

Theory Comprehensive Exam Spring 2010

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.

There has been nothing innovative or new in criminological theory during the past two decades. Support or refute this statement, drawing on examples of theoretical works you deem as innovative or that have emerged during this period but which in your judgment do not offer new insights.

It could be argued that Durkheim's thinking was instrumental in the development of both traditional strain and control theories. Discuss the roots of the latter in the former and in the process attend to the ways it has been argued that anomie and strain may be related.

Tittle (1995:35) has critiqued criminological theories as being too simple, in part because they often fail to "identify the contingencies that influence the strength with which the causal processes operate." In short, they ignore the issue of conditioning ("moderating") factors. Identify a theory that matches this description, and show how it could be amended to better incorporate conditional effects. Briefly review the basic arguments of the theory and the overall empirical evidence, but give primary attention to (a) amending the theory to identify key conditioning factors, (b) discussing the empirical evidence supporting your suggested changes, and (c) considering any theoretical limitations to your proposed changes.

Discuss the origins of social threat and racial threat theory and assess the current state of empirical knowledge that is informed by those perspectives.

The criminal justice system is predicated largely on the notion of deterrence, that the fear of sanctions is one thing that keeps people in compliance with the law. But is there any evidence that deterrence works? Write an essay in which you review the empirical evidence about deterrence from the 1960s to the present. In this essay you are to do two things: (a) Describe what the theory of deterrence says, and note important conceptual and theoretical developments in the notion of deterrence; and (b) Discuss how the empirical research and theoretical developmental have worked in tandem, each pushing the other.

In his book Losing Legitimacy, LaFree argues that a plausible explanation of postwar United States crime rates requires "an explanation that can account

for the sometimes rapidly changing crime trends... that is congruent with steady low crime rates in the early postwar period, rapidly increasing crime rates in the middle postwar period, and steady high crime rates in the late postwar period... (and that can) account for street crime rates of the young, men, and of African Americans..." (p.56). Which criminological theories best explain these "facts"? What are the main obstacles to developing a theory that would integrate these theoretical perspectives? What criteria would you use for determining whether any such integrated theory was successful?

Aggregate-level studies continue to find a significant and substantial association between levels of socio-economic disadvantage and offending rates. At the same time, though, several multi-level studies over the past decade have reported much more modest associations between levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and participation in offending. How can you reconcile these seemingly paradoxical findings and what are the implications for criminological theory?

During the last several decades of the twentieth century, criminologists routinely referred to delinquent peers as one of the strongest correlates of delinquency. New research evidence has come to light over the last decade, however, that is superior from a methodological standpoint and broader theoretically. Discuss this new wave of research and its implications for what we know about the link between delinquent peers and delinquency and its implications for our understanding of the causal meaning of this association.

The topic of inter-group crime has received ample sociological attention in recent decades. Within this body of work, scholars have focused on *interracial* crime offending. Explain in detail at least one theoretical explanation of interracial crime. In doing so, identify the underlying assumptions of the theory and its intellectual roots, and review relevant empirical research. Finally, provide a critical assessment of the work in that tradition.