

# The Seven-Step Model and Early Explanations of Criminality

## Chapter Overview and Objectives

In this chapter, we present the seven-step model to criminological thinking. In addition to explaining each step and providing examples, we also introduce some key terms that are essential starting points to understanding criminological theory. Finally, we present quantitative and qualitative research traditions and give examples of each. To appreciate contemporary criminological theories, it is useful to understand some of the early explanations of crime and criminal behavior. In this chapter, we show you how to apply the seven-step model to spiritualistic/demonological explanations, the classical school of criminology, and the positivist school. Figure 2.1 provides some early explanations for crime and criminal behavior.

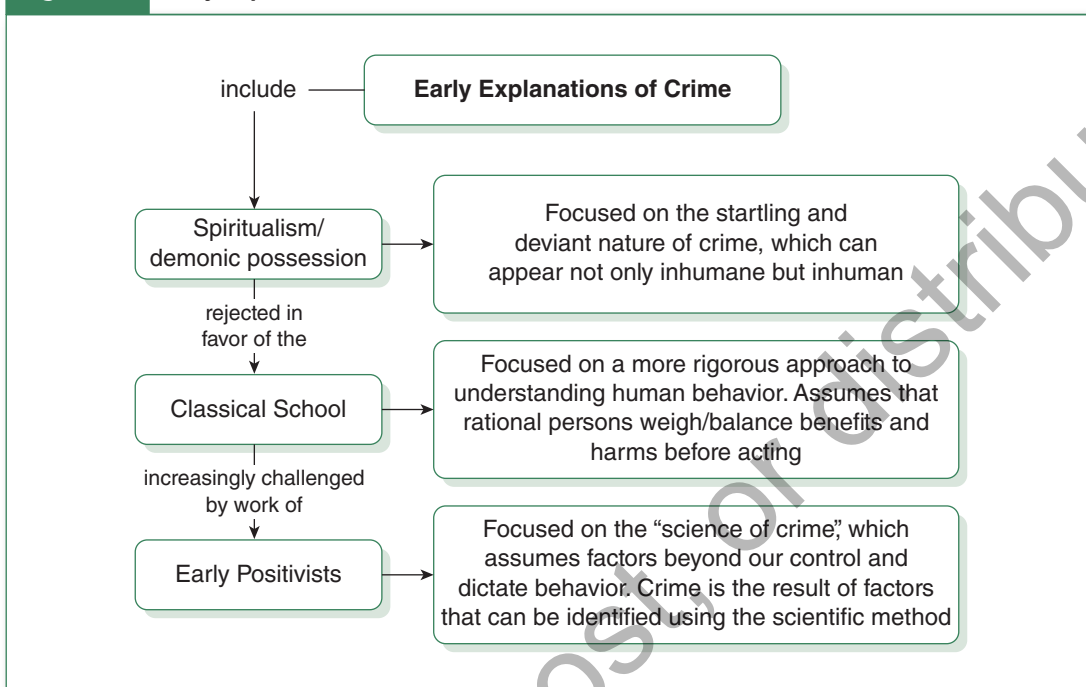
By the end of the chapter, readers should be able to:

- Present and explain the seven-step model to criminological thinking
- List the three main assumptions of human nature explored in this chapter
- Explain the shift from early approaches to explaining crime to more “scientific” approaches
- Compare and contrast quantitative and qualitative research in criminology
- Define key terms such as *causation*, *correlation*, *proposition*, and *falsifiability*

## The Seven Steps to Understanding Criminological Thinking

As introduced in Chapter 1, we have organized various aspects of what we call criminological thinking using a seven-step model. Figure 2.2 is a depiction of this model.

Figure 2.1 Early Explanations of Crime

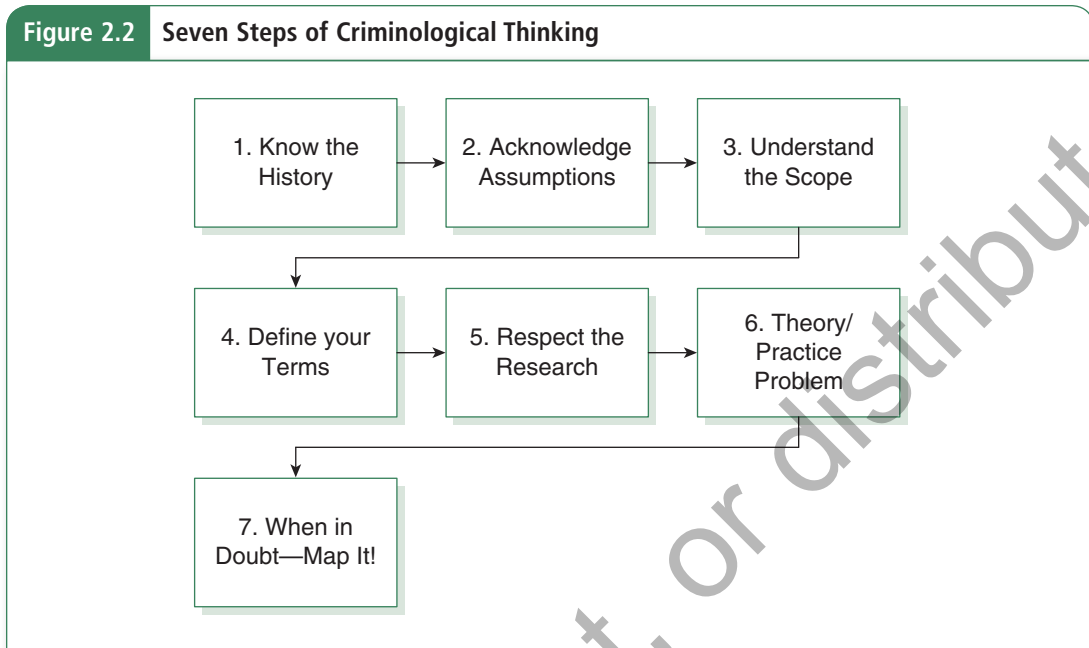


### Step One: Know the History

As discussed above, the interdisciplinary nature of criminology has complicated the use of common terms. This is related to both history and the assumptions that sometimes arise from differing perspectives on that history. While a full recounting of the historical twists and turns in the development of criminological theory is not possible in these pages, exploring some of the historical context surrounding the development of theory is important. The historical period in which specific theories emerged can help us to understand the issues being confronted at the time and how different interactions between theorists and researchers led to the further development of various criminological theories. For now, we will look at a few examples of how history and some of the early criminological theories are connected.

#### Spiritualistic Explanations: The Demons Made Me Do It

Since the earliest days of human civilization, antisocial and criminal acts have been associated with demonic possession or other evil supernatural forces. Indeed, the horrific nature of some crimes makes it easy to assume that those who commit these crimes are not only inhumane, but also inhuman. The idea that crime was a consequence of demonic possession also led to a variety of purifying rituals—these included physical torture, burning, mutilation, and a whole host of other assaults on the body designed to either drive out the demons or allow the evil spirits to escape the



body and the soul to be saved. Today, such practices are not a feature of American criminal justice, but there remains a view that retribution is a worthy goal of penal policy and that harsh punishment can be justified based on biblical notions of an “eye for an eye.” Of some interest is how the role of religion in penal policy has changed over time. Based on a 50-state survey, prison chaplains reported that

America’s state penitentiaries are a bustle of religious activity. More than seven-in-ten (73%) state prison chaplains say that efforts by inmates to proselytize or convert other inmates are either very common (31%) or somewhat common (43%). About three-quarters of the chaplains say that a lot (26%) or some (51%) religious switching occurs among inmates in the prisons where they work. Many chaplains report growth from religious switching in the numbers of Muslims and Protestant Christians, in particular. (Pew, 2012, p. 11).

At first blush, demonological or spiritualistic explanations of crime and criminality may seem outdated and antiquated. However, it is important to bear in mind that versions of these older explanations of criminality are still embraced by many people in modern society. For example, serial killers, mass murderers, sex offenders, and terrorists are often characterized as “monsters,” and some imply their behavior is thought to be unexplainable except in terms of pure evil. Against these simplistic ideas, the philosophical basis for our modern criminal justice system and some important explanations of crime emerged during the Enlightenment in Western Europe. A different and more complex view of human behavior emerged in place of the brutal approach to penal policies of the 17th century.

### The Classical School: Maximizing Pleasure and Choosing Crime

The classical school emerged in the 18th century and focused primarily on preventing criminal acts rather than on explaining or understanding criminality or criminal behavior. In other words, classical school philosophers were not particularly interested in why certain people committed crime and which characteristics or factors influenced the decision to commit crime. Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham are the two most well-known classical school philosophers, and their writings laid the groundwork for the criminal justice system in modern Western society. These scholars agreed that in order to control behavior, society needs a clearly defined set of laws and punishments, a fair legal process, and prisons for those who violate the laws (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2011). Both claimed that there were three important aspects of punishment: severity, certainty, and celerity, or swiftness. In order for punishment to deter potential criminals, these three elements had to be correctly calibrated to specific criminal acts.

