

**THE POWER OF ONE?:
REFLECTIONS ON AGNEW'S UNIFIED THEORY OF CRIME**

James D. Unnever, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee

Year after year, at the end of every semester criminology students express their frustration with after being exposed to what seems to be an endless potpourri of theories of offending. With a sense of pragmatic urgency, they question why criminologists do not just combine all of these explanations into one comprehensive grand theory of crime. After all, they are taught that the data, with some nuanced equivocations, support the basic tenets of each theory. For example, the students learn that associating with delinquent peers, having low self-control, being weakly bonded, and encountering stresses and strains will increase the likelihood that a person will commit crime. To them, it just does not make sense that they have to separately learn the assumptions and core explanations of each theory. Instead, out of their frustration, they demand that criminologists develop one unified integrated theory of crime that incorporates the core findings of each theory of crime.

At this point, professors routinely tell their students that an integrated unified theory of crime is impossible because the currently prevailing theories of crime—that is, those that are taught most often (e.g., learning-differential association, low self-control, social bonds, and general strain theory)—have conflicting assumptions. For example, Hirschi's social bond theory assumes that people are inherently born with the predisposition to engage in crime whereas strain theories argue that people will not offend unless they are pressured to do so. These incompatible assumptions make it impossible to construct a single theory of crime. It would be the equivalent of building a house on a cracked foundation.

Therefore, most criminologists identify with a particular theory of crime. Their affinity is generally grounded in whether they agree with the theory's core assumptions.

Thus, “conservative” criminologists—that is, for example, those who identify with the argument that people engage in crime because they cannot control their impulses to immediately satisfy themselves—gravitate to theories of social and self-control. On the other hand, more liberal minded criminologists—that is, those who believe that people are pressured into crime—gravitate to theories that argue that societies have stressors embedded within them (e.g., income inequality, poverty) that cause people to offend. Careers are thus born and sustained as criminologists defend and extend “their” theory. This entrenchment, although not always, is usually accompanied with the desire of proving that their theory is right and that all the other theories are wrong.

Braving the Troubled Waters

Into this seemingly unresolvable quagmire steps Robert Agnew with his latest scholarly achievement, *Toward a Unified Criminology Integrating Assumptions about Crime, People, and Society*. As the title declares, Agnew has squarely and inspiringly placed himself in the middle of the debate about whether it is possible to build a unified integrated holistic theory of crime. That is, a grand theory that fully explains the causes of all offending. His treatise is based on a vast reading of emerging literature that sheds light on the basic assumptions of the theories of crime.

Agnew contends that criminology is ripe enough to create a grand theory of crime. Building upon what is already known, this all-encompassing unified theory will explain individual differences in offending. It will explain group differences in crime. It will explain individual differences in crime within groups. It will link the macro causes of crime (e.g., income inequality) with the micro causes (e.g., individual differences). It will explain the causes of crime regardless of the type of crime studied (i.e., from street crimes to white collar crime). And it will explain more of the variance in crime than has been heretofore been achieved. In fact, Agnew (2011:viii) boldly states that “the problem is not a lack of

theories or explanations; the discipline is blessed (or cursed?) with scores of theories. And: "It seems doubtful that the development of yet another theory will significantly advance the discipline" (Agnew, 2011:201-202). Therefore, according to Agnew, what the discipline needs is to integrate the existing theories of crime into one unified holistic theoretical framework.

Seeking the Middle Ground: Bridging the Differences in Assumptions

What is Crime?

Agnew begins his treatise by noting that the prevailing theories of crime widely differ in how they define crime. For example, social and self-control theorists base their definition of crime on criminal statutes. In comparison, conflict theorists contend that existing criminal statutes do not define a broad array of harmful behaviors (e.g., polluting the environment, corporate negligence that results bodily harm or death). They further contend that these omissions result from dominant groups controlling the law-defining process.

