Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Define and discuss criminology terms introduced in Unit I.
2. Recall and explain theories, issues, and perspectives that apply to criminology and social policy.
3. Recall how criminological research can impact theory and social policy development.
4. Identify and describe research types, stages, techniques, and processes.

Written Lecture

Crime Defined

The definition of crime is dependent on the perspective from which it is viewed. Crime can be viewed in terms of legalistic, political, sociological, and psychological perspectives. The legalistic definition is the view adopted by the text, and therefore we will also concentrate on this definition.

Crime is defined as conduct that is a violation of criminal laws established by the federal government, a state, or a local jurisdiction that has the authority to create and enforce such laws (Schmalleger, 2012). As the Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu stated, "The more laws you make, the more criminals you will have." The problem with the legalistic view of crime is that those individuals who create the laws have a great deal of power to infuse possible immoral standards into criminal law. In contrast, not all immoral acts are recognized by statute (Schmalleger, 2012). For example, the act of lying is immoral by most standards, but not always illegal; when you lie to your significant other, or when children lie to their parents, it is not illegal. But, as demonstrated in the Casey Anthony case, lying to authorities is a criminal act. Casey Anthony is a Florida mother who was charged with first-degree murder in the death of her 2-year-old daughter, Caylee. She was acquitted by the jury, but was convicted on four counts of lying to investigators and given a four-year sentence.

Once criminal behavior has been established, the criminologists, criminalists, and criminal justice professionals apply these standards to the functioning of the criminal justice field. Criminal justice professionals are those who work within the system on a daily basis, such as police, lawyers, and judges. Criminalists are those individuals responsible for the collection and processing of forensic evidence. These include crime scene processors and laboratory personnel. Criminologists are researchers in criminology, often in academic environments, who develop and apply theories of criminal behavior to social policy. If the terms criminologist, criminalist, and criminal justice professional sound familiar, this may be because all three are the foundation of mythical positions represented on the various CSI television programs. Don’t believe everything you see on television, though. For example, a criminal justice instructor who has personally spoken with a Miami crime scene technician says that technician does not drive a Hummer!
Criminologists, Criminal Behavior, and Deviance

During most of this course, we will be concentrating on the work of the criminologist. So, what is criminology? It is defined as “an interdisciplinary profession built around the scientific study of crime and criminal behavior, including their forms, causes, legal aspects, and control” (Schmalleger, p. G-3, 2012). Although the terms deviant and criminal behaviors are often referred to as synonyms, the distinction between them is significant. Deviance involves behavior that is against established social norms, while criminal behavior involves using exploitation and deception to obtain other peoples’ valued resources (Schmalleger, 2012). Deviant behavior is generally associated with juvenile activity, but it can extend to adult behavior. Alcoholism, for example, is a type of social deviant behavior that is not criminal, nor is it age-dependent.

A criminologist develops theories concerning criminal and deviant behavior. So, what is a theory? There is no universally accepted definition of a theory (Akers & Sellers, 2009). For example, a theory can be viewed as a “set of rules by which a person creates an ideal state of affairs” (Pepinsky, 1954, p.266), while Hunt (1991) defines a theory as a methodically related set of empirically testable statements. The purpose of theory is to increase understanding of a phenomenon through an organized structure capable of explaining and predicting that phenomenon.

In order to be accepted as a scientific discipline, criminological theories must withstand the scrutiny of any other scientific discipline’s theory. The evaluation of a scientific theory requires the consideration of consistent internal logic, scope, and parsimony of the theory’s concepts; testability of the overall theory; and the usefulness and policy implications of the theory. Most importantly, acceptance of a scientific theory requires the validation of the theory through empirical research (Akers & Sellers, 2009).