According to the classical school theorists, in order to prevent crime and achieve deterrence, a number of conditions must be met. First, the punishment should be calibrated at the appropriate **severity** level. In other words, the punishment must fit the crime and should be comparable to the harm caused by the crime. Second, the chance of being detected must have a high level of **certainty**, or the offender must perceive that he or she is likely to be caught and punished. Third, the punishment should take place shortly after the act or behavior, so the level of **celerity**, or **swiftness**, should be high. Both Beccaria and Bentham agreed that the severity of punishment was much less important than certainty and celerity. In fact, they specifically cautioned against ratcheting up the severity of punishments to unreasonable levels, suggesting that this would eventually cause a backlash in society and a loss of faith in the criminal justice system (Williams & McShane, 2010). Interestingly, many of the deterrence principles offered by Beccaria and Bentham have been supported by more modern research on rewards and punishments in psychological learning theory.

By the end of the 18th century, the penal system of Europe had changed drastically, with various forms of incarceration gradually replacing the “theatre of horror.” Historian Michael Ignatieff explores how:

It came to be considered just, reasonable, and humane to immure prisoners in solitary cells, clothe them in uniforms, regiment their day to the cadence of the clock, and “improve” their minds with dosages of scripture and hard labor. Between 1770 and 1840 this form of carceral discipline “directed at the mind” replaced a cluster of punishments directed at the body—whipping, branding, the stocks, and public hanging. (1978, p. xiii)

From the 1920s to the 1970s, the justice system concerned itself with trying to reform, remake, and restructure the lives of offenders and make them into good, honest, law-abiding citizens. Moreover, since World War II, the justice system has also been seen as part of efforts to socially rehabilitate those in conflict with the law (Griffiths, 2010). For example, in the place of long sentences, probation officers have employed a variety of techniques commonly associated with social work, including group work, community work, task-centered work, family therapy, and behavioral programs. By the 1960s, this progressive approach to penal practice

was the exemplar, the paradigm of the welfarist approach to dealing with crime and offenders. It emphasized rehabilitation, resettlement, individualised social case-work, re-integration—a social welfare approach to social problems. The problem of crime was

understood as a problem of individuals and families in need of help and support, of communities that were disorganised and disadvantaged. The focus of attention was not the crime itself—the instant offence being a matter of mostly legal concern—but instead the personal and social problems that underlay criminal behavior. Crime was a presenting symptom, a trigger for intervention, rather than the focal point for the probation officer's action. (Garland, 1997, p. 3)

The irony is that despite the recognition 200 years ago of the limitations of severe and overly punitive approaches to punishment, there remains support for a return to punishment based not on deterrence but instead on retribution.

Since the 1970s, the United States has begun to rely upon harsher punishments to control crime. This approach has, for the most part, been quite unsuccessful except to reinforce social inequities and racial injustice (Austin & Irwin, 1997; Messner & Rosenfeld, 2001; Western, 2006). Even today, many have lost faith in the ability of the criminal justice system to reduce crime; the hope now is to keep it at a tolerable level (Garland, 2001). The focus on managing crime, increasing punishments, and reducing rehabilitative efforts has gained a foothold throughout North America and the United Kingdom, despite evidence that it does not reduce crime, cut criminal justice costs, or promote rehabilitation and reintegration.

In Chapter 12, we will return to a more detailed review of the classical school and modern theories based on its ideas when we discuss deterrence, rational choice, and economic theories of criminal behavior. For now, we will turn to the origins of the scientific approach to understanding crime, often referred to as the positivist school of criminology.

### Positivist Criminology: A Science of Crime?

Positivist criminology emerged after the classical school and also influenced the functioning of the criminal justice system. As mentioned previously, classical explanations attributed crime to free will and choices made by offenders. Positivism, on the other hand, suggests that certain characteristics may make some people more prone to committing crime than others. **Positivist theories** are deterministic and are rooted in the scientific method; positivists assume that factors beyond our control dictate our behavior. These theories may attempt to explain criminality, criminal behavior, or crime rates and are not particularly concerned with understanding the dynamics and situational aspects of specific types of crime or criminal acts.

The origins of the positivist approach in the social sciences can be traced to the work of Auguste Comte, a 19th century French philosopher (Williams & McShane, 2014). In fact, he coined the term *positivism* and is often credited as the original founder of the discipline of sociology (Bohm & Vogel, 2011). Comte dismissed the notions of free will espoused by Enlightenment and classical school scholars and advocated studying social phenomena using testable hypotheses, careful classification, and a systematic approach based on the natural sciences (Williams & McShane, 2014). He believed that the scientific elite would be best equipped to design governmental policies and dictate how the “inferior classes” (i.e., anyone who was not an intellectual) should live their lives (Bohm & Vogel, 2011).

We will return to the positivist school in more detail in Chapter 2 when we discuss the biological theories; for now, let's think about the importance of history. One way to understand the relevance of history is to consider how criminological theories have developed. This may be related to the social

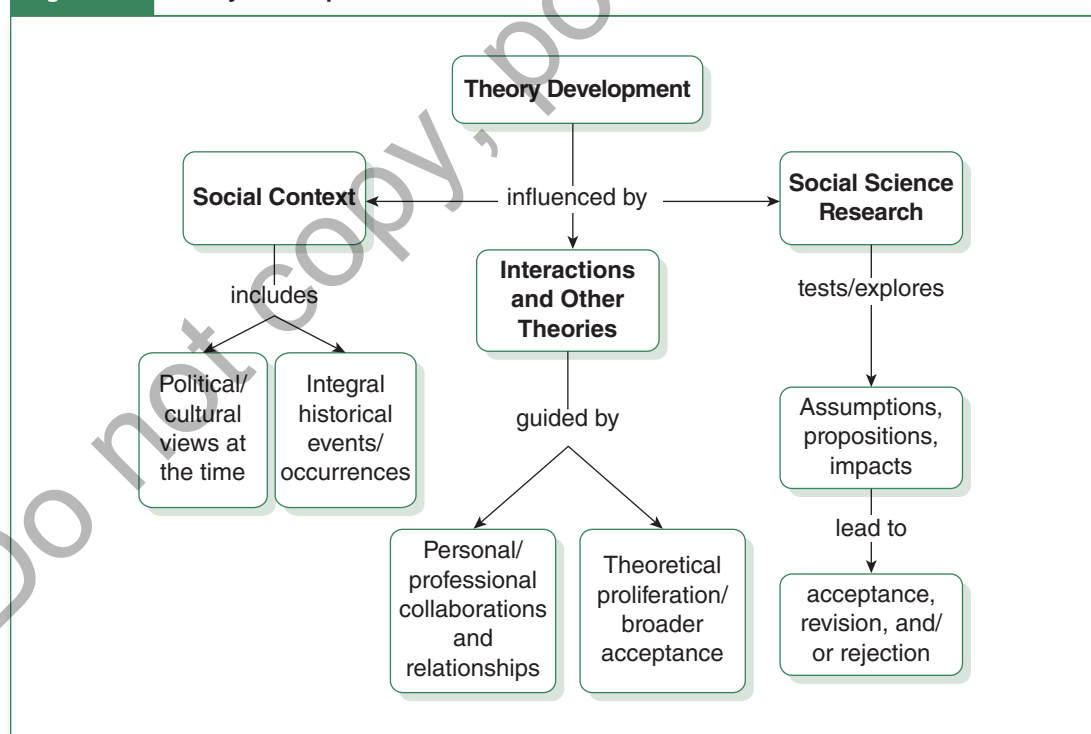
context of a period, prevalent views of society at the time, and/or key historical events that may have served to inspire or otherwise influence theorists. Another aspect discussed in later chapters relates to how research findings, interactions between researchers, and even personal feuds and professional rivalries have shaped different criminological theories. We have discussed some of this in relation to the classical and positivist schools of thought in criminology. Figure 2.3 provides one view of how theories might be affected or influenced by social context and history.

Next, we will consider how differing assumptions have impacted the variety of perspectives found in criminology.

### Step Two: Acknowledge Assumptions

All criminological theories make a number of assumptions about human nature, behavior, society, and reality (Agnew, 2011). **Assumptions** refer to things that we take for granted as true about people and our world. To clearly understand criminological theories, it is necessary to be familiar with the key assumptions that characterize the different criminological theories. As we have seen, the classical and positivist schools of thought emerged from a debate over the free will assumption. Do people have free will or is their behavior determined by factors beyond their control? Other, more complex theories make different assumptions about various aspects of reality. For now, we will look closer at three assumptions that criminologists (and people in general) make about human nature.

