

Theory Comprehensive Exam Fall 2009

Instructions: For this exam, you are to select any four (4) of the following questions. All responses are to be turned in at 4:00 p.m. You may contact Margarita if you have any problem requiring faculty attention.

1. A critical issue in criminological theory is the role that culture plays in determining whether individuals will follow or break laws. Some have argued that culture is a critical determinant of offending, while others maintain that cultural forces play little or no role. Trace the development of culture-based theories of offending and then detail how critics of such approaches have attacked this perspective. As you do so, be sure to identify the key assumptions of culture-based theories and of the counter claims posited by their critics. Finally, tell us what the empirical evidence has to say about this debate, discuss where empirical research should be directed in the future, and comment on whether you believe there is any room to reconcile the approaches.

2. Recent individual-level research has shown that immigrants have lower levels of offending, measured in various ways, than native born Americans. That “advantage” apparently wanes for second and third generation immigrants. What theoretical perspectives are most useful in explaining these two empirical patterns?

3. Assess the utility of female-specific theories of offending. Are they helpful and/or necessary for explaining female offending, or does the existing body of sex-neutral theories suffice to account for both male and female offending?

4. A significant question over the past three decades is whether or not there is an effect of social class/poverty on individual involvement in crime. Please review the history of research in this area, being sure to note the important methodological issues that have emerged in this line of work. What ultimate conclusions have been revealed and how might this be incorporated into criminological theory?

5. Describe the current state of labeling theory. In doing so, be sure to emphasize (1) the definition of labeling, (2) the factors that should increase one’s exposure to labeling, (3) the reasons why labeling should affect later crime, and (4) the factors that may amplify or diminish its effects on crime. Where relevant, discuss empirical evidence on the accuracy of labeling theory’s predictions.

6. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979:105) quotes Servan as follows: “on the soft fibres of the brain is founded the unshakable base of the soundest of Empires.” He then observed that the reforms of classical criminology were an important effort to transition from social control through the manipulation of bodies to social control through the manipulation of minds. This notion about “social control from within” has long been and continues to be a prominent issue in the literature. Discuss social control from within or the various ways that theorists (classic, contemporary, or both) have described the mechanisms of social control that while originating outside of the individual, ultimately are exercised from within the individual.

7. Some theoretical perspectives posit that citizens’ status characteristics play a prominent role in how agents and institutions of formal social control treat people. A good deal of research in the last several decades has been devoted to examining this assertion. Pick two social status or demographic characteristics and discuss what the research literature says about the role that they play in how individuals are treated in the criminal justice system. Be sure to discuss the methodological adequacy of the research you cite.

8. Many scholars have pointed out that the twentieth century was characterized both by a long period of “stability” in the use of imprisonment, and by a substantial increase in its use during the last quarter of the century. The figure copied below summarizes this pattern by showing U.S. state prison admissions rates separately for blacks and whites. Summarize the theoretical and empirical literature on these two “eras” of imprisonment in America. Specifically, what do you view as the leading theoretical explanations for these trends, and what does the empirical literature tell us about the validity of those explanations?

Black and White Prison Admissions Rates per 100,000, 1925-2000

