

**Synopsis of**  
***Toward a Unified Criminology:***  
***Integrating Assumptions about Crime, People, and Society***  
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*Toward a Unified Criminology* focuses on the underlying assumptions that criminologists make about the nature of crime, people, society, and reality. It describes the assumptions made by different theories and perspectives, noting that they are often opposed. This opposition makes it impossible to integrate these theories and perspectives or develop a unified criminology. The book then draws on recent work from several disciplines to evaluate these assumptions and propose a new, integrated set of assumptions, which can form the foundation for a unified criminology. This synopsis describes the key arguments of the book, with several passages excerpted from the book.

*Toward a Unified Criminology* begins by arguing that criminology is a divided discipline. It provides an overview of the differences between "mainstream" and "critical" criminologists, including differences in the types of crime examined, the explanations of crime, the methods used to test these explanations, and policy recommendations. Mainstream criminologists usually focus on individual acts of theft, violence and illicit drug use; they explain these acts largely in terms of individual characteristics and features of the immediate social environment, such as low self-control and poor parental supervision; they rely heavily on the statistical analysis of survey data to test these explanations; and they make recommendations for the more effective rehabilitation and sanction of offenders. By contrast, critical criminologists focus on a broader range of "crimes," including many harmful acts that are not in violation of the criminal law; they explain crime in terms larger social forces, particularly

the efforts of some groups to oppress others; they rely more heavily on comparative/historical and qualitative analyses; and they recommend that the larger social environment be altered in ways that reduce oppression.

Likewise, there are major divisions within both mainstream and critical criminology. Strain theorists, for example, explain crime largely in terms of variation in the motivation to offend, focusing on those strains or stressors that pressure individuals into crime. Control theorists argue that all individuals are strongly motivated to engage in crime, and instead focus on variation in those social and self-controls that restrain individuals from crime. Certain critical criminologists assume that class conflict is the primary cause of crime, while others focus on gender or race/ethnic conflict. There have been several attempts to develop integrated theories of crime, but such attempts typically only integrate a few mainstream theories. Further, some challenge the integrity of these integrations, claiming that they violate certain of the core assumptions of the theories that are integrated. And none of these integrations has attracted a large following. This division has hurt criminology; the discipline lacks a comprehensive framework that would allow us to better explain crime and more effectively advocate for its reduction.

The book argues that the divisions in criminology have deep roots, reflecting the different assumptions that theories and perspectives make about the nature of crime, people, society, and reality. In particular:

- *Definition of crime:* Mainstream criminologists assume that crime is best defined in terms of violations of the criminal law, while critical criminologists argue that it is best to focus on acts that are harmful and “blameworthy,” including acts *not* legally defined as crimes.
- *Determinism versus agency:* Most mainstream criminologists assume or act as if crime is fully determined by forces beyond the individual’s control, while critical

- criminologists and certain others place great stress on the agency or the ability of people to exert some independent influence on their thoughts and behaviors.
- *The nature of human nature.* Some theorists argue that people are self-interested, seeking to satisfy their needs and desires in the most expedient manner, with little concern for others. Others claim that people are socially concerned; they desire close ties to others, are quick to conform, and are reluctant to harm innocent others. Still others claim that people are “blank slates,” shaped by the social environment.
  - *The nature of society.* Many mainstream criminologists assume that society is characterized by consensus; people hold similar values, have compatible goals, and agree on the rules of competition. Critical criminologists assume that society is characterized by conflict, people disagree over certain core values, have conflicting goals, and the members of more privileged groups oppress others as they seek to maintain or enhance their privileged position.
  - *The nature of reality.* Most mainstream criminologists and certain others assume that there is an objective reality “out there” that can be accurately measured. They focus on developing the single best measures of this reality. Many critical criminologists assume that people hold differing views of the world and they focus on measuring these views since they have a major impact on behavior. Some, in fact, claim that there is no objective reality, rather there are multiple subjective realities.

These assumptions are the foundations upon which mainstream and critical theories are built; they define the scope of the field and influence the causes of crime that are examined, the methods that are employed, and the policy recommendations that are made. For example, the assumption that people are self-interested leads criminologists to focus on those factors that restrain the pursuit of self-interest, such as self-control. The assumption that people are socially concerned leads criminologists to focus on those

factors that pressure or entice individuals into crime, such as strains. The book describes the many influences of these assumptions on crime theories and perspectives.

