Introduction

A number of commentators have observed that criminology may suffer from limited theoretical and methodological perspectives. This is a common critique of criminological work. It is often argued that criminology lacks a coherent theoretical framework. The abstract of this article will provide an overview of the main arguments presented.

Decay or Renaissance?

The State of Criminology: Theoretical Perspectives

Abstract

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Introduction

Faute de mieux, notre façon de penser est dictée par nos expériences passées, que ce soit au niveau individuel ou collectif. Les expériences passées nous ont appris comment nous devons nous comporter dans certaines situations. Cela peut être utile, mais il est également important de rester ouvert aux nouvelles idées et perspectives.

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Accepting this appearance has been, I will argue, a mistake for criminology. Even though crime events have quite different causal histories, it may still be that there are elements common to all, or most, without which crime would not have occurred. Disparate as the three illustrative causal histories are, at least one common causal element can be abstracted from all three — an illegitimate opportunity — the unattended loaf of bread, the chance to leak the effluent in the dead of night, the vulnerable woman on a dark street. Also we might abstract a blockage of legitimate opportunity from all three — the unavailability to the slum dweller of legitimate means of feeding his family; the blockage of legitimate means for the factory manager to achieve her production target; the denial of consensual sexual access to the rapist’s girlfriend. Just as we can abstract common opportunity theory causes from these otherwise disparate causal histories, so we might abstract common differential association or social learning theory elements from all three. With all three, there may have been exposure to definitions favourable to crime — the social learning of the father that feeding his family is a higher loyalty than that to the criminal law; the rationalisations of the factory manager that pollution is not real crime; the legitimisation of sexual violence directed against women that the rapist had experienced in Vietnam.

In principle, a general theory of crime can be very powerful, even though it ignores all but one of the myriad causes in the varied causal histories of crime events. If that one cause is present in all causal histories that lead to crime and absent in all those that do not, then we have explained 100% of the variance in crime with our single-factor theory. And massive individual differences in propensity to offend and in the environmental contingencies confronted do not detract from this fact in the least. They do not detract from the fact that if we can change this factor, whatever else is going on, crime will not occur. And of course, to be useful, a general theory is not required to explain all of the variance in all of the types of cases, but some of the variance in all types of cases.

My first point is, therefore, that it is nonsense to suggest that because the behaviour subsumed under the crime rubric is so disparate, with such complexly different causal histories, general theories of crime are impossible. A theory of any topic X will be an implausible idea unless there is a prior assumption that X is an explanatory kind. To be an explanatory kind X need not be fully homogeneous, only sufficiently homogeneous for it to be likely that every or most types of X will come under one or more of the same causal influences. There is no way of knowing that a class of actions is of an explanatory kind short of a plausible theory of the class being developed. In advance, giraffes, clover and newts might seem a hopelessly heterogeneous class, yet the theory of evolution shows how the proof of the consanguinity is in the eating.

At this point, some may be willing to concede that a variable like availability of illegitimate opportunities will be a correlate of all types of crime, though a partial explanation because so many with illegitimate opportunities will decline to take them. Yet they will remain pessimistic about general theory because opportunity explanations are differential association explanations, while they might be general, are also banal. The challenge for theoretical criminology is to take that general, uncontroversial — banal if you will — explanations and give them the specificity of content which will ultimately build criminological theory into something that can supplant the utilitarian with new insight into the explanation of crime. We should not walk away from the challenge because its foundations are banal; this very banality is the foundations to the theoretical edifices we build.
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phenomenological. Marxist revolutions had killed positive criminological theory stone dead. Happily, some adventurous spirits are now beginning to poke their heads above the trenches. Wilson and Herrnstein (1985) did so on the right side of the battlefield, and how we all relished finally having a target to shot at. From the left we had a bold theoretical exposition by Colvin and Pauly (1983). They have not yet had their brains blown out, perhaps only because they do not come from Harvard.

The very fact that some theorists are beginning to see the horizon rather than dig deeper into their familiar trench is encouraging for the future of criminology. I was also enormously encouraged by the book edited by Bob Meier in 1985 Theoretical Methods of Criminology. Charles Tittle's (1985) contribution to that volume is particularly relevant to the position I am developing here on the state of criminology. Tittle diagnoses the criminological malady of killing theories before they are given a chance to grow. Part of the fault lies within the theorists, who, Tittle says, either polemically limit their theory by presenting it as a counter to some mode of thought prevailing at the time the theory was written or present their work as some kind of final answer. Sutherland committed both these sins; he was not content to bill differential association as no more than "an important brick in an emerging edifice of general theory" (Tittle, 1985: 13).

But the greater fault lies with the collective adversarial approach of criminology to theoretical work: "...the social scientific community is more united in trying to prove the impossibility of general theory than it is in trying to construct one" (Tittle, 1985: 116). So theories are viewed as the creations of individuals who tend to defend them against a torrent of destructive criticism; neither the original theorist nor the critics are moved to reproduce the theory in light of the data and argument generated by the debate.

The malady is of testing the original formulations of criminological theory, concluding they are wrong and leaving it at that. What should we do instead? Tittle suggests that we move away from theories as immovable individual creations and seek to nurture a constructive movement to build general theory. Under a healthy reciprocation between theory and research our initial interest should not be to show that "A causes B" in the original formulation of a theory is wrong, but to refine it, elaborate it, conditionalise, add specificity to it. If the proposition is plain wrong, we will discover that soon enough.

Unless we turn the culture of criminology around, the disincentives for clear, bold, manipulable formulations that make for testable prediction will continue to keep our heads down protected by atheoretical description which seems unacceptable to everyone, by abstruse language that obscures tautology, non-prediction, and a failure to enter the symbolic world of offenders, and by methodological virtuosity that obscures the banality of just another kind of atheoretical description.

The present state of criminology is one of abject failure in its own terms. We cannot say anything convincing to the community about the causes of crime; we cannot prescribe policies that will work to reduce crime; we cannot even honestly say that societies spending more on criminological research get better criminal justice policies than those that spend little or nothing on criminology. Certainly we cannot say some important things about justice, but philosophers and jurists were making the list of those points before ever a criminological research establishment was created.

We can also say some useful things about what does not work. Yet we have lacked the collective guts to undermine our institutional base by saying to policymakers...
that they really ought to save the taxpayers' money by spending less on the criminal justice system. At best we recommend occasional minor cuts in spending while sustain criminology in the long term. If that is all we are to continue doing, if we will be far fewer people at this conference. The state can improve the health of people by public spending on health services, it can improve the housing of people by public spending on housing, and scholars in these areas can say sensible, Criminology as a science has failed to put us in a position to do so with respect to its theory. The policy failure is a failure of explanation; we cannot solve it by criminology of recent decades are not on the tree waiting to be plucked. The quick theory fails us so utterly in this way, we must look to its fundamentals—retreating from the need to explain. The fruits of the atheoretical policy-oriented theory are just out not there waiting to be discovered.

This is not to say that good policy analysis means identifying "the" general theory do bad policy analysis so much of the time is because they do just that. No, the scope these theories as alternative frameworks for thinking about particular policy theories that are absolutely contradictory: The oppositions enfolded in the useful strategy more informed by theory B as the contradictions inherent in the application of theory A today alerts the policy analyst to switch intervention to a CRIMINOLOGY, abandon the theoretical nihilism that unites us against anyone who general theory, and work cooperatively to build upon it rather than kill it in the

REFERENCES


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