

PART II

EXPLANATIONS OF CRIME

MARVIN D. KROHN

Over the past decade, there have been significant developments in theories of criminal and deviant behavior. Many of these developments have been generated by taking an important concept or approach and redirecting the way it is used. For example, both institutional anomie theory and general strain theory have taken the original approach developed by Durkheim and refined by Merton in two different directions. The understanding of why people behave in criminal or deviant ways has also been enhanced by significant research developments. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the area of biological and genetic approaches to the explanation of crime. The discovery of the structure of DNA and the resulting identification of genotypes has expanded the potential of this approach immeasurably. In addition, some theoretical perspectives have advanced in a steady progression with ideas fueled by the interplay between research and theoretical refinement.

We have not tried to include all extant theoretical perspectives. To do so would constitute a full compendium of its own. We have selected perspectives that represent both individual and social structural approaches to the explanation of crime and deviance. The selected perspectives all have experienced some theoretical growth in the past decade. The authors of the chapters have been instrumental in advancing their respective theories and the research that explores them.

As suggested some of the most significant theoretical developments in the study of crime and deviance are emanating from approaches that take a biological/genetic approach. Spurred on by dramatic findings in the areas of genetics and the related field of evolutionary psychology, scholars like Anthony Walsh and Kevin Beaver are trying to apply these findings to the study of crime and deviance. Part of the problem with the application of this approach is the fact that most criminologists have not been trained in genetics. Moreover, as Walsh and Beaver point out, part of the problem is a resistance to these perspectives by those trained in the social sciences.

Walsh and Beaver do an excellent job in summarizing the significant developments in this area and, most importantly, making this research accessible to social scientists.

Ronald Akers and Robert Burgess first introduced social learning theory in 1966. Since that time, Akers has continued to refine the theory and he and his many students have pursued a vigorous research program to examine the viability of the theory. In the current chapter, Akers and Jennings include a brief summary of the basic components of the theory and then proceed to focus on Akers' explication of the role of social structural variables. Although Akers suggested that social learning variables would be expected to mediate the relationship between factors such as gender and social class, he did not formally incorporate the social structural variables into his theory until 1998. An important contribution of this essay is the examination of the recent research on the full model.

Much like Akers, Howard Kaplan has been developing his self-referent theory over the course of 40 years. Although the central premise of the theory has remained consistent, Kaplan has done an excellent job of incorporating the findings from a long-term research project to modify and improve his theory. The current essay is the best exposition of his theory and its development that the editors of this handbook have seen. In it, he examines the basic tenets of the theory and documents how it has changed over time. Kaplan 'listens' to his research findings as well, if not better, than any other theorist does. Rather than dismissing findings that are contrary to the theory, he either endeavors to find a way to account for them within the structure of the theory or admits that they present a problem for the theory.

Self-control theory has received more attention over the past 10 years than any other theoretical perspective in the discipline. Predicated on the argument that an explanation of crime should be based on the characteristics of crime, Gottfredson and Hirschi argued that self-control, formed early in one's life, explained why some individuals are more likely than others to commit a crime or some other form of deviant behavior. While the theoretical argument is rather straightforward, the difficulty with the theory has been in the details of researching propositions derived from it. As a proponent of self-control theory, Alex Piquero reviews the controversial research on the theory. In his own research that is summarized in this chapter, Piquero has taken a leading role in developing measures of the concept of self-control and, thus, in providing evidence in support of the premises of the theory.

The strain perspective's popularity that was so evident from the late 1930s through to the 1960s significantly waned as findings from self-report studies questioned the impact of economic disadvantage as key cause of delinquency and crime. In the 1980s, Robert Agnew advanced a version of strain theory, general strain theory (GST), which identified a number of sources of strain other than that caused by economic hardship. His approach has revitalized interest in strain as evidenced by the research that Agnew reviews in his chapter. In addition to reviewing the theory and key research findings, Agnew demonstrates the potential of his perspective to account for group differences in crime and patterns of offending over the life course.

Much like the strain perspective, interest in labeling theory had diminished by the late 1970s. In part, this was a result of the oversimplification of both the theory and the criticisms leveled against it. Jón Bernburg examines how more recent work on labeling theory (including his own) has addressed those criticisms. In particular, Bernburg argues that the examination of mediating variables in examining how official intervention indirectly affects continued involvement in crime has been an important recognition leading to a renewed interest in the labeling theory. An area that Bernburg suggests that more research is needed is the investigation of contingencies that might explain why the label affects some people whereas others are not affected.

The remaining two selections can be characterized as emphasizing a social structural approach to the explanation of crime and deviance. Institutional anomie theory developed by Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld shares with Agnew the work of Merton as its intellectual antecedent. However, unlike Agnew who focused on the strain component of Merton's ideas, Messner and Rosenfeld discuss how our society's overemphasis on economic goals permeates in an adverse way other major institutions (e.g., the family), resulting in an egoistic form of individualism and a weakening of social norms. From this, they derive a number of research hypotheses concerning rates of crime across different nations as well as within national borders. They review the research on many of the implications of their theory. In many ways, institutional anomie theory resonates well with what we are observing in American society today.

Our final selection brings us back to the beginning in a sense. Charis Kubrin's chapter focuses on one of the first theoretical perspectives that was produced by American criminologists, social disorganization theory. Ironically, even though this approach has been around for some 90 years, some of the problems that plagued it in the 1920s continue to be evident today. After reviewing the basic tenets of the theory, Kubrin details those continuing challenges and adds additional concerns that the approach must address. However, as Kubrin also recognizes, recent work on social disorganization has identified the path that future work must take to continue to advance this perspective.