**Figure 2.3** Theory Development and Influences and Interactions



First, as discussed above, classical school theorists make a number of assertions relating to human nature and human behavior. They believe that people have **free will** and are responsible for their own decision making. Further, they claim that people are **hedonistic** in the sense that they seek pleasure and avoid pain. Finally, classical school thought asserts that people are **rational** and can anticipate outcomes, weigh and balance options, and act in their own self-interest. The classical school took for granted that people will commit crime if proper laws and regulations are not in place. In other words, people seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Originally developed by Jeremy Bentham, a 19th century Jurist, this approach is associated with **utilitarianism** and relies on what is known as the **hedonistic calculus**. The central principle of the approach is summarized in the following passage:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think. (Bentham, 1789, p. 11)

In other words, when presented with a choice, people weigh out the pleasure and pain associated with the consequences of the different choices. Based on this calculation, people will act to maximize their own pleasure or happiness. This approach can also be connected to Thomas Hobbes (Williams & McShane, 2010; Lilly et al., 2011). Both Bentham and Hobbes would agree that man's natural state is inherently selfish and that we require laws and regulations to prevent a "war of all against all." If a person assumes that people are naturally pleasure-seeking and need to be kept in line, he or she will likely be very concerned with properly administering punishments to deter people from committing crime. Of course, this is not the only view of human nature.

Second, some theories, including many positivist theories, claim that a person is a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*. This assumption suggests that people are born without any sort of inherent nature and instead are completely shaped by their environment. People who believe in a *tabula rasa* conception of human nature fall clearly on the side of nurture in the nature–nurture debate. The term *tabula rasa* can be traced all the way back to the writings of Aristotle. However, the term is most closely associated with the writings of John Locke, a social and political philosopher (Agnew, 2011; Bohm & Vogel, 2011). If a person agrees that humans are empty vessels whose behavior is shaped by experience, it is more likely that he or she will support the use of social programs or rehabilitation to deal with crime.

Third, other theories assume that people are naturally social or altruistic. According to some theorists, people are socially concerned actors who wish to help others and avoid harming them. This is because people tend to value social ties and do not want to risk losing them. Many sociological theorists believe that human behavior is inherently social. This assumption is also associated with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who assumed that humans were inherently good but corrupted by negative influences from society and societal pressures (Agnew, 2011). If a person assumes that people are inherently altruistic and that social forces corrupt individuals, then one might focus on how societal norms, pressures, and power allow some harmful behavior to continue yet define other harmful behavior as criminal.

One contentious issue in the study of crime relates to assumptions made concerning human agency. In other words, do people have free will or are their behaviors determined by factors beyond their control? The answer to this question drastically alters the way in which a criminologist studies crime and criminality and illustrates the basic conflict between the classical and positivist schools of thought (Agnew, 2011). On the one hand, the classical school, believers in the concepts of deterrence and rational thought, and economics theorists all assume that people have free will and are rational actors, so they tend to focus on studying criminal acts over criminal behavior. On the other hand, positivist criminologists assume that human behavior (including criminal behavior) is determined by biological, psychological, social or physical-environmental factors, or a combination of all three. This illustrates how our assumptions about the nature of the actor dictates the method or approach we use to studying crime and criminals (Agnew, 2011).

The assumption of free will versus determinism also illustrates a fundamental tension in our criminal justice system. The notion of deterrence, the judicial process, offender culpability, and individual rights are based on classical school notions. However, other aspects of our criminal justice, such as rehabilitation and treatment, parole and probation, and the use of experts to help with the problem of crime, are clearly a product of the positivist or scientific approach to crime.

A third key assumption crucial to understanding criminological theories concerns the nature of society. In other words, is society characterized more by consensus or conflict? The key question here is, how much attention should criminologists pay to the formation of the criminal law? On the one hand, consensus theorists assume that most people in society agree on which acts should be legal and illegal. On the other hand, conflict theorists assert that the criminal law represents the interests of different competing groups in society. There is some disagreement among conflict theorists as to how many groups are involved in this process. In other words, is it more accurate to think in terms of rich versus poor or in terms of numerous groups pursuing their own interests and competing against one another?

We will revisit these questions in Chapter 11 when we discuss the conflict and critical theories in criminology in more detail. For now, it should be clear how making these different assumptions could affect the nature of theory being proposed and even the policies and practices that emerge. Consider the following table and see if you can determine what policy or programs might result from the assumptions listed.

### *Student Exercise 1*

<b>Assumption About Human Nature</b>	<b>Criminological Orientation</b>	<b>Justice Policy and/or Program Examples?</b>
Naturally pleasure-seeking	Focus on controlling behavior through environment and/or punishment	
Naturally social	Focus on the benefits of social solutions to crime	
Naturally altruistic	Focus on the corrupting influence of societal norms and pressures	



### Step Three: Understand the Problem Focus, Scope, and Level of Explanation

Problem focus (or explanatory domain), scope, and level of explanation are important aspects of criminological thinking. Unfortunately, in many social scientific theories these dimensions are unclear or are left unstated, and the same can be said of most criminological theories (Messner, Krohn, & Liska, 1989; Messner & Rosenfeld, 2001; Wagner, 1984). This oversight can lead to serious problems in criminology because criminological theories have varying scopes, are posed at many different levels of explanation, and may address several explanatory domains. The lack of understanding and consistency in this area explains why criminological theories have developed slowly and why there have been so many difficulties associated with integrating different theories (Bernard & Snipes, 1996; Messner, Krohn, & Liska, 1989; Short, 1985). To avoid this confusion, the meaning of scope, level of explanation, and problem focus will be clearly specified below.

Different criminological theories seek to explain different types of phenomena. In criminology, there are several different **explanatory domains** or **problem foci**. Criminologists generally seem to agree that criminological theories focus upon four different aspects of crime (Akers, 2009; Brantingham & Brantingham, 1984; Bernard, Snipes, & Gerould, 2010; Miller, Schreck, & Tewksbury, 2011; Sutherland & Cressey, 1974). Most criminological theories focus on explaining criminal behavior (or criminality), criminal acts, or crime rates. Some theories may also attempt to explain the formation and activities of the criminal law and the criminal justice system. In some cases, theories may attempt to address more than one of the four aspects.

**Scope** refers to how much the theory can explain and is more specific than problem focus. For example, some theories claim to be general theories that can explain all forms of criminal behavior, but other theories are much more specific and focus on explaining one particular type of crime. Some also argue that the causes of elite or “suite” crime (e.g., white-collar, corporate, and political crime) are different from common or “street” crime (e.g., theft, robbery, burglary, and assault). Still others argue that victimless crimes (e.g., drug use, prostitution, and illegal gambling) cannot be explained by factors that are commonly associated with more violent or victimful crimes (e.g., theft, assault, robbery, burglary, and murder). When reading about and attempting to apply various criminological theories, it is important to think about the scope of the theory and consider what it is attempting to explain.

Another important aspect of a theory is its **level of explanation**, which is sometimes referred to as level of abstraction or level of analysis (Bernard et al., 2010). Some criminologists differentiate between micro-, macro-, and meso-level theories. Micro-level theories explain how specific people or groups of people become criminals, whereas macro-level theories explain how the social structure can affect crime (Short, 1985). Meso-level (or bridging) theories fall somewhere in the middle of micro- and macro-level theories (Williams & McShane, 2010).

Another method of classifying theories based on levels of explanation (also called levels of analysis) involves distinguishing between theories that focus upon **individual differences** that lead to crime and theories that emphasize the **social structural factors** and **social processes** that lead to crime (Akers, 2009; Bernard et al., 2010). In other words, some people may have biological or psychological characteristics (e.g., impulsivity or a lack of empathy) that make them more prone to behaving criminally. However, it is obvious that not every criminal has biological or psychological problems because, in many cases, crime seems more related to social factors. For example, a person may be under financial stress because of socioeconomic status or may have more opportunities to commit crime because of the neighborhood he or she inhabits (both structural factors). In addition, a person’s

peer group may be involved in crime or the person may simply lack the strong social ties that might prevent him or her from committing crime (both social processes).

Problem focus, scope, and level of explanation may also be connected to a theory's disciplinary origins and criminological perspective. For example, psychological learning theories focus primarily on explaining individual criminality, while rational choice theories are more concerned with explaining the dynamics of criminal acts. Sociological theories, such as strain theory or social learning theory, tend to emphasize social structures and processes. Critical or conflict theories are concerned with understanding how criminal laws are formed and how the activities of the criminal justice system may affect crime and criminal behavior (Bernard et al., 2010).

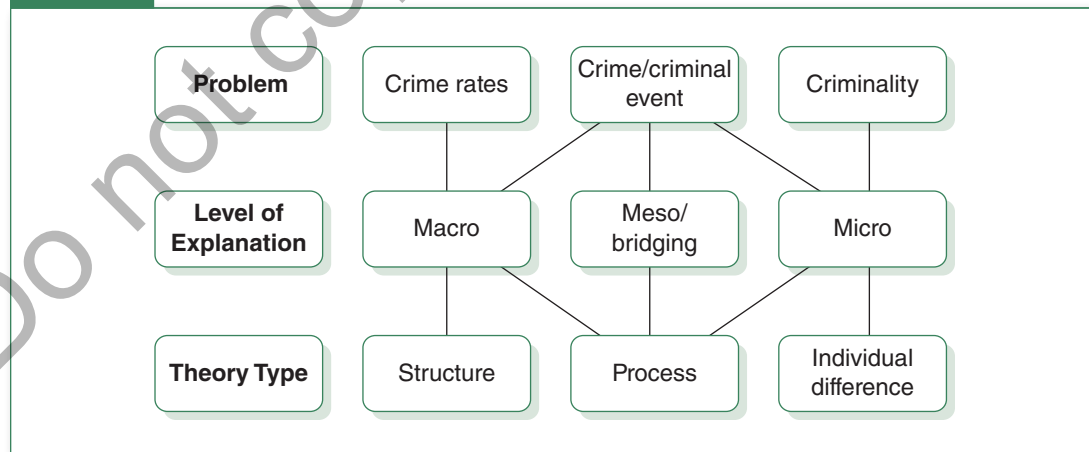
At this point, it should be clear that while they are all different dimensions of a theory, scope, level of explanation, and problem focus/explanatory domain are all connected to one another in various ways. Figure 2.4 provides one way to see these various elements together.

