

The Need for Theory-Based Criminology

This session brings together a set of papers with the common aim of promoting a more theory-based criminology. The papers focus on particular common problems relating to theory and/or theory testing in criminology. Ways to advance criminological theorising and research are suggested.

Chair: Julie Horney (University at Albany)

**1. *The Importance of Asking Why and How. Toward an Analytical Criminology.*
Per-Olof Wikström (University of Cambridge)**

The aim of this paper is to provide a rationale and agenda for a more theory-driven, analytical criminology. It criticizes the common risk factor approach to theory and theory testing and its inherent problem of distinguishing between correlates and causes and inability to provide proper explanation of crime and its causes. The paper highlights the importance of having an adequate theory of action that can help identify causal mechanisms (processes) and integrate levels of explanation. It provides a clear demarcation criterion to distinguish between correlates and potential causes in the study of crime. Finally, it stresses the need to clearly differentiate between causes and the causes of the causes when analysing crime causation.

**2. *Sanctions, Temptations, and Self-Interest in Choice Theories of Crime*
Michael Gottfredson (University of California)**

The conceptual distinctions between compulsion and choice permeate criminology and the criminal law. Theories once were said to belong to one or the other perspective—the positive school or the classical school and the criminal law has always struggled with the concept of purposeful or intentional behaviour in the development of sanctioning systems. Contemporary research on the development of the tendency to engage in behaviour that favours short-term satisfactions but which entail longer term costs, on the effectiveness of external sanctions like deterrence in the criminal justice system, and on the similarities with crime of many non-crime behaviours are explored in an effort to bring individual action more directly to the foreground of theory.

**3. *Experiments are Not the Gold Standard: Causal Knowledge and Observational Science*
Robert J. Sampson (Harvard University)**

The growing movement of evidence-based criminology favours experiments—especially RCTs (randomized controlled trials)—as the gold standard for causal evidence (“what works”). This trend follows a larger experimental movement in the social sciences that eschews observational studies thought to be contaminated by “selection bias.” This paper critiques experimental hegemony and argues for the value of *theory-based* criminology linked to what I call *observational science*. Using neighbourhood-effects theory and results from the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) housing experiment as an example; I reconceptualise selection bias as a fundamental social process worthy of study in its own right rather than as a statistical nuisance. I also reconsider scientific claims about causality from experimentation in the social world. I argue that the unbiased estimates possible in experiments are often not of primary theoretical interest and that while the generation of causal knowledge does not depend on any one method it does depend on a theoretical interpretation of mechanism. It follows that experiments offer no special place in a hierarchy of evidence. Experiments are not the gold standard because there is no gold standard.

**4. *Discussant*
John Hagan (Northwestern University)**