turn. On balance, Agnew's unifying criminology restates the need for integration, raises many of the same questions other integrationalists have raised, does not answer them, but lays out a research agenda for how they may be answered, and does all this in a unique and accessible way. And for that his book is to be highly commended, and read by both mainstream and critical criminologists.

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