Agnew, in an innovative way, attempts to resolve these fundamental differences by generating a definition of crime that includes behaviors that are universally defined to be illegal (e.g., individual definitions of homicide) and those that are harmful but rarely ever included in existing criminal statutes (e.g., corporate homicide). Agnew (2011:194) states that "crime is best defined as (1) acts which cause blameworthy harm, (2) are condemned by the public, and/or (3) are sanctioned by the state." Based on this definition, he suggests that criminologists use international human right laws as a basis for constructing their definitions of what behaviors should be analyzed (i.e., defined as criminal). These international laws transcend the political agenda of any one particular country (i.e., transcend the interests of elites) and represent "the best available attempt to reach a broad consensus regarding those behaviors that are universally harmful (Agnew, 2011:32)." Documents that criminologists can reference to generate universal definitions of what is criminal include the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Thus, Agnew's expansive definition of crime presents a creative way to bridge the gap between social and self-control theorists use of existing criminal statutes and the recognition by conflict theorists that dominant groups largely control the ability to define what is illegal. Thus, his unified theory of crime includes definitions of crime based on criminal laws (e.g., behaviors that are universally condemned; murder, robbery, rape, burglary, theft and vandalism) while also incorporating definitions of crime that include harms committed by the powerful (e.g., corporations) as well as by state governments (e.g., failure to protect civil liberties, right to gainful employment, torture, right to medical care) as defined by international laws.

Do People Freely Choose or Are They Pressured into Crime?

Another debate that divides theories of crime is whether people freely choose to engage in crime or whether they are pressured into crime. For example, social and self-control (and rational choice) theorists assume that people freely choose to commit crime because it is in their self-interest to do so. Therefore, the most efficient way to deter crime is to increase the certainty and severity of punishment. On the other hand, strain theorists, for example, argue that people do not freely choose to engage in crime because of their self-interest but, rather, because they encounter stressors that compel them to offend.

Agnew attempts to resolve these fundamental differences in assumptions by arguing that people have a "bounded agency". The concept of bounded agency allows for social and self-control theorists to be correct in their assumption that offenders are rational thinkers who imperfectly weigh the costs and benefits of committing crime. Thus, social and self-control theorists are partially correct that increasing the certainty and to a lesser extent the severity of punishment may deter some individuals from engaging in crime. His concept of

bounded agency also allows for crime theories (e.g., strain) that argue that people are pressured into crime to be correct. Agnew suggests that individuals, especially those with greater agency, are more likely to engage in crime when they have weak ties to both criminal and conventional others, have criminal friends, and are high in strains.

Notably, Agnew details the factors that enhance individual agency. "Individuals will exercise greater agency when they (a) are motivated to alter their behavior, (b) believe they can produce desired change, (c) have the resources to exercise agency (e.g., creativity, broad knowledge, autonomy, power) and (d) are in environments that have weak or countervailing constraints, provide numerous opportunities for agency, and encourage agency" (Agnew, 2011:60). In short, people choose to engage in crime but do so because they are pressured into offending.

Nature versus Nurture

Are people inherently selfish in their decision-making always trying to maximize their self-interests as assumed by social and self-control theorists? Does crime, therefore, result from a person's desire to maximize their gains even if it violates moral and criminal codes? Or, are people inherently empathetic individuals who are concerned about the welfare of others? If so, people will only engage in crime if they are pressured to do so. Agnew also outlines a third possibility. Is it possible that people are born "blank slates" with no inherent predispositions; that is, all behavior is learned? Consequently, people will only engage in crime when they overly exposed to definitions that encourage them to offend.

Agnew argues that these polarizing positions are too simplistic to capture the complexity of human behavior. Rather, he argues that each assumption is partially correct. That is, people are, at times, rational self-interested individuals. People are also genuinely concerned about the welfare of others and will be, at times, altruistic even at their own expense. In addition, given the vast cultural differences in behaviors, he suggests that a

substantive component of behavior is learned when people interact with one another. Thus, individuals are socially concerned, self-interested, and behave according to what they have learned from others. As a result, Agnew (2011:111) concludes that "all crime theories are relevant."

