

Criminal Justice 406 / Theories of Criminology / Fall 2006

Handout: 8/29/06

“There is nothing so practical as a good theory” Kurt Lewin / “ Nothing can justify theory except its explaining observed facts.” C.S. Pierce / “Theories in one form or another provide the basis of all social programs”¹ / “A theory consists of propositions, concepts, assumptions, and scope conditions.”² / “Theory is of value in empirical science only to the extent to which it connects fruitfully with the empirical world. Concepts are the means, and the only means of establishing such connection, for it is the concept that points to the empirical instances about which a theoretical proposal is made. If the concept is clear as to what it refers, then sure identification of the empirical instances may be made.”³ [Suggested reading Taylor (1994) Chapter 3: Theories. *Research methods in criminal justice.*; Gould (1981) *The Mismeasure of Man* Chapter 4 “Measuring bodies” pp 112-145.]

Why the book approach?

How to approach each book: The David Harvey approach; a book is an argument approach

1) Key questions

- a. What is outcome?
- b. For each concept, especially outcome, What is “focus of convenience?”⁴
- c. For each concept, especially outcome: what is “scope” or “range of convenience?”⁵
- d. What are **assumptions**?
 - i. Between or w/i group differences most important?
 - ii. Variations in motivation (differential motivation) or not (amotivational: all individuals are motivated offenders); relatedly:
 - iii. Is why do people BREAK laws the question or why do people KEEP laws the question?; relatedly
 - iv. What is their conception of “human nature;” does biology predominate?; are people socialized?; over-socialized?; “rational?”
- e. More on motivational questions. Social contract theory. Thomas Hobbes v. John Locke (and Rousseau).⁶
- f. What level or levels of analysis? Single or multiple? If multiple is it contextual, or multilevel? “Integrated?” Different meanings of integrated. How does level agree with data level? With human nature conception (bio/psych/soc/cultural) and w/i vs. between group question?
- g. What is development level (degree of specification) of theorizing?⁷ Range:
 - i. initial verbal formulations – concepts, loose causal statements, exemplars;
 - ii. more developed verbal formulations – ideal types, simply typologies (2 x 2);
 - iii. initial causal statements – state direction of impact, do not specify strength or complete causal structure;
 - iv. more advanced mathematical formulations.

¹ Taylor, R. B. (1993). *Research methods in criminal justice*. New York: McGraw-Hill. p. 52

² Price, J. L. (2003). Strategies of theory construction at Columbia University in the 1950s. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Sociology, University of Iowa. [ONLINE: <http://www.uiowa.edu/~soc/docs/tw/pricetw2003.pdf>; retrieved 9/1/04].

³ Blumer, H. (1954). “What is wrong with social theory?” *American Sociological Review* 19 3-10

⁴ Kelly, G. A. 1955. *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York: Norton. “A construct's [concept's] focus of convenience comprises those particular things to which the user would find it's application maximally useful. These are the elements upon which the construct is likely to have been formed originally.” (1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 5/1991)

⁵ Kelly (1955). “Constructs are limited to a particular range of convenience, that is, they are not relevant to all situations.”

⁶ “Social contract.” *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition. 2001. [ONLINE: <http://www.bartleby.com/65/so/socialco.html>. Retrieved 9/1/04] “The theory of such a contract, first formulated by the English philosophers Thomas Hobbes (in the *Leviathan*, 1651) and John Locke, assumes that men at first lived in a state of anarchy in which there was no society, no government, and no organized coercion of the individual by the group. Hobbes maintained that by the social contract men had surrendered their natural liberties in order to enjoy the order and safety of the organized state. Locke made the social contract the basis of his advocacy of popular sovereignty, the idea that the monarch or government must reflect the will of the people. Like Locke, the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, in *Le Contrat social* (1762), found the general will a means of establishing reciprocal rights and duties, privileges, and responsibilities as a basis of the state.”

⁷ Blalock, H. M. Jr. 1969. *Theory construction: From verbal to mathematical formulations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- h. What is the approach (strategy) to constructing theory used here? ⁸ Some approaches:
- i. **formalization** (“make explicit the definitions, propositions, assumptions, and scope conditions”);
 - ii. **general theory** (“the use of uniform concepts and labels to study social systems and the focus on the most abstract level of reality”);
 - iii. **middle range theory** (seeks a “medium” level of abstraction and generality; “The middle-range strategy has the merit of being manageable. It is easier to develop an explanation of one of the four types of deviant behavior – or better, one of the subtypes of these four types – than it is to develop an explanation of deviant behavior”);
 - iv. emphasize **both theory and method** (Wilcox et al., see recommended list);
 - v. **functional analysis** (“focuses on the consequences of social behavior”);
 - vi. **deviant case analysis** (Katz) (“views deviant cases as opportunities to build theory”);
 - vii. build **typology**, also called “property-space”;
 - viii. **continuity** (intense scrutiny of past research in the area; more than just meta-analysis; “The wheel will not have to be continually rediscovered. Present-day scholars cannot stand on the shoulders of giants and thereby deal creatively with contemporary research unless the present-day scholars know what the giants wrote.”);
 - ix. **epidemiology**.
- i. What is the strategy to testing theory? General approaches: Holmes vs. Einstein.⁹
- j. What is the slippage vs. correspondence between the constructs and the operationalized indicators. Sociodemographics as proxies – advantages and disadvantages.
- k. What is happening with time? Is this cross-sectional or longitudinal? If longitudinal, is this a panel (same folks or places or organizations) different time) or a wave (different people different times) approach¹⁰ How long is the period – a year or a lifetime? Process cycles?
- 2) Some strategies for decoding theories
- a. Ask yourself these key questions noted above
 - b. Develop causal models; specify:
 - i. Definition of each construct
 - ii. Operationalization of each construct
 - iii. Directionality of each impact (feedback loops?)
 - iv. For each impact: can you describe the processual dynamics underlying it?
 - v. Be clear about main effects vs. interaction effects (moderating variables)
 - vi. Mediating variables?
 - vii. Single level vs. multiple level vs. contextual?
- 3) Beware of some mistakes or fallacies
- a. Assuming that within group processes also explain between group differences, or vice versa. “Variation among individuals within a group and differences in mean values between groups are entirely separate phenomena. One item provides no license for speculation about the other.”¹¹
 - b. Relatedly: thinking that what happens on one level also happens on another level.¹²
 - i. ecological fallacy
 - ii. individual fallacy
 - c. Reification; e.g., “the notion that such a nebulous, socially defined concept as intelligence might be identified as a ‘thing’ with a locus in the brain ... and that it might be measured as a single number”¹³ This arises in part from confusing of the data world with the real world.¹⁴

⁸ Price, J. L. (2003). The labels used are Price’s (see also Blalock) and the quotes are from this paper.

⁹ Taylor (1994): 19-37.

¹⁰ Taylor (1994): 297

¹¹ Gould, S. J. 1981. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: Norton. p. 156

¹² Thorndike, E. L. (1939). On the fallacy of imputing the correlations found for groups to the individuals in smaller groups composing them. *American Journal of Psychology*, 52, 122-124; Hannan, M. T. (1971). *Aggregation and disaggregation in sociology*. Lexington Books: Lexington, MA.

¹³ Gould 1981. p. 239

¹⁴ “Much of the fascination of statistics lies embedded in our gut feeling – and never trust a gut feeling – that abstract measures summarizing large tables of data must express something more real and fundamental than the data themselves.” Op. cit.

