

Theory Comprehensive Exam
Fall 2015

Instructions: For this exam, you are to select any four (4) of the following questions. All are responses are to be turned in no later than 4:00 p.m. You may contact Margarita if you have any problems requiring faculty attention.

1. It has been said that if one could use one demographic trait to predict who in a given population would be criminal and who would not, there would be fewer Type I errors (false positives) if the males were predicted to be criminal and the females not. If you think that is a reasonable position, explain why it may be so and support your argument with empirical evidence. If you disagree and consider another demographic trait to be a superior predictor, explain why that may be so and support your argument with empirical evidence.
2. Describe deterrence theory, including its origins and development. Discuss the state of evidence on deterrence theory. In so doing, summarize the state of evidence on specific deterrence and general deterrence. Also, discuss what is known about the effects of perceptual versus objective properties of punishment. Critique extant research and identify critical research gaps in scholarship.
3. Explain how evidence of a threshold effect—in which X has a much greater effect on Y after a given threshold value of X—might serve as the basis for revising a theory. Provide an example of how a theory of crime (e.g., self-control, strain, social learning) would need to be modified to account for threshold effects. Why do criminological theories generally not contemplate or therefore seek to explain threshold effects? How is criminology as a science impeded by focusing primarily on linear effects of causal factors?
4. Choose any one of the following theories of crime/delinquency and discuss whether there has been adequate testing of the theoretical propositions to bolster the claim that theoretical progress has been made: 1) Merton's strain theory, 2) Life course and 3) Differential Association/Social learning. In your discussion please give a definition of what you mean by theoretical progress. In addition, discuss how and the extent to which the theory you choose has been advanced (or perhaps hindered) by the methods and data available to researchers.
5. The United States experienced dramatic reductions in crime rates during the 1990s. Describe the theory or theories that are most useful for explaining this drop. Then, review the empirical research that has been conducted on this issue and assess the extent to which it supports the relevant theories.
6. The nature versus nurture debate has occupied a central position in explanations of human behavior in general. Review the evidence related to this debate as it applies to criminal behavior. Be sure to discuss contemporary research that focuses on the intersection of genetic and environmental factors.
7. Discuss the development of strain theory from Durkheim to 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. Criminological researchers have focused more attention on racial residential segregation and formal social control. Please discuss the different theories (and supporting evidence) that show a link between racial residential segregation and formal social control. Do you find the evidence persuasive and supportive of the various theoretical frameworks around segregation and formal social control? Please explain your position.