Notably, Agnew assumes that there is individual variation across these dimensions. That is, some people will be more self-interested or empathetic than others. He also contends that people who are more socially concerned will be less likely to offend than those who are self-interested. In addition, Agnew argues that context matters. That is, some contexts encourage people to be more self-interested than socially concerned or exacerbate the likelihood that individuals will be exposed to definitions that favor the violation of laws. Therefore, a growth area within his unified theory of crime is to account for these individual and contextual differences. "In sum, research examining the individual and circumstantial variation in social concern and self-interest should dramatically improve efforts to explain crime, since it will focus on a range of factors that are either ignored in quantitative criminology or erroneously assumed to be similar across individuals" (Agnew, 2011:115).

Are Societies Characterized by Consensus or Conflict?

The final polarizing debate that divides theories of crime is whether societies are characterized by a shared consensus or by group conflict. This is a key assumption in terms of its implications. First, because it underlies the debate as to why some behaviors become defined as illegal. Second, because it frames the debate on whether group differences in crime are caused by societal inequities or individuals making "bad" choices.

Briefly, social and self-control theorists believe that behaviors are defined as illegal because they offend collectively held sentiments. These collectively held sentiments are the basis for existing criminal statutes. Social and self-control theorists also assume that group differences are "not central to the explanation of crime" rather "crime stems from low self-

control and a breakdown in social control." (Agnew, 2011:123). According to Agnew, social and self-control theorists assume that these factors explain all crime regardless of group affiliation.

On the other hand, conflict theorists argue that dominant groups use the law to maintain their superordinate position by controlling class-based and minority group threats. These scholars contend that dominant groups control emerging threats by defining behaviors emanating from the poor as illegal. (Note, also that conflict theorists argue that harmful behaviors that dominant groups engage in (e.g., pollution) are rarely defined as illegal.) These theorists further suggest that group-based differences in crime result from (a) differences in how behaviors are defined as illegal, (b) differences in the application of the law (e.g., disproportionate minority contact with the police), and (c) the consequences of their oppression.

Not surprisingly, Agnew resolves this contentious debate by seeking the middle ground. He argues that societies are characterized by both consensus and conflict. Thus, some behaviors are defined as illegal because they truly offend collectively held sentiments (such as murder, rape, robbery, and theft). He also recognizes that other harmful behaviors (e.g., systemic discrimination) are not defined as illegal because dominant groups control the law defining process. Thus, Agnew's definition of crime is based on international law, which includes both universally condoned behaviors (individual definitions of homicide) and harmful behaviors perpetrated by corporations (e.g., pollution) and state governments (e.g., torture).

It is notable that Agnew essentially dismisses the contention by social and self-control theorists that group-based explanations are unnecessary. However, again seeking a middle ground, he suggests that individuals do make "bad" choices (e.g., dropping out of school) and that these decisions increase their probability of engaging in crime. Yet, Agnew

recognizes that there are systemic disparities (e.g., inequities in school funding) that facilitate people making “bad” choices that may lead to criminal behavior. These inequities define the oppression that the poor and minorities encounter. Thus, oppressed groups (such as African Americans) “may commit crimes in an effort to improve their situation, protect their limited resources, seek revenge against those who oppress them, symbolically express “resistance” to their oppression, or otherwise react to the negative consequences of their oppression” (Agnew, 2011:132).

The Nature of Reality and How Best to Measure It

The final divisive question is whether reality is an objective phenomenon or whether it can be understood only from the perspective of the person who is experiencing it. In other words, is reality an objective or subjective phenomenon? Agnew suggests that positivist criminologists assume that reality is an objective phenomenon that can be reliably measured. These criminologists are most often referred to as “quantitative” scholars who usually collect their data on crime using surveys. In general, quantitative criminologists analyze their “objective” data using sophisticated statistical procedures such as regression models and confirmatory factor analyses.

Scholars who assume that reality can be best understood from the subjective perspective of individuals are most often referred to as “constructionists” or “qualitative criminologists”. The primary method employed by these criminologists is to intensely interview respondents. It is assumed that each individual subjectively creates their own reality and that their behavior is governed by how they define their reality (i.e., if people define it as real it is real in its consequences).

