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Author(s): William H. Norman

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## STUDENTS AS THEORISTS IN A CRIMINOLOGY COURSE\*

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WILLIAM H. NORMAN  
*Graceland College*

As teachers of sociology we should help our students to understand the sociological perspective and the concepts, theories, and research findings of the field. We also should ask them to inquire, to think critically, and to endeavor to explain social phenomena systematically. In the introductory criminology course, students learn some of what sociologists know and think about crime and criminal behavior, but generally they experience the study of criminology as spectators rather than as participants. This paper describes an assignment with which I encourage students to take an active role in understanding and explaining the causes of crime.

The assignment has three main pedagogical objectives. One is to motivate students through active involvement. The second is to encourage a deeper understanding of criminological theories and their implications. The third is to promote critical thinking and higher-order cognitive skills such as application, analysis, and synthesis (Bloom 1956).

### INTELLECTUAL TASKS

As described by Goldsmid and Wilson (1980, p. 63), the process of sociological inquiry starts with a question that presses us to explain differences. For example, why do some societies have more crime than others? Why do some groups commit more crimes than others? Why does one person commit crimes and another does not? We look to previous explanations in experience and theory for a tentative answer; where that answer is inadequate, we try to build another, refining and correcting previous explanations. It is this process of inquiry that I want the student to experience. In my criminology course, the process begins with a survey and evaluation of the major theories explaining crime and criminal behavior.

Although students in the course are mostly juniors and seniors, many have had no prior exposure to sociology except the intro-

ductory survey course, so I do not expect them to analyze and evaluate the theories according to formal theory-construction criteria. Instead, I ask them to perform five general intellectual tasks.

First, they are to examine each theory's assumptions about human nature and social functioning and are to compare these to their own assumptions. This exercise forces them to consider their own assumptions more carefully. Eventually they will find one or more theories whose assumptions are compatible with their own.

Second, they are to evaluate each theory's explanations and concepts with regard to what might be called *verisimilitude*, for want of a better term. That is, the concepts and explanations must make sense to them and should help them to organize and understand crime phenomena. Both micro-level and macro-level theories are evaluated.

Third, they are to consider the shortcomings of the theories. When writing the first paper required by this assignment, the students must address the weaknesses of the theories they have chosen. They are encouraged to consider additions or modifications to the theory which would deal with its weaknesses.

Fourth (and simultaneously with the second and third tasks), the students must consider the compatibility of micro and macro theories. They are to integrate explanatory systems at both levels into a single comprehensive theory.

The fifth task is to work out the implications of this theory for explaining divergent types of crime and for developing prevention and correction policies. The student will use his or her preferred theory to explain particular types of crime and to make policy recommendations in the second and third papers, respectively.

These intellectual tasks culminate in a writing assignment. As noted above, the assignment involves three papers, one associated with each of three sections or units of the course. The first paper is the explication of a general theory, the second uses the theory (as revised) to explain a particular type of crime, and the third describes the policy im-

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\*I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

plications of the theory (as revised again, if necessary). Let me explain in further detail what I do to prepare students to develop their own criminological theories.

### PREPARATION FOR THE FIRST PAPER

To lay the foundation for their theorizing, we devote the first few weeks of the course to the major theories of crime and criminal behavior, including biological and psychological approaches as well as a number of sociological explanations. It is useful to have a textbook which not only discusses a number of theories but also makes theoretical issues salient for the student reader.<sup>1</sup>

If the assignment is to have the intended outcome, it is important not only that students be exposed to a wide variety of theories in the first section of the course, but also that they take a critical or evaluative approach to each. In considering differential association theory, for example, students learn the basic premises of the theory from the text and by reading Sutherland and Cressey's (1978) explication. We then discuss the main strengths and shortcomings.

Some major strengths of differential association theory are as follows: 1) It has a great deal of verisimilitude or face validity depending, of course, on one's own assumptions. It identifies learning as the crucial process in creating criminality; this view coincides with a prominent common-sense explanation, and it assumes that criminals are not different by nature from noncriminals. 2) It is useful and parsimonious in that it is able to interrelate diverse phenomena associated with crime (poverty, absence of father, greed) by specifying an intervening condition (learning).