### Step Four: Define Terms and Concepts

The French philosopher Voltaire once stated, "If you would converse with me, define your terms." Before discussing the elements within the different theories, it is important to clarify what we are talking about when we use the word *theory*. **Theories** refer to specific explanations of criminality/criminal behavior, crime/criminal acts, crime rates, and/or the behaviors of the criminal law/criminal justice system. Theories can be tested and falsified, but they can never be proved fully (Popper, 1962). We can never fully verify theories because we may uncover new facts that fail to support the theory or we may test the theory with new or different data and find that it is much less accurate or useful than previously believed.

Good theories should be straightforward and easy to understand. This means that all other things being equal, we prefer simple theories to more complex ones primarily because simple theories are easier to test and refute. If we know a theory is simple, yet people have failed to refute it, this means that it must be a strong theory. This guiding principle is sometimes referred to as Occam's

**Figure 2.4** Problem Focus, Level of Explanation, and Theory Type



razor. This principle suggests that if two theories explain a phenomenon equally well, we prefer the theory that does it by using the fewest concepts and least complex relationships (Palys, 1997). Let's consider an example.

The basis for Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is natural selection, or the idea that in order for an organism to survive in its environment, it must adapt. Darwin showed that, over time, previous adaptations change future generations. Thus, although some traits have a genetic basis, they can change over time. The theory, of course, is controversial to some. It shouldn't be. The theory does not deny the possibility that some sort of Creator exists, since such a question is beyond the scope of the theory. Natural selection simply serves as the best explanation for what we observe happening in nature. It is based on four key propositions. **Propositions** refer to the key statements of the theory in question (Robinson, 2004, p. 19). For the theory of natural selection (see Figure 14.2), propositions might include the following:

- Within a given species, more individuals are produced by reproduction than can survive within the constraints (e.g., food supply) imposed by the species' environment.
- The disparity between the number of individuals produced by reproduction and the number that can survive creates a struggle for existence (<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/nature-environment/natural-history/evolution-through-natural-selection/content-section-2>).
- Individuals within a species show variation, and those with advantageous characteristics have a greater probability of survival and reproduction.
- When advantageous characteristics that promote survival are inherited by offspring, individuals possessing those characteristics will become more common in the population over successive generations.

If propositions refer to the key sentences in a theory, **concepts** refer to the key ideas within the propositions. One issue that we will discuss in later chapters is the importance of consistency and precision with regard to our definitions. Concepts ought to be defined in ways that allow others to both understand and clearly measure them. In other words, clarity in criminological thinking is to be praised. However, sometimes overly simplistic definitions obscure or overlook the complexity of criminal events and societal responses to them. To understand the relationship between propositions and concepts, let's consider natural selection again. Based on the above propositions, some key concepts might include struggle, variation, inheritance, and survival.

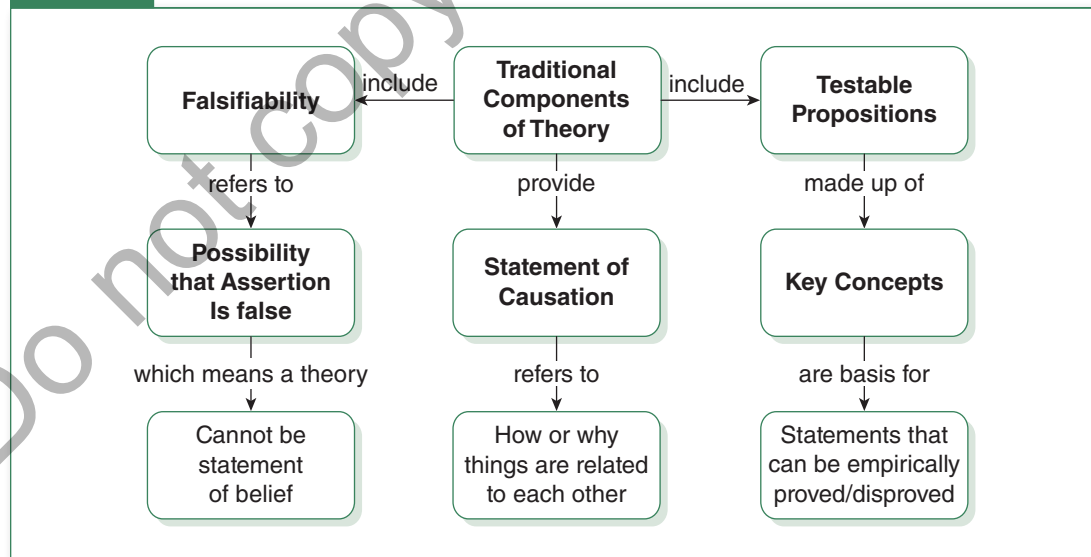
The main difference between this theory and its competitors is that natural selection is falsifiable. **Falsifiability** means it is possible to refute a central claim made by a theory. We will look at falsifiability in greater detail later; for now we will stick with natural selection. How could this theory be falsified? One way is by looking to the fossil record. As we know a great deal about how various animals (including humans) have changed over time, we can easily look back to see how well the idea of adaptation holds up. The British scientist J. B. S. Haldane, when asked what would constitute evidence against evolution, famously said, "Fossil rabbits in the Precambrian." The joke for those of you who are not geologists is that the Precambrian era comprises the geologic timeframe prior to 600 million years ago, when from an evolutionary point of view rabbits did not exist. While nothing like rabbit fossils have ever been found in this era, it is possible that evolution could be disproved by such a discovery. This is what makes evolution falsifiable and distinct from other explanations such as intelligent design or creationism. While there are plenty of gaps in the fossil record, no fossils have yet been found that disprove evolutionary theory. As such, evolution remains the best theory of explanation we have for the diversity of life on earth.

In addition to being falsifiable, good theories should also uncover new puzzles or problems for researchers to solve. A theory does not have to explain everything; it is just as important to open up new areas of research and help push knowledge in the field further. In other words, a good theory should lead to more research studies (Kuhn, 1962). Theories should also be able to make sense of the existing facts that are known about the phenomenon or phenomena in question (Williams & McShane, 2010). Again, evolutionary theory scores high in both of these categories; this is why it is so widely accepted by scientists. Evolutionary theory is relevant to all organisms from amoebae to humans to blue whales, and it has succeeded in making sense of data that, at first, seemed to be unrelated to it. For example, Gregor Mendel's research on genetics came about at roughly the same time, in the mid-1800s. However, the integration of Darwin's and Mendel's work, referred to as the modern synthesis, did not take place until the early part of the 20th century.

A final point that needs to be made is that theories are composed of statements that explain a relationship between two or more concepts (Thornberry, 1989). As discussed above, theories contain explanatory statements called propositions from which key concepts are identified. Both concepts and propositions must be testable and falsifiable in order to evaluate a theory. Figure 2.5 presents some of the traditional components of theory.

While theories may be very specific, criminological perspectives tend to be more abstract. Perspectives, sometimes called meta-theories or paradigms, are general approaches or underlying philosophies that inform our theories. The classical and positivist schools are early examples of criminological perspectives. Examples of prominent perspectives in modern criminology include psychodynamic, learning, labeling/societal reaction, control, anomie, rational choice/economic/deterrence, critical/conflict, biosocial, and developmental and life-course approaches.

**Figure 2.5** Traditional Components of a Theory



Criminological perspectives do not explain specific things. Instead, they provide a list of guidelines and direct the theorist to important aspects of the problem. A person's preferred criminological perspective may determine some of the core assumptions that person makes about the phenomenon he or she is trying to explain. Given that all theories are built on different assumptions, it is important to discuss the key assumptions that characterize criminology. In many cases, these can be connected to criminology's complicated history.

### Step Five: Respect the Research

To understand the importance of criminological research, it is necessary to understand basic differences in research traditions. **Qualitative research** refers to the gathering, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of narrative information in order to establish concepts and build theories (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 6). Qualitative research was very much at the heart of early studies of crime, including the ethnographic and interview research that formed part of what is known as the Chicago school (Shaw, 1930; Sutherland & Conwell, 1937). During the 1920s and 1930s, researchers at the University of Chicago undertook numerous qualitative studies of crime and deviance. These researchers viewed the city of Chicago as a sort of social laboratory and focused on understanding how the urban landscape related to social problems such as crime (Adler & Adler, 1987).