Agnew uses the relationship between education and crime to illustrate how quantitative criminologists differ from qualitative scholars in their analysis. Quantitative criminologists would collect objective data on school performance (e.g., grade point

average, membership in clubs and organizations, average time spent on homework) and empirically correlate it with the self-reported criminal activity, which is collected by surveying students. In comparison, the qualitative scholar would intensely interview students to assess how they perceive their schooling. This qualitative approach, for example, could find that even though students are objectively doing well in school (i.e., have a high grade point average) they feel alienated from their school (perhaps, because they are bullied while at school). Thus, these students may engage in delinquency even though they have no objective reason to do so.

Agnew resolves this apparent divisive dilemma by, once again, seeking the middle ground. Thus, he argues that a fuller and more complete understanding of crime can only be generated if criminologists assume that reality has both an objective and subjective component. Consequently, he contends that criminologists should use quantitative and qualitative methods. He labels this mixed methodology as the multiple perspectives approach (MPA). The MPA “draws on both the positivistic and constructionist approaches, incorporating the advantages of each” (Agnew, 2011:181). Agnew also outlines how criminologists should employ the MPA. Criminologists should “collect data from the target individual, members of the target individual’s primary group (e.g., parents, peers), key members of the target individual’s secondary group (e.g., teachers employers), and—where possible and desirable—other sources (e.g., official records, independent observations, experiments) (Agnew, 2011:190).

Summary

Agnew does an excellent job of describing the assumptions of the prevailing theories of crime (strain, differential association, and social and self-control theories [Gottfredson and Hirschi’s general theory of crime and Hirschi’s bond theory]). And, why most theorists consider these assumptions to be incompatible. These incompatible assumptions, he

suggests, hinder the discipline of criminology. They fractionalize research into insular factions. Thus, criminologists define themselves as, for example, strain theorists, and they devote their career to testing its hypotheses and expanding its scope. Whereas, other criminologists define themselves as social or self-control theorists and they devote their career to testing and refining its core hypothesis.

Most notably, the incompatibility of these assumptions hinders holistic research that allows the basic tenets of each theory to be included in a single comprehensive model of crime. Rather, studies that do include measures of, for example, low self-control and differential association, in one model (i.e., regression equation) frame their analysis as a “test of two rival theories” (Unnever, Cullen, and Agnew, 2006:1). Implicit to this effort is an ‘us versus them’ mentality with the results from the analysis showing that one of the theories has more predictive power than the other. Of course, this win-lose framework is rarely validated as the data show that both theories are nearly equally supported.

In fact, it is this latter finding that, I believe, is compelling Agnew’s scholarly effort to create a grand theory of offending. He surveys the criminological research and finds that it consistently shows that the dominant theories of crime, low self-control, social bonds, differential association, and strain, generate consistent support. Therefore, it only makes pragmatic sense for criminologists to simultaneously include measures of each theory into their statistical models without being encumbered by the incompatibility of each theory’s assumptions. His book attempts to solve this problem by creating the groundwork for an integrative theory of crime. This foundation melds the assumptions of each theory. Thus, researchers, as they move forward, can include measures of strain, social control, low self-control, and differential association in one regression model knowing that they are not violating any theoretical assumptions. His integrated theory becomes the perfect scaffolding for creating a comprehensive holistic theory of offending that generalizes across all individuals, groups, and types of crime.

General Comments

I share with Professor Agnew his frustration with not being able to include measures of each of the current prevailing theory's core arguments into one regression equation without framing the analysis as a test of 'rival theories'. This is particularly frustrating when the data show support for each theory. It only makes sense to include each theory's measures into one model. But, do we need to create the 'holy grail' of criminology, a unified integrated theory of crime that explains all offending, to move the discipline of criminology forward? I do not believe so.

Rather, I present another quite different path that I believe would invigorate criminology even more so than a unified theory of crime. This path is different because I suggest that the prevailing hegemonic theories of crime (social bonds, low self-control, strain, and differential association) are built upon limited worldviews that prevent them from being all that is necessary to build a unified theory of crime. Therefore, I disagree with Agnew's conclusion that: "It seems doubtful that the development of yet another theory will significantly advance the discipline."