We also discuss the following three criticisms: 1) The theory oversimplifies the learning process and presents a mechanistic image of learners. 2) The theory does not deal well with crimes by loners. 3) It begs the question

<sup>1</sup> One textbook I have used is *Criminology: Crime and Criminal Justice* by D. Stanley Eitzen and Doug A. Timmer (1985). This book emphasizes and incorporates theory throughout, not only in an introductory chapter. It also has a theoretical point of view ("radical" criminology supplemented by labeling theory). The authors make their perspective explicit and apply it in every chapter. This approach has enormous pedagogical value, as it gives students something to evaluate and react to.

of why and how the social context or subculture that promotes criminality came to exist in the first place. The theory disregards broader social forces and institutional arrangements that generate crime. (This is a shortcoming of all micro theories of criminality.)

Next we read Donald Cressey's (1960) defense of differential association and an article by Daniel Glaser (1956) which also defends the theory and characterizes *identification* as the crucial mechanism in the process of becoming criminal.

When each of the theories has been studied in this way, the students are asked to develop and present their own theoretical perspectives.

### THE FIRST PAPER: DESCRIBING THE THEORY

The first paper, which is a culmination of the first section of the course, presents the students' own theories of crime and criminality. Students are encouraged to adopt one or more of the theories we have studied or, at least, to incorporate elements of these into their own theories rather than starting from scratch.

The theory presented in this first paper is expected to provide explanations at both the macro level (for differences in criminality across regions, races, classes, etc.) and at the micro level (for individual differences in behavior). Each type of explanation should account for all types of crime from street crime to corporate and political crime. In addition, the student theorist must anticipate criticisms and address them through refutation or by modifying the theory. This task is facilitated by textbook coverage and classroom discussion of the main criticisms of each theory.

This is a tall order. I tell the students that no professional criminologist has produced an adequate, universally accepted, comprehensive explanation for crime, though that is the objective of theory and research in crime and criminal behavior. I also inform them that I expect them to modify their theories from one paper to the next. Modifications should be made in response both to my critique and to their own reevaluation in light of their exposure to new information. The development of an adequate theory of crime and criminality is a long-term dialectical process which will not end for the student when this course ends.

I evaluate each theory presented in terms of comprehensiveness and consonance with reality. I also evaluate it with respect to whether it is consistent with the writer's own underlying assumptions (I ask the students to begin the paper by stating as explicitly as possible their assumptions about human nature) and whether it is internally consistent.

It is the instructor's job to point out strengths and weaknesses and to suggest modifications or revisions to be incorporated into the next paper, using the standards mentioned above. (See the appendix for the directions for the first paper.)

Students generally take one of three approaches to presenting their theories. By far the most common, and preferred, approach is to present a combination of two or more of the theories discussed in reading and in class. In such cases my critique is principally an examination of how well the student has addressed the recognized weaknesses of the theories and how well the theories fit together.

A second approach taken by students is to list and discuss a number of factors that are associated with criminality, such as broken homes, personality defects, and lack of education, and to present this discussion as their theory of crime. This approach fails to meet the requirements of the assignment, however, because such a list does not constitute a general theory (cf. Sutherland and Cressey 1974, pp. 57-61, 71-75). When students take this approach, I show them that simply enumerating factors which correlate with some type of crime begs the question. Correlation does not necessarily indicate a causal connection. Even if it did, this "shotgun" approach does not tell us the circumstances in which one or another factor applies, it does not identify the necessary and the sufficient conditions for the occurrence of crime, and it does not constitute a general causal explanation which helps to organize and make sense of crime phenomena.

A third approach occasionally taken by a student is to contend that no theory can be developed because criminal behavior is such an individual decision that general explanations are useless. I remind such students that our purpose is nomothetic and that the many regularities in crime data cannot be explained as the result of random individual decisions. Careful and thorough scrutiny of the paper is essential. I have found that I spend much more time on evaluating the first paper than

on the next two, chiefly because the revision of the theory that the student includes in the second paper is typically a substantial improvement over the first version.