The Role of Research

Research is critical in the development and validation of any scientific theory. In order to develop a theory, one must first identify a problem. After the problem is identified, a hypothesis is formulated. The dependent and independent variables must then be identified and operationalized. After the variables have been put unto terms that can be measured, a research design must be chosen that addresses internal and external validity. When designing research, the choice is made between quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative research utilizes data collection and statistical analysis, while a qualitative study explores the meaning an individual or a group places on a social or human dilemma, and utilizes various methods, often interviews (Creswell, 2009). Once the research has been completed, results are analyzed using statistics or theme creation, depending on the choice of research method. Here’s an example in criminology:

- **Criminology Problem:** Why are males represented more in crime statistics than females?
- **Hypothesis:** Females are less represented in crime statistic due to male chivalry in the criminal justice system.
- **Independent variable:** Male chivalry
- **Operationalized:** The use of discretion by male officers toward female offenders
- **Dependent variable:** Female representation in crime statistics
Operationalized: Females versus males arrested for offenses where officer discretion can be exercised

Research Design: Use quantitative, quasi-experimental self-reporting. From a large, metropolitan police department, randomly select 20 male officers and 20 female officers to study for a period of 6 weeks. Collect data concerning encounters with offenders versus sex of the offender and exercise of discretion by the officer. To address validity, the officers will be selected from similar shifts and beats, and officers will be assigned numbers to ensure their anonymity. In addition, the names of the officers selected for the study will not be released to anyone within the department, and they will be instructed to keep this information confidential. To reduce bias in the actions of the officers, the officers within the studies will not be informed of the nature of the study.

Analysis of the data collected will either prove or nullify the hypothesis. Once a hypothesis has been repeatedly tested and proven valid, it is accepted as a theory. Most people are familiar with Einstein and his theory of relativity. While riding on the trolley away from the clock tower in downtown Bern, Switzerland, Einstein recognized that light must “catch up to you” as you ride away from the clock, and that the closer you get to the speed of light, the slower the clock will appear. In this moment, Einstein identified a problem and developed a hypothesis. He later tested the hypothesis, and his findings are now one of the most accepted theories in science: $E = mc^2$.

A theory is not a depiction of the real world, but is rather a description of a possible world. This is especially important to remember when evaluating the validity of a criminological theory. Theories within the field of criminology are not “hard truths”; they depict outcomes that are more or less likely to occur, given a set of circumstances. Since any theory describes the ideal state of affairs, a theory may exhibit similarities to the real world, but it will never be identical (Pepinsky, 1954).

Criminological theories can be categorized as explaining the creation of laws and the operation of the criminal justice system, or as explaining criminal behavior. Each category plays an important role within criminology; however, theories attempting to explain the deviation of human behavior from the social norm—theoretical criminology—far outnumber those attempting to explain the system itself (Akers & Seller, 2009). Since the 1950s, there has been a proliferation of the type of theory that bases its explanation of criminal and deviant behavior on societal influence.

In criminology, the divergence between theory and practice is fundamental and must be recognized. As you learn about each theory, you might feel that one theory does not explain every instance of criminal behavior. In an attempt to address this issue, many have taken aspects of several theories and combined them to create an integrated theory of crime. Ultimately, criminological theories are evaluated through their application to, and usefulness in, public policy, public safety, and criminal justice policy effectiveness (Akers & Sellers, 2009). Throughout this course, we will explore the evolution of criminological theory and how understanding an offender can affect the criminal justice system and current criminal trends.

References


**Supplemental Reading**

Click [here](#) to access a PDF of the Chapter 1 Presentation.  
Click [here](#) to access a PDF of the Chapter 2 Presentation.

Look in the CSU Online Library’s Criminal Justice Periodicals Index for articles pertaining to criminology theories and research. "*Offending Women*: A Double Entendre," by Joanne Belknap, examines 19 articles written about women offenders during the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*’s first 100 years. Check it out to see how women have been portrayed in criminology during the last century. The introduction details the research; the subsequent sections discuss the articles, including such subjects as women’s reformatory movements, prison matrons, and changes in the numbers of women incarcerated. A major surprise may be why some of them were incarcerated.