Today, there are calls for a renewed focus on qualitative research to understand issues such as offender decision making, social networks, and the ways in which social processes shape criminal events. According to Miller (2005), although many criminological areas of interest have received limited attention from qualitative researchers, they offer promise for future investigations. This includes the use of life history narratives to understand pathways to offending and desistance from crime (Daly, 1992; Giordano, Cherkovich, & Rudolf, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Moore, 1991; Sampson & Laub, 2003) as well as research on organizational processes and decision making within criminal justice and other relevant institutions. The benefit of qualitative analysis is that it can provide a means to focus more deeply on individual cases and context-specific realities.

In criminology, it is far more common for researchers to employ quantitative methods. **Quantitative research** can be described as the techniques associated with the gathering, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of numerical information (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 5). Through clearly defined dependent and independent variables, quantitative research relies upon **hypothesis testing** to evaluate theories. This requires that researchers understand the differences between propositions, concepts, independent and dependent variables, and correlation versus causation. Ideally, theories are stated formally in propositions. As discussed above, propositions are statements that explain the relationships between key concepts within the theory. When the theory is tested, the key concepts are measured with variables. Concepts are words or phrases that represent something abstract in the world (Bohm & Vogel, 2011). The goal of a theory is to explain how two or more concepts are related to each other. Examples of popular criminological concepts include differential association, strain, and social bonds.

A central tool in quantitative research is the variable. In simple terms, a **variable** is a measure of an abstract concept that has variation in the real world. **Independent** (or treatment) variables exert some kind of influence on **dependent** (or test) variables. As we discussed earlier, criminologists are primarily interested in explaining criminal acts, criminal behavior, or crime rates, and it is important to recognize that independent variables must precede the dependent variable in order to test their

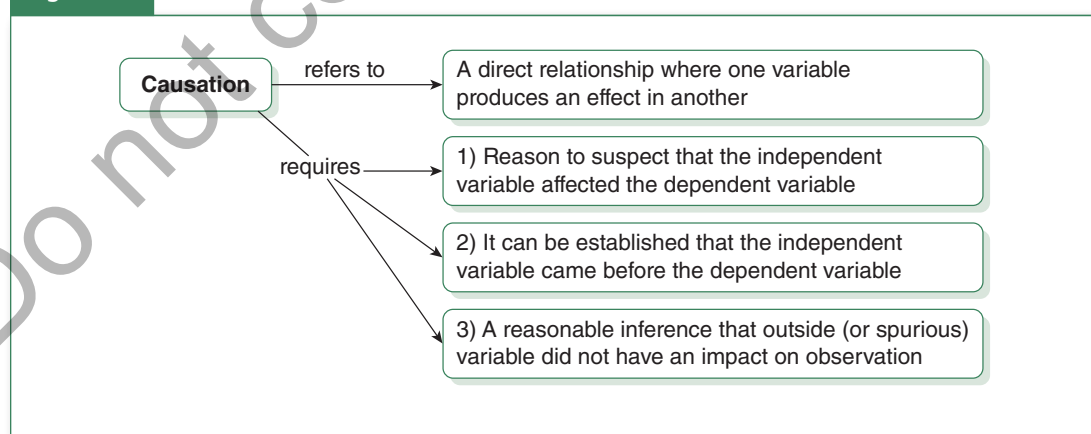
effects (Bernard & Snipes, 1996; Bernard et al., 2011). Quantitative techniques focus on numeric data and seek to test whether, and to what extent, some variables influence criminal acts, criminal behavior, or crime rates. If a connection is found between variables, this relationship may be the result of a direct cause-and-effect relationship, or **causal** relationship. It may also be the result of a **correlation**. A correlation may allow for an increased probability that one variable will affect another but is not always based on an ironclad direct relationship.

One way to think about causation and correlation is to consider cigarette smoking. Public health messages often imply that everyone who smokes gets cancer; this suggests a direct cause and effect relationship. It is more accurate to say that smoking increases your risk of getting cancer. If the first statement were true, all smokers would eventually get cancer. While smoking causes numerous other health problems in society and is not a good habit to acquire, it is only correlated with cancer (Wheeldon & Åhlberg, 2012, pp. 44–45). Obviously, there are genetic and other environmental factors (e.g., toxins in food, water, and air) that play a role in cancer.

While a correlation does not equal causation, there may be cases in which the sheer number of correlations found in study after study makes it prudent to concede that a causal explanation may exist. For now, it is useful to explain the differences between causation and correlation. In order to establish a causal relationship between two variables, we need a logical basis for our suggested relationship. This is often referred to as the **criteria of causation**, and its aspects can be summarized as follows: (1) There is a reason to suspect that the independent variable affected the dependent variable; (2) it can be established that one variable came before the other; and (3) it can be assumed that some outside (or spurious) variable is not having an impact on our observation. These aspects are outlined in Figure 2.6.

It is important to remain skeptical about causal relationships in criminology. It is far more common and useful to consider the strength of various correlations. A correlation refers to when variables vary systematically and in relation to one another. There are two types of correlations. For example, **direct (or positive) correlations** refer to situations in which increases in the independent variable cause increases in the dependent variable. For example, one might claim that crime (the dependent

Figure 2.6 Three Criteria of Causation

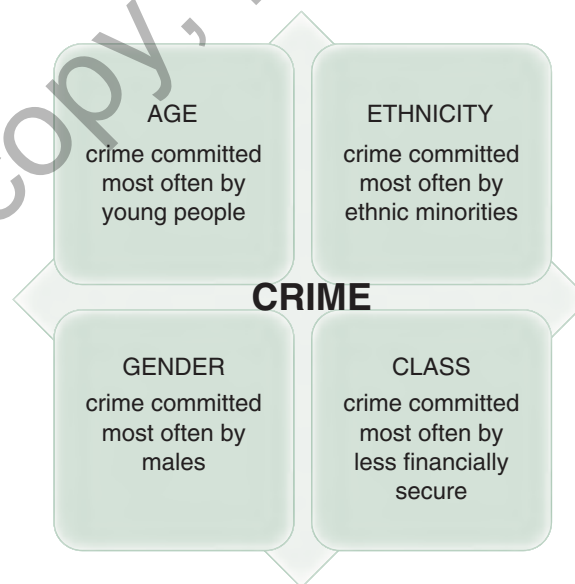


variable) increases with level of poverty or deprivation (the independent variable). This statement may or may not be true. To test this idea, we could examine crime and unemployment rates to see if a pattern can be observed. **Inverse** (or **negative**) **correlations** refer to when an increase in the independent variable results in a decrease in the dependent variable. Quantitative research has uncovered four main correlates of crime, as presented in Figure 2.7.

While these correlates can be challenged, they remain persistent features of criminological thinking. This is because over a long period of time, criminological research has consistently shown that a relationship between these variables and crime exists. Nevertheless, research has complicated simplistic conclusions about how crime is connected to age, gender, class, and ethnicity. Let's look at one of the most complicated issues in criminal justice: the question of race and ethnicity.

It is no secret that the American justice system has a race problem. In general, ethnic minorities are overrepresented in the prison system. Numeric analysis suggests Asian Americans are likely to commit crimes at a lower rate than white Americans and that African Americans are more involved in crime (Mosher, Miethe, & Hart, 2011; Roberts & Gabor, 1990; Rushton, 1985, 1988). In 2005, about 8% of black males age 25 to 29 were in state or federal prison, compared to 2.6% of Hispanic males and 1.1% of white males in the same age group (Harrison & Beck, 2006). Does this mean African Americans commit more crime? No. The problem is that numeric analyses like these tend to gloss over key details and important questions. For example, what kinds of harm are considered crimes? What crimes does the criminal justice system tend to focus on? Which neighborhoods do police patrol most frequently? What role does institutionalized racism play in who gets charged?

**Figure 2.7** Four Correlates of Crime



In a review of misdemeanor marijuana arrests in New York City between 1989 and 2000, a major study by Harcourt and Ludwig (2007) found that the pattern of arrests disproportionately targeted the African American and Hispanic populations. African Americans and Hispanics arrested were nearly twice as likely as their white counterparts to be detained before arraignment and convicted, and they were at least three times more likely to be sentenced to additional jail time (Harcourt & Ludwig, 2007, p. 165). This study showed that the pattern of misdemeanor marijuana arrests in New York City since the introduction of broken windows policing in 1994 disproportionately targeted African Americans and Hispanics in relation to their representation in the resident population.

Another study on the same topic provides a useful way to visualize the disparate treatment faced by minorities. Harry Levine's research demonstrates how, since 1995, New York City arrested and jailed more people for possessing marijuana than any other city in the world. Based on interviews with police officers, public defenders, legal aid and private attorneys, assistant district attorneys, and individuals arrested for possessing marijuana, Levine explored changes in enforcement tactics and their consequences during this period. For example, Levine and Small (2008) report that although whites are more prevalent users of marijuana, based on data drawn from the US Department of Health and Human Services (2005), they were less likely than other ethnicities to be arrested during the period investigated by the researchers. Figure 2.8 provides a useful example of simplistic attempts to link crime and ethnicity. This example illustrates that law enforcement tactics may change over time and that crime rates may vary based on these changes (e.g., who gets arrested and why).