But despite the importance of these assumptions, they are seldom discussed and evaluated, particularly by mainstream criminologists. One reason for this is that, until recently, it was difficult to evaluate the validity of these assumptions. For example, the data on human nature were of poor quality. As a result, it was possible for some to claim that people are self-interested, pointing to the many cruel acts committed in the pursuit of personal interests; others to claim that people are socially concerned, pointing to the many kind acts committed at some personal cost; and still others to claim that people are blank slates, pointing to the many differences between individuals and groups. There was no good way to adjudicate between these claims. But in recent years there has been a wealth of research on these assumptions by biologists, psychologist, economists, political scientists, and sociologists. For example, there has been a great deal of work on the nature of human nature, including experiments focusing on aspects of self interest and social concern, surveys examining the response to moral dilemmas, anthropological research on human universals, psychological research on those traits and behaviors that appear very early in life, studies of primate behavior, computer simulations and studies of hunting and gathering societies by evolutionary psychologists, and work on the biological foundations of human traits. With certain notable exceptions, criminologists have not taken account of this work. A substantial part of *Toward a Unified Criminology* provides summaries of this work and discusses its implications for the assumptions that criminologists make.

The central message of the book is that there is some truth to each of the assumptions made by criminologists, but each assumption only captures a part of the truth. For example, it is not the case that people are self-interested *or* social concerned *or* blank slates. Rather, research suggests that people are self-interested, socially concerned, *and* learn much from others, with the strength of these traits varying across

individuals and social circumstances. The book elaborates on this message by developing a new set of underlying assumptions which integrate and extend the assumptions made by existing theories and perspectives. These assumptions provide the foundation on which to build a unified criminology. Much of the book is devoted to describing these assumptions and discussing their implications for criminology, including the types of crime we should examine, the causes we should consider, the methods we should employ, and the policy recommendations we might make. Many suggestions for further research are made here.

It is not possible in this brief synopsis to describe the research on which these new assumptions are based or their many implications for criminology. But I next provide brief descriptions of the integrative assumptions and certain of their implications:

*The Nature of Crime.* The advantages and disadvantages of several approaches to defining crime are discussed in the book. I argue that crime is best defined as acts which 1) cause blameworthy harm, 2) are condemned by the public, and/or 3) are sanctioned by the state. I further argue that criminologists can profitably draw on the international human rights law to help define "blameworthiness" and "harm." While the international law is a political creation, it transcends the politics of particular states, reflects extensive debate between agents with a range of perspectives, and provides much concrete guidance for identifying harmful and blameworthy acts. The above three dimensions encourage criminologists to devote greater attention to the origins and nature of their subject matter (e.g., why is it that certain blameworthy harms are not condemned or sanctioned by the state?). They provide criminologists with a new mission; making the public and policy makers more aware of those blameworthy harms that are not condemned and sanctioned. And they provide the basis for a new typology of crime, with seven types of crime identified (e.g., blameworthy harms that are not strongly condemned and sanctioned; acts that cause little blameworthy harm but are strongly condemned and sanctioned). This typology also directs attention to certain

neglected types of crime (e.g., blameworthy harms that are sanctioned by the state but not widely condemned by the public).

*Determinism and Agency.* Behaviors are said to range along a continuum, from fully determined to partly agentic. Drawing on theory and research from several areas, a theory of determinism and agency is developed. Individuals are predicted to exercise greater agency when they a) are motivated to alter their behavior, b) believe they can produce desired change, c) possess the traits and resources necessary 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. The implications of these arguments for crime are discussed. Among other things, we would expect behavior to be more unpredictable and somewhat more likely to involve crime when conditions favor the exercise of agency. Therefore, taking account of the factors that influence agency will allow criminologists to better explain both the level of crime and the amount of variation (unpredictability) around this level. The book then discusses how we might influence the exercise of agency, noting that those most likely to exercise agency are especially subject to guidance. They are open to change, inclined to conscious deliberation, and better able to act on the choices they make.