#### THE SECOND PAPER: APPLYING THE THEORY TO EXPLAIN PARTICULAR CRIMES

Before writing the second paper, the students study what we know about various types of crime, such as robbery, professional theft, organized crime, and corporate crime. As we read about these and discuss them, I remind students that their theory is intended to explain both why this type of crime exists and why someone would engage in it. The second paper is due at the conclusion of this unit of the course.

As part of the second paper, students are to resubmit the theory presented in the first paper (with revisions), together with an application of that theory to two of the types of crime discussed in the text, robbery and occupational crime. (Directions for the second paper also are included in the appendix.) Often a student finds a theory appealing, adopts it, and defends it, but uses another theory entirely to explain specific types of crime or particular instances of criminal behavior. This second paper requires the student to confront the problem of practical application, to judge whether the theory presented is adequate, and, if it is not, to reject or modify it.

I evaluate this paper, like the first, with respect to logical and internal consistency, and with respect to comprehensiveness and compatibility with reality. Again, the student is expected to deal with both the macro and micro levels of explanation.

#### THE THIRD PAPER: POLICY PROPOSALS IMPLIED BY THE THEORY

The final section of the course is concerned with societal reactions to crime. We study the criminal justice system, corrections, and crime prevention programs and proposals. The third paper in this assignment is due at the conclusion of the course and is to be a response to this final section. The student again must submit

the theory presented in the first paper, as revised. (See the appendix for directions for the third paper.)

In this paper, the student is to apply her or his theory to a proposal for the prevention of crime and to a proposal for "treating" or "curing" criminal behavior. I ask the students to draw out the implications of this theory and of its assumptions in constructing these proposals. Sometimes I ask them to focus particularly on two types of crime and their perpetrators, namely mugging and price fixing; this requirement ensures that the proposals take both lower-class and upper-class criminality into account.

As in the second paper, this assignment may produce cognitive dissonance. The "prevention" implications of one's theory of crime sometimes conflict strongly with one's correctional philosophy. A student who advocates a labeling approach to explaining crime also may hold a "make 'em do hard time" attitude. The third paper requires students to confront such inconsistencies and to try to rectify them.

As in the other two papers, the criteria for evaluation of the third paper are comprehensiveness, congruence with reality, and logical and internal consistency.

#### APPRAISAL

I have used this assignment in this form the last three times I have taught the introductory criminology course. With some exceptions, it has been well received each time. I think the assignment helps to motivate students to learn the major theories of crime and criminality; they realize that they must produce a series of three papers based largely on their own choice and defense of criminological theories, so they want to understand those theories. They appear to be more attentive and more interested during discussions of the theories than were previous classes, and they raise more questions about the theories. Although I cannot claim that the students completing this assignment learn more about criminology theories in general, their essay exams make it clear that they do very well at mastering those theories which they appropriate as their own.

Both anecdotal evidence and course evaluations suggest that students become more aware of their beliefs and assumptions and make progress in taking a more logical and

analytical approach to understanding crime and criminal behavior. One student, whose first paper somewhat incongruously combined a "personality" theory of criminality with a radical-critical theory of crime, thanked me later for making her think about the connections between her underlying assumptions and her explanations for behavior. She said that she had begun to use this skill in her psychology and religion courses as well. Students' contributions to discussion in the final section of the course show greater recognition of such connections, as in one student's challenge to another that began, "How can you believe that society is responsible for crime and still believe in the death penalty?" Another student stated explicitly that her belief that a crime-free society is theoretically possible is based upon her assumption that people are shaped by their environments.

The chief drawback of this technique is the amount of time it requires of the instructor. With the exception of a few very well-written papers, I need about an hour to read, evaluate, and write comments just for the student's first paper. This approach may be practical only in classes of 20 or fewer students. Given the payoff in increased motivation, understanding, and analytical thinking, I think it's worth the effort.