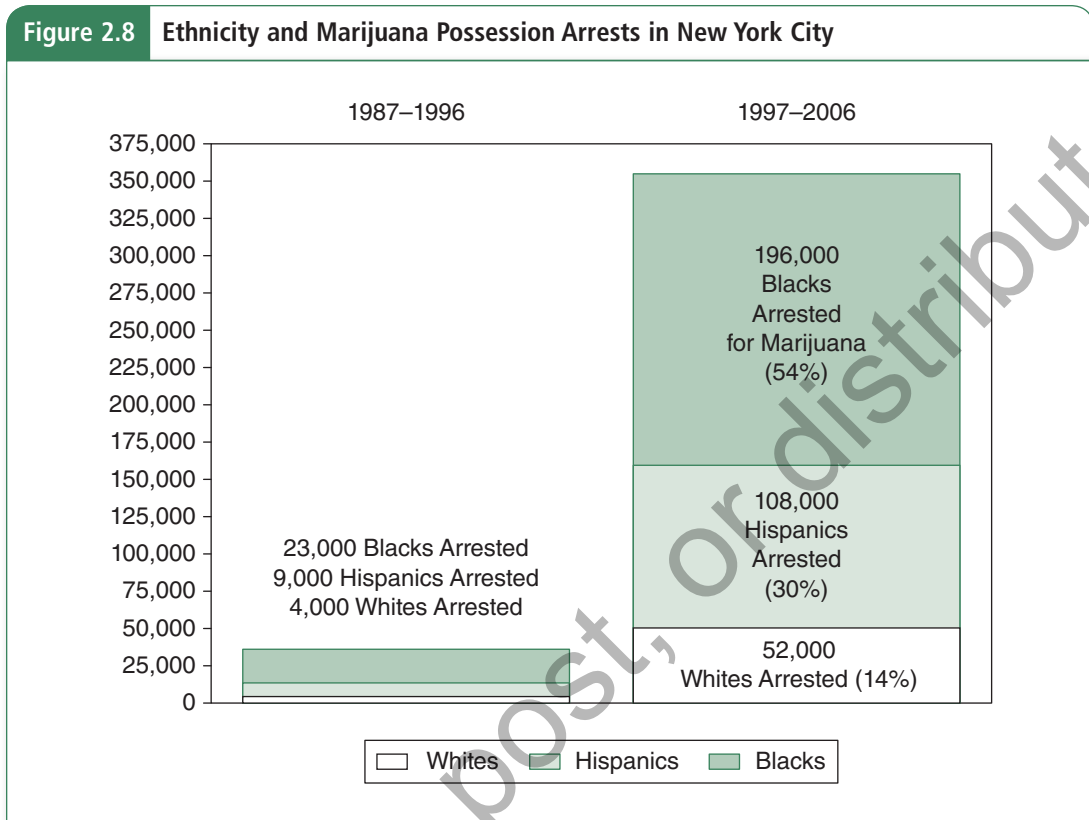
Another issue is the question of what we define as a crime. At the time of the writing of this book, despite the massive fraud that resulted in the largest economic downturn in two generations, not one individual from the largest banks and firms on Wall Street had been charged for the events that led up to the financial crisis. This is despite reports from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as far back as 2005 suggesting that at least 26 different states had significant mortgage fraud problems, including inflated appraisals, fake supporting loan documentation, and collusion among third-party brokers and those from the mortgage industry (FBI, 2005). As we shall see later in this book, sometimes questions of formal justice are really questions of political expedience, dominant ideology, and/or bureaucratic inertia.

Today, many states, including New York, Colorado, and Washington, appear to be pulling back from the all-out "war on drugs" assault in favor of decriminalization, a focus on evidence-based treatment programs, and the increasing use of drug courts. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) reports that in 2011 more than 2,600 drug courts were in operation in the United States. These courts use a less adversarial approach than other courts and rely upon multidisciplinary teams to deliver more specific and responsive programming and treatment (NIJ, 2012).

The above examples also suggest a useful way to understand causation and correlation. Rates of criminal behavior may be consistently reported as higher among one group of people. However, this does not mean that this group is somehow more criminal than others. Just because we know two variables are correlated with each another does not mean that one directly causes the other (Wikstrom, 2008). This is a major logical fallacy and one that must be resisted. Another example may be useful. It is well established that there is an inverse correlation between crime and age. In other words, as people get older, they tend to commit less crime. So, does growing old cause people to commit less crime?

Consider all of the factors associated with growing older that may make people less inclined to engage in criminal conduct. It may be that age is simply the best way to capture a whole range of





*Source:* New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, Computerized Criminal History system. Cited in Levine, Harry G. & Small, Deborah Peterson (2008). *Marijuana Arrest Crusade: Racial Bias and Police Policy in New York City, 1997 to 2007*. New York Civil Liberties Union: NY, NY.

changing behaviors that make one less likely to engage in criminal behavior. While it is true that younger people commit crime more often than older people, this does not mean all youth are criminals. In other words, while age is correlated with crime, it cannot perfectly predict involvement in crime over the life cycle of offenders (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

The complications inherent in explaining the reasons or underlying causes and consequences of youth crime have led some researchers to consider how to combine quantitative theory testing with a qualitative technique that focuses on refining specific aspects of the theory (Laub & Sampson, 2004). For this reason, there has been increasing interest in **mixed methods** in criminology (Agnew, 2011; Maruna, 2010) to combine the clarity of numbers and statistics with the nuance of narrative perspective (Wheeldon & Åhlberg, 2012). Yet, as we will see, other challenges exist. One major issue for researchers attempting to test, revise, validate, or rebuild existing theories is that some theories are much more difficult to understand than others. When theories suggest clear relationships between concepts and variables, either quantitative or qualitative (or perhaps both) techniques can be used. However, when the statements of relationships are embedded within a theorist's writing and are not expressed clearly as propositions, they can prove difficult to test, verify, and further explore.

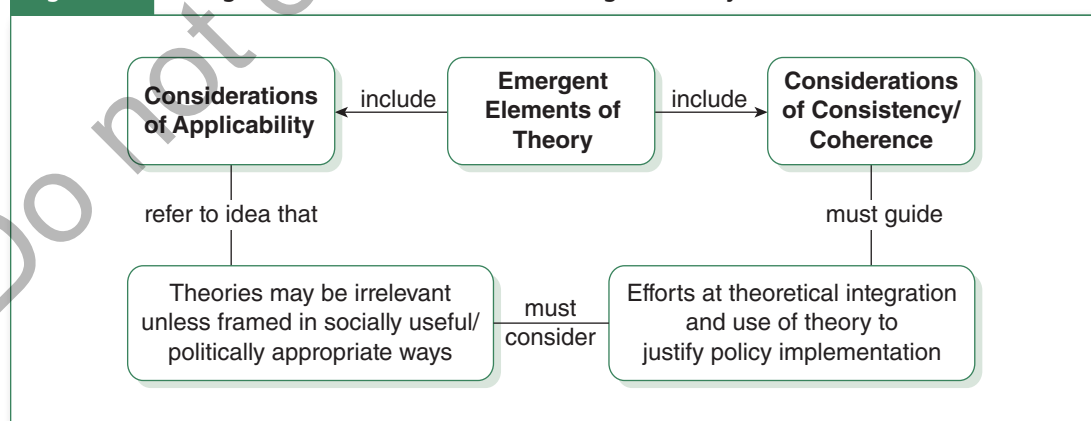
No matter which research approach is used to test or explore a theory, too often researchers fail to consider counterevidence. All credible research acknowledges limitations and explores counterevidence. In this text, we hope to offer examples of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research to showcase high-quality research that considers criminological theories from a variety of perspectives. We also agree with the sentiment that the complex features of crime and social control cannot be understood through simple quantitative and cost–benefit analyses alone. It is essential that we renew the “criminological imagination” by exploring criminological theories based on clearly stated assumptions, concepts, and propositions. This must always include research limitations, counterevidence, and an acknowledgment of the researcher’s own role in the research process. It must also account for the ways in which theories are linked to the policies developed for and practices employed by those working in the criminal justice system.

### Step Six: Recognize the Theory–Practice Problem

Throughout the text, we will offer some discussion on the practical ways various theoretical approaches have influenced the administration of the justice system and its policies, programs, and practices. In the last three decades, criminology has too often ignored the complexities of various theories in favor of more simplistic accounts that fit within the administrative needs of agencies and the sound bites of politicians. As we have explored elsewhere (Wheeldon & Heidt, 2007), this results in either incoherent and/or inconsistent applications of a criminological theory on the one hand, or the development of new approaches that are generally ignored by policymakers on the other hand.

It is important to acknowledge that the relationship between criminology and the criminal justice system has also had an impact on the theories produced by criminologists. There is empirical evidence to suggest that the needs of the criminal justice system and the current political climate can impact the nature of criminological knowledge. Politics may also be relevant in the sense that the government provides a great deal of funding for criminological research. This has led some to suggest that current researchers are driven by governmental assumptions about crime rather than by the input of criminological scholars and their peers (Savelsberg, King, & Cleveland, 2002). Figure 2.9 outlines some emergent considerations for criminological theory.