Instead, I suggest that a greater understanding of offending will emerge as criminologists begin to "think outside of the box". That is, not have the prevailing theories of crime singularly or collectively limit the way that criminologists approach their analyses of why people engage in crime. In its place, I contend that what is needed is an expansive growth in criminological theories that incorporate the worldviews of people who offend. For example, feminist criminologists have rejected the worldview implicit to the dominant theories of crime. They argue that theories of crime born out of the experiences of white men and created to explain male offending (i.e., all of the prevailing theories of crime have been written by relatively affluent white men) have not captured the lived experiences of what it means to be a woman in a gendered stratified society. Similarly, Unnever and

Gabidon (2011) present a theory of African American offending that has as its core assumption that the worldview of blacks is peerless and that the prevailing theories of crime fail to capture what it means to be an African American in a racially stratified society.

Collectively, this line of 'thinking outside the box' suggests that the diversity in offending can only be captured with a diversity of theoretical reasoning. That is, there is a need for a pluralism of criminological theories rather than a grand or integrated theory of crime. I know that this line of reasoning clutters the playing the field and will frustrate those who desire simplicity (or believe that they already KNOW why people offend). But the reality is that people are complex and groups are even more complex (nevertheless, corporations and state governments). People may then declare out of their frustration: "Are you suggesting that we need a theory of crime for different groups and institutions?" My answer is yes.

Thus, I encourage criminologists to construct theories of crime that examine the worldview of different groups, such as women, African Americans, Asians, Hispanics and how these worldviews shape their decisions to offend. Scholars should also be aware that there is tremendous variance within each of these groups as it would be inappropriate to collapse, for example, Afro-Caribbean blacks into the same model of offending as American born blacks. Similarly, there is tremendous variation among Hispanics (Cubans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, etc.). It is also likely that robust theories need to emerge that model the complexities of corporate crime, state crime, and transnational crimes. I argue that the individual level orientation of the prevailing theories of crime—low self-control, differential association, strain, and social bonds—cannot capture the complexities of these types of crime.

Critics may argue that the hegemonic theories of crime can incorporate the core arguments of, for example, feminist criminology or Unnever and Gabidon's theory of

African American offending. For example, strain theory includes the argument that discrimination is related to offending. But a correlation that shows that African Americans who experience discrimination are more likely to offend does not capture or illustrate the worldview of what it means to be black in a racially stratified society. Put more simply, the prevailing theories fail to recognize that, for example, women and African Americans have peerless worldviews and that these worldviews, in the case of women, minimize, and in the case of African Americans, enhance their probability of offending. This is not to say that the theories that are currently dominating criminology are wrong. It is just that their analyses are limited.

In sum, I do not believe that criminology as a science is ripe enough for a single general theory to explain all offending. Rather, I encourage a plethora of criminological theories that capture the diversity and complexity of the lived human experience. After all, the beauty of the rainbow is in the diversity of its colors. Perhaps, down the road, once this richness in criminological theory has emerged, an eminent scholar will synthesize all of the findings into one grand theory that explains all offending. However, note that no other science that I am aware of has yet reached the maturation point where the need for further theorizing is mute because it has THE grand theory.

In the end, Agnew presents a scholarly treatise on the how the assumptions of the prevailing theories of crime (social and self-control, differential association, and strain) have factionalized the discipline of criminology. He also should be commended for creating an excellent review of the literature that sheds light on the validity of each of the theory's basic assumptions. It is based on this emerging body of research, that Agnew claims that an integrative theory can be constructed that melds the core hypotheses of the prevailing theories of crime.

REFERENCES

- Agnew, Robert. 2011. *Toward a Unified Criminology Integrating Assumptions about Crime, People, and Society*. New York: New York University Press.
- Unnever, James D., Francis T. Cullen, and Robert Agnew. 2006. "Why is "Bad" Parenting Criminogenic? Implications from Rival Theories." Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice 4 (1): 3-33.
- Unnever, James D. and Shaun Gabbidon. 2011. *A Theory of African American Offending: Race, Racism, and Crime*. New York: Routledge Press.