*Human Nature.* Research clearly indicates that people are self-interested and often take some account of the costs and benefits of possible actions. The pursuit of personal interests is especially important in certain circumstances, including competition among males for rank, competition over scarce resources, and interactions with those in out-groups. But at the same time, people show concern for others, especially kin and members of in-groups, but also strangers. This concern involves a desire for close ties with and the respect of others, empathy for others, a reluctance to cause direct harm to innocent others, an inclination to help innocent others in need, a desire to cooperate with others who reciprocate in an equitable manner, and a strong inclination to conform.

Further, people have a strong desire and ability to learn from others, and the above inclinations for social concern and self interest are specified, modified, and stressed to varying degrees in social groups. This more complex view of human nature suggests that all theories of crime are relevant, including those that focus on the constraints to and the motivations for crime. Also, criminologists should attempt to better measure the traits of self-interest and social concern, which vary somewhat across individuals, and examine their effect on crime. At present, criminologists tend to view self-interest as a constant and focus on the factors that restrain individuals from acting on their interests in a criminal manner. Further, criminologists should pay more attention to those social circumstances that foster social concern and self-interest; they too should impact crime. There is also reason to believe that levels of self-interest and social concern can be deliberately altered, suggesting a range of policy interventions.

*Consensus and Conflict.* After evaluating the key arguments of consensus and conflict theories, an integrated theory is presented. All functioning societies are said to be characterized by a core consensus; with people condemning the unconditional use of personal violence and theft and cooperating in certain areas, such as defense from external threats. Beyond that, the extent and nature of consensus and conflict vary. Conflict involves the oppression of one group by another, with oppression involving the infliction of blameworthy harms. A variety of blameworthy harms or types of oppression are listed. Those factors influencing the extent and nature of conflict are described, along with the reasons why conflict influences crime. Conflict generally increases crime among both oppressors and oppressed, although certain types of conflict may reduce crime among the oppressed (e.g., the "paternalistic oppression" to which females are often subject). Drawing on the integrated theory, a list of variables predicted to affect crime is presented. Certain of these variables play a central role in current research (e.g., self-control, poverty), while others are neglected (e.g., discrimination).

*The Nature of Reality.* It is said that there is an objective reality that affects behavior, including crime. But it is difficult to accurately measure this reality, particularly since individual reports of it are biased for several reasons. Some progress, however, has been made in developing “reduced-bias” measures of this reality. Such measures focus on the overlap or shared variance between different information sources, including reports from different types of respondents (e.g., juveniles, parents, teachers) and other information sources (e.g., official records, independent assessments by trained observers). Researchers, however, should not rely solely on these reduced-bias measures. It is also important to consider the subjective views of different types of respondents. They also affect behavior, even after researchers take account of reduced-bias measures. Further, researchers should examine the relationship between the different information sources (e.g., between juvenile and parent reports of the same factor, or between reduced-bias measures and the subjective views of respondents). Particular types of relationships may affect crime, over and above the individual effects of their component parts. For example, crime may be more likely when juvenile and parents hold very different views of reality, with these different views creating conflict and strain.

The book concludes by briefly discussing how these integrated assumptions might form the basis for a unified theory of crime, incorporating key arguments from all major theories and perspectives, and describing the steps that should to be taken in constructing such a theory. And I would like to conclude this synopsis by thanking David Polizzi, the editor of the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology*, for making this review symposium possible. The chief aim of *Toward a Unified Criminology* is to stimulate discussion and debate on the underlying assumptions which divide criminology, and this symposium is a wonderful first step in that direction. I did not have the opportunity to read the reviews of my book when writing this synopsis, but I also thank the reviewers for the careful consideration that I am sure they gave the book.



I will respond to their comments in a later issue of this journal. When responding, I will *not* play the role of an author trying to defend his or her arguments against all challenges. I readily acknowledge that the arguments in *Toward a Unified Criminology* can be improved. The book addresses a broad range of topics and draws on research from many areas; it is quite likely that I have overlooked certain relevant work, failed to consider some arguments that challenge the positions I advocate, and neglected some promising avenues for further strengthening the assumptions which underlie criminology. I do *not* view *Toward a Unified Criminology* as the final word on the topics addressed, but as an effort to begin what I hope will be a long and productive conversation on key issues in the discipline. So I welcome all constructive comments and suggestions.