

Theory Comprehensive Exam Fall 2011

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. Regarding the relationship between age and crime, this generalization is commonly made: Criminal behavior increases in early adolescence, peaks in middle to late adolescence, and then falls steadily thereafter.

While true on some level, this generalization leaves many nuances unaddressed. Address this by providing a comprehensive assessment of the empirical research, being sure to address relevant theoretical perspectives.

2. Peggy Giordano commented that “Every theory has negative cases [cases that run counter to the theory’s logic]. Rather than ignore them, analyzing their characteristics in more detail offers a useful mechanism for refining and extending a given perspective.”

In reference to a specific theory, discuss in detail how a consideration of negative cases could inspire refinements of that theory, being sure to cite empirical evidence to support your arguments.

3. How would you characterize the accumulated evidence relating immigration/immigrants and crime? What best explains the pattern that such evidence has taken?

4. A growing body of research suggests that genetic factors play an important role in the etiology of criminal behavior. Briefly summarize what we have learned to-date about the link between genes and crime, describe the theoretical processes thought to explain this link, and discuss the implications of the existing empirical evidence for (a) theories that focus on aggregate-level processes as the primary explanatory mechanisms, and (b) individual-level theories that omit genetic differences.

5. Since the early 1970s, rates of incarceration in the United States have increased by more than five times. What factors or perspectives do you think are most useful in explaining that extraordinary growth in imprisonment?

6. Criminal sentencing research has become an important domain of criminological inquiry. What theoretical perspectives have been most useful

in framing that research and how would you summarize the research evidence as it relates to those perspectives?

7. Discuss the development of strain theory from Merton to Agnew. In doing so, be sure to explicate the main propositions of each theory. How did Agnew expand and build off of Merton's work? Discuss the empirical literature testing both of these theories. Are they supported empirically?

8. There is now a sizable literature seeking to understand the victim/offender overlap. Which theoretical framework(s) best explain(s) the above association? Please cite relevant literature and studies.

9. Compare and contrast Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime, Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control, and Moffitt's (1993) developmental taxonomy. How are they similar? How are they different? Lastly, discuss the empirical literature bearing on each theory.

10. Some criminologists argue that differences in neighborhood crime rates simply represent the tendency for individuals with certain social, psychological, and demographic characteristics to live in different parts of the city. From this perspective, it is not necessary to consider the role of neighborhood structures and dynamics at all, for they are simply aggregated proxies for processes that actually unfold at the individual level. That is, for example, observed relationships between the level of community deprivation and the crime rate actually represent the relationships between the economic status of individuals and the level of their criminal involvement. Do you agree or disagree with this proposition, and what theoretical and empirical evidence can you provide to support your position?