**Figure 2.9** Emergent Considerations for Criminological Theory



### Step Seven: When in Doubt—Map It!

As you have no doubt noticed, we have used a number of visual maps and diagrams so far to help augment the text and to provide another way to see the concepts and relationships we have discussed. Our use of these visual approaches is based on the growing recognition that many students learn in different ways. Different learning styles require different teaching approaches, but by building visual examples and exercises into the text we hope visual learners and nonvisual learners will take the opportunity to map out what they are reading, use maps to prepare for tests and exams, and perhaps even consider how maps could be used to explore criminological theory in more detail.

Throughout this text, we will use both concept maps and mind maps to illustrate various aspects of criminological theories. These diagrams will be used in several different ways later in the book. For example, they will be used to demonstrate relationships between variables within theories, to explain the relationship between theory and research, to clarify the historical development of theories, and to show how theories themselves are interconnected and how they may be integrated with each other. In many cases, we have tried to incorporate mapping into exercises designed to help students learn and remember the theories more effectively.

### A Research Example: Classical Criminology and Deterrence Theory

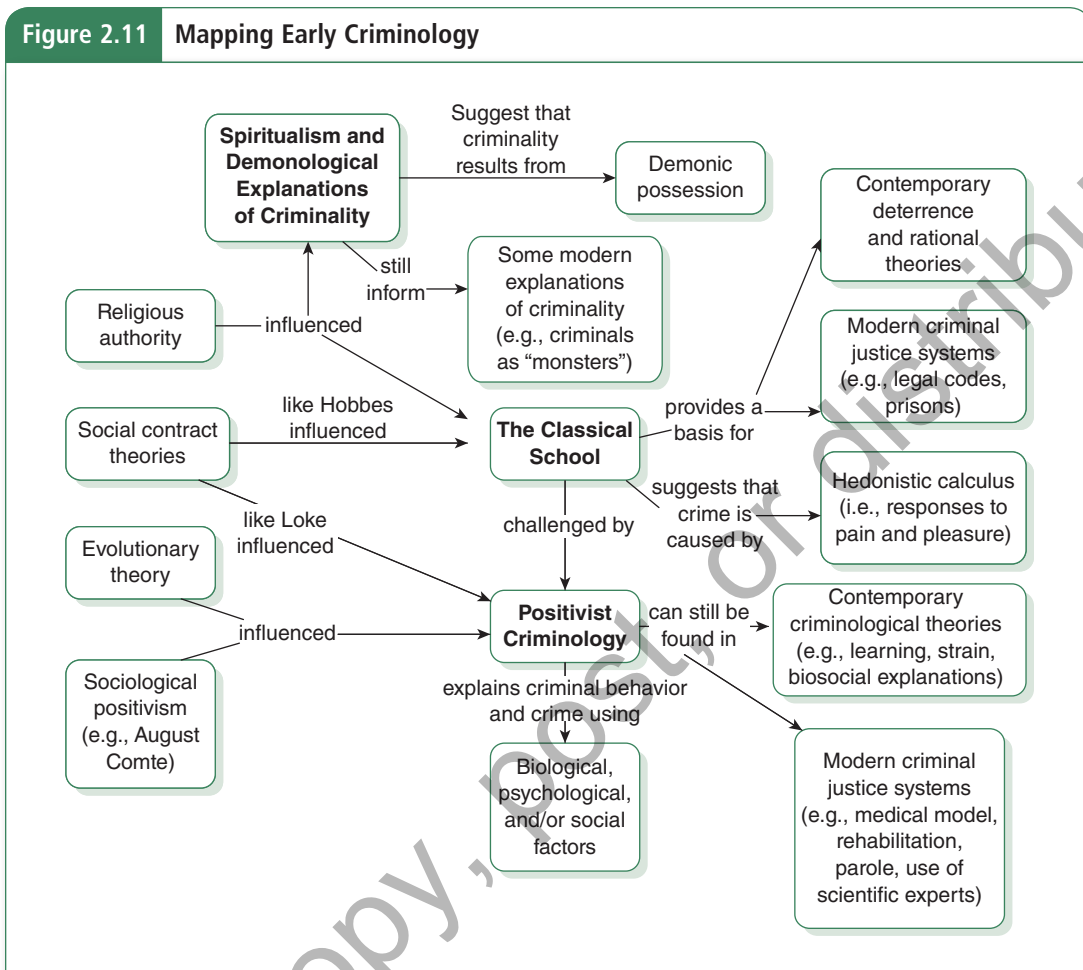
Throughout this text, we will provide research examples of how theories have been explored, concepts conceptualized, and findings presented. Our first such example borrows from the useful discussion by Miller, Schreck, and Tewksbury (2011, pp. 24–27) on four approaches to research on deterrence.

You may recall that classical school criminologists make a number of assumptions about human nature. The first is that people have free will and choose for themselves what to do. The second is that

**Figure 2.10** Seven Steps of the Classical School

Seven Steps	The Classical School
1. Know the History	Originated during the Enlightenment (ca. 1700–1800) as a reaction to brutal punishment regimes imposed by the church
2. Acknowledge Assumptions	Humans are rational, have free will, and are hedonistic; behavior must be regulated through laws
3. Problem Focus, Scope, and Level of Explanation	Criminal acts committed by individuals; amount of punishment required to control behavior
4. Key Terms and Concepts	Hedonistic (or hedonic) calculus and deterrence
5. Respect the Research	N/A (see later rational theories for examples)
6. Theory/Practice	Formal methods of social control, including legal codes, prisons, determinate sentencing
7. Mapping the Theory	See Figure 2.11

Figure 2.11 Mapping Early Criminology



people are hedonistic, in the sense that they seek pleasure and avoid pain. Third and finally, classical school criminologists believe people are rational and can anticipate outcomes, weigh and balance options, and act in their own self-interest.

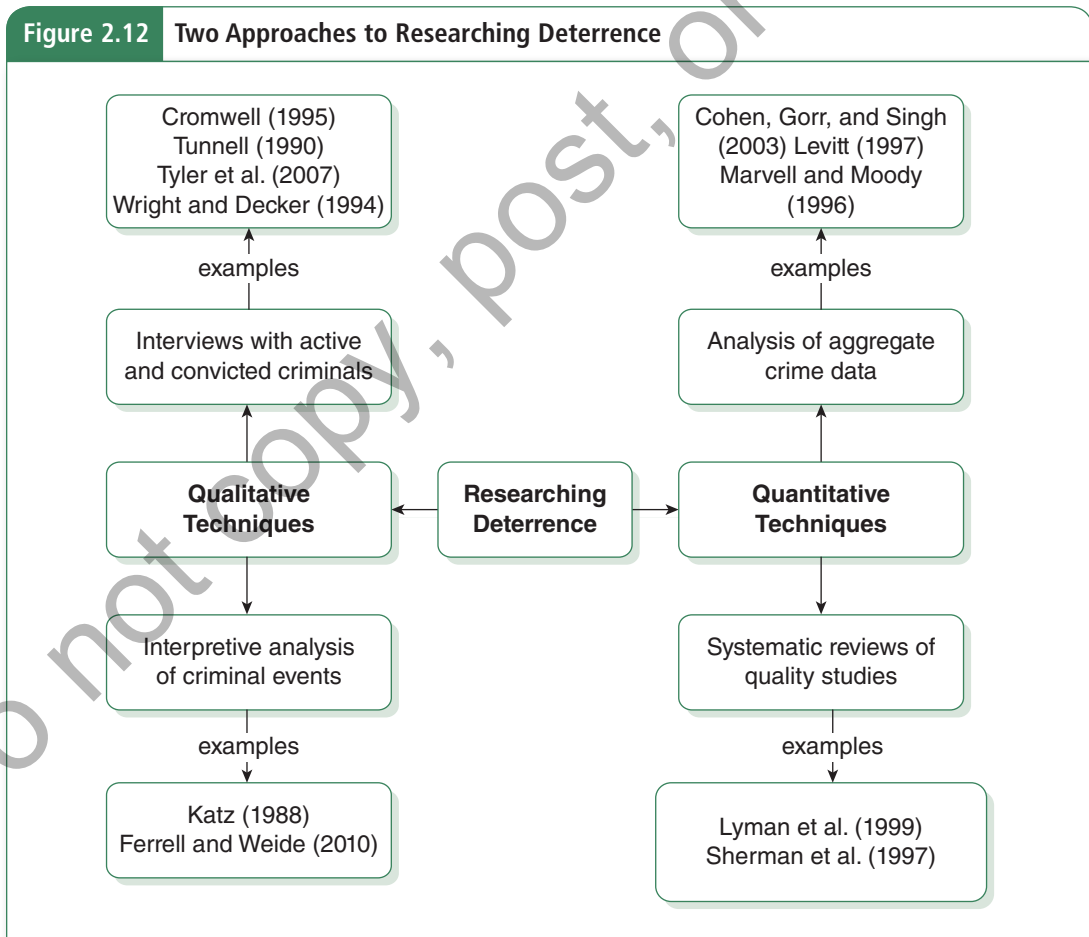
It is relatively easy to see the problems with these assumptions. For example, do people always choose what to do? Are people ever compelled by urges they cannot control? Consider motives such as greed, revenge, need, anger, lust, jealousy, thrill seeking, and vanity. Are these always just mere expressions of free will? One might also ask whether a person's choices can be controlled by fear of punishment. This would require that a person know the existing penal codes and sentencing guidelines and have the ability to estimate the likelihood of apprehension, thus perhaps leading that person to conclude that the risk of punishment was not worth the short-term gain associated with committing crime.