#### APPENDIX

##### FIRST CRIMINOLOGY THEORY PAPER

1. This paper is to be typewritten or computer-printed and double-spaced. There is no limitation on length.
2. Before explaining your theory, identify your assumptions about human nature. Are we naturally self-centered or social or what? Hedonistic or altruistic? Governed by drives or instincts or shaped by our environment? Is our behavior determined by chemicals or conditioning or social pressures or other aspects of the situation or do we choose to act as we do?
3. Set forth your theory explaining both patterns of crime (macro) and differences in criminal behavior (micro). "Macro" questions to answer: What causes crime in our society? Why is crime not distributed evenly throughout the society? Why do different groups have different rates and types of crime? "Micro" questions to answer: What causes a

person to commit crimes? Why do people with similar backgrounds act differently with respect to criminal behavior?

4. You should adopt one or more of the theories studied, fitting them together and modifying to deal with limitations and weaknesses.
5. Your theory should be able to explain as many types of crime as possible assault, burglary, fraud, organized crime, corporate crime, etc.
6. Take a critical look at your theory. Find criticisms in the book, in class notes, and in the Analysis and Critique articles in Traub and Little. Address these limitations and weaknesses in your paper.
7. Which kinds of criminal acts does your theory not explain (or which are you not trying to explain) (e.g., those few crimes committed by psychopaths, or a mother stealing to feed her children.)?
8. Be internally consistent. Check your theory to be sure that you are not contradicting yourself (e.g., combining radical-critical and psychoanalytic explanations would not seem to be internally consistent; I would have to be persuaded).
9. Be consistent with reality. Research results and other "facts" should not contradict your theory. The theory should fit with what we know about crime.
10. Don't despair if you don't seem to be able to do all this successfully; no one has up until now! (And bear in mind that this is probably not the final version of your theory; you will be revising it to deal with any weaknesses and with new information.)

### SECOND CRIMINOLOGY THEORY PAPER

1. This paper has two parts: 1) an explanation of your theory of crime, as revised, and 2) an application of this theory to two types of crime discussed in this course: robbery and occupational crime. (Parts 1 and 2 may be submitted as two separate papers or as two sections of a single paper.)
2. The first part—the theory—is a resubmission, with revisions where necessary, of your theory of criminality presented in the first paper. Refer to my comments and to the page of instructions given for the first paper. (If there are no revisions to your first paper, simply resubmit it unaltered.)
- 3.

If you do make revisions, give me the original version too, for comparison purposes.

4. The second part of the paper should explain—from the standpoint of your theory—what are the causes of robbery and then what are the causes of occupational crimes. You must be sure each explanation is a logical extension or application of your general theory to this specific type of crime, and that it is consistent with reality (i.e., consistent with the facts about this type of crime). This second part need not be long.
5. Both parts are to be typewritten or computer-printed and double-spaced.

### THIRD CRIMINOLOGY THEORY PAPER

1. In this paper, you are to explain what your theory of crime indicates about preventing crime and "curing" or reforming criminals. In other words, what should be done about crime, from the standpoint of your theory?
2. This paper has two parts: 1) an explanation of your theory of crime, as revised, and 2) "policy recommendations" derived from your theory.
3. The first part the theory is a resubmission, with revisions where necessary, of your theory of criminality. Refer to my comments on the second paper and to the page of instructions given for the first paper. *Give me the other revision too* (the second paper), for comparison purposes.
4. The second part of the paper should explain the implications of your theory for both preventing crime and dealing with convicted offenders. If your theory is correct, what policies should be followed to reduce the crime rate? And what policies should be followed to "treat" (or otherwise deal with) persons convicted of crimes?
5. The policies you are identifying are to be general approaches, not details about specific programs, and must be logical implications of your theory.
6. Both parts are to be typewritten or computer-printed and double-spaced.

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**Bill Norman** is Associate Professor of Sociology at Graceland College. His teaching responsibilities include criminology, the sociology of religion, and research methods. He is currently engaged in conducting local community research with undergraduate sociology majors. At present, his research interests include the influence of social networks on life satisfaction among older people and the effects of college attendance on religious beliefs. Address correspondence to William H. Norman, Division of Social Sciences, Graceland College, Lamoni, IA 50140.