A core assumption is that the more **certain**, **swift**, and **severe** the punishment, the greater its ability to control criminal behavior. While research into deterrence supports many of the assumptions

made by classical theorists, some aspects of this perspective appear stronger than others (Robinson, 2004). An oft-cited passage from an interview with the influential Alfred Blumstein challenges assumptions about the utility of increasing punishment:

Research on deterrence has consistently supported the position that sentence “severity” (that is, the time served) has less of a deterrent effect than sentence “certainty” (the probability of going to prison). Thus, from the deterrence consideration, there is clear preference for increasing certainty, even if it becomes necessary to do so at the expense of severity. (1995, pp. 10–13)

Miller, Schreck, and Tewksbury (2011, pp. 24–27) provide some useful discussion on deterrence research based on assumptions and principles drawn from the classical school. We have adapted and added to this discussion and present Figure 2.12 as a useful way to visualize approaches, research examples, and relevant findings on deterrence.



One approach to researching deterrence is based on *qualitative research*. As you may recall, qualitative research is based on narrative information and attempting to describe individual experiences rather than positing generalizable findings. Based on **interviews** with 60 incarcerated repeat property offenders, Tunnell (1990) demonstrated how few respondents within his sample considered prison an effective deterrent. He reports that the most common responses explaining the lack of deterrent effects on their actions were that the criminals thought they would not get caught and thought that if they were caught they would be incapacitated for a relatively short time.

Other studies have come out of the Australian Reintegrative Shaming Experiments (RISE), conducted by Tyler, Sherman, Strang, Barnes, and Woods (2007). In one example, longitudinal data drawn from before and after interviews was used by researchers to explore how attitudes to offending were affected by exposure to the normal court-based procedural justice mechanisms on the one hand, and to participation in restorative justice (RJ) conferences on the other hand. The paper concludes that exposure to RJ conferences affected people's orientations toward the law, and, as a result, led people to view the law as more legitimate and to believe that breaking the law in the future would create further problems for them. This is a growing area of interest. In Chapter 13, we will return to John Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming theory.

Qualitative research has in some ways challenged the idea that deterrence is based solely on punishment. It also complicates the way we think about rationality and the process by which people consider others, weigh and balance consequences, and view the justice system itself. For example, based on studies involving burglars, the major risk identified by those interviewed was not severe punishment from the criminal justice system. Instead, researchers consistently found being discovered by the occupants of the residence in question was viewed as the major risk and/or concern (Cromwell, 1995; Wright & Decker, 1994). This research provides a window into understanding how those involved with criminal behavior view their crimes.

Other interesting qualitative studies involve more interpretative approaches to meaning. This includes the work of Katz (1988), who analyzed descriptions of several hundred criminal acts of vandalism, theft, robbery, and murder. In many of these cases, deterrence, as traditionally defined, did not account for the sensual appeal of homicide, shoplifting, and armed robbery, nor did the fact that those committing the crimes were reacting and retaliating to actual or perceived insults and humiliations. In a different example that confronts the complexity of understanding deterrence, Ferrell and Weide (2010) explored contemporary graffiti as a social and cultural artifact of the urban environment. Using interpretive approaches and mapping where graffiti occurs, they suggest that where graffiti appears in the city is essential to understanding its meaning. The relationship between artist, location, and audience, they argue, may challenge simplistic models of crime and crime control.

Another way to approach researching deterrence is based on *quantitative research*. As discussed previously, quantitative researchers focus on the analysis of numeric information and attempt to generalize their findings rather than describe individual experiences. This research approach may be undertaken in a variety of ways, but it must contend with the basic problem that correlates for crime deterrence must attempt to measure the likelihood that a crime that would have occurred absent an intervention or intervening factor *did not* occur (Robinson, 2004). Nevertheless, a variety of studies have been undertaken.

One popular approach is based on an **analysis of aggregate crime data**, which refers to data or data sets that have been combined together. These large data sets can assist to uncover correlations that may be more common than the individual experiences catalogued and considered by qualitative

researchers. Some examples of findings using this approach include those of Levitt (1997) and Marvell and Moody (1996), who show how increased police presence leads to reductions in street crime. Attempts to measure the effects of police interventions suggest that while these interventions reduce drug dealing during periods of active enforcement, levels return to baseline once the interventions cease (Cohen, Gorr, & Singh, 2003).

One of the more recent efforts at establishing criminological knowledge is based on **systematic reviews**. These comprehensive literature reviews focus on a single question and try to identify, appraise, select, and synthesize all high-quality research evidence relevant to that question. In this way, evidence is established by relying on a variety of high-quality, peer-reviewed data gathered by independent researchers. The roots of this approach come from the medical field and its use of randomized controlled trials to identify effective treatments for disease. By challenging accepted practice and replacing assumptions with rigorous study, evidence-based medicine has led to improved health outcomes and reduced costs. Systematic reviews of high-quality, randomized, controlled trials are crucial to evidence-based practices, and their use is becoming increasingly important in criminology.

One important contribution is that of Sherman et al. (1998). They reviewed more than 500 justice programs and practices to assess what was working, what wasn't, and what needed more research. Although the focus of this analysis was on crime prevention, some practices can be connected to deterrence as well. Practices found to deter crime included extra police patrols in high-crime areas, monitoring of high-risk repeat offenders, and on-scene arrests of domestic violence suspects. Practices shown not to deter crime (and in some cases make the problem worse) included boot camps for juveniles, scared straight programs, and youth-focused drug awareness programs organized through the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program. The findings related to DARE have been tested and validated by others using similar methodologies (Lyman et al., 1999).

Despite these findings, the authors are cautious to suggest that these conclusions are provisional—like all research (Sherman et al., 1998). Clearly, there are questions regarding what works in one geographic area or cultural setting. Another important question that lies at the heart of classical criminology and contemporary research on deterrence is the following: Will the same sanction influence all potential criminals in the same way? Because offenders are individuals with their own histories, experiences, and outlooks, these sorts of sweeping generalizations about deterring crime are difficult to make. Instead, it may be better to focus on how interventions vary in their effectiveness with regard to different crimes and criminals. To address these questions, we need to know more about what biological and psychological processes affect individuals and their decision making. As outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, biological and psychological theories consider the role of individuals and personalities in understanding crime, especially in the context of human development and cognition.

### Think You Get It?

- Follow the instructions below to make a concept map and a mind map. First, make your own concept map of the seven steps to criminological thinking. In your map, list the key questions to consider in each step. Next, make a mind map of the main differences between quantitative and qualitative research.

### Constructing a Concept Map

1. Select 6 to 8 concepts related to the topic you selected. These should be ideas from this chapter. Present these concepts first in a table.
2. Think about this analogy before you begin to map: Concepts can be seen as islands, while linking words are like bridges. These linking words should include arrowheads to show the direction of the relationship between one concept and another.
3. Begin your map by starting with classical criminology near the top of the page. Use the concepts in your table and appropriate linking words and arrows to make a full proposition or claim that can be understood through your map.
4. Because many of the concepts you identified from the chapter are likely connected in one way or another, build new propositions using other concepts and linking words.

### Making a Mind Map

1. Start in the middle of the page and write the main topic of interest in a small circle.
2. Draw lines outward and write the name of each of the connected themes.
3. Now write an important idea or aspect as discussed in the chapter that is connected to each theme.
4. Write other words, ideas, or concepts that are connected to your first idea and continue to build your map outward.
5. Use color, the thickness of lines, boxes, or pictures and graphics to make your map unique and expressive.

## Conclusion and Review Questions

This chapter has examined the seven-step model in some detail to explain how it is useful for understanding developments in criminological theories. First, we discussed some of the earliest explanations of criminal behavior based on spiritualism or the demonological approach. The model was then applied directly to the classical and positivist approaches to criminology to illustrate the various steps in the model.

Those who study deterrence are increasingly aware of the complications of trying to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to the problem of crime by preventing it before the fact or punishing it afterward. While some approaches to deterrence align with assumptions made by classical school philosophy,



others do not. This may be a function of how we understand the relationship between individuals, crime, and approaches to crime prevention.

## CHAPTER REVIEW

1. Present the seven steps of criminological thinking and provide two relevant issues for each step.
2. List the three main assumptions of human nature explored in this chapter and explain how they can be connected to our current criminal justice system.
3. What are two early approaches to explaining crime? How are they relevant today?
4. Compare and contrast quantitative and qualitative research in criminology and provide examples of research that rely upon these two approaches.
5. Define key terms such as *theory*, *causation*, *correlation*, *proposition*, and *falsifiability*.