

Per-Olof H. Wikström and Robert J. Sampson, eds.
The Explanation of Crime: Context, Mechanisms and Development.Cambridge University Press, 2006, 324 pp.
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This volume, edited by Per-Olof H. Wikström and Robert J. Sampson, includes chapters written by major scholars in the field of criminology. Integration of criminological knowledge is the main theme of the volume. Although different disciplines, theories, and methodological approaches contribute to the understanding of crime in their own ways, the uncoordinated accumulation of ideas and results can become more confusing than instructive. This is why a book like this one is interesting: it proposes to simplify and clarify criminology through the integration of different approaches into coherent theories of crime causation. For example, some traditions in criminology search for the probabilistic causes of crime in characteristics of individuals, while other traditions investigate how social contexts are criminogenic. Because scholars of each tradition find some support for their ideas, a stronger theory would emerge from their integration. Following the same logic, a sociological explanation of crime can be improved by integrating a psychological explanation.

The book is organized around three components to facilitate the integration of criminological knowledge: (1) how social context can be criminogenic, (2) how risk factors influence the individual development of criminal behavior; (3) mechanisms by which social context and individual development interact to explain crime.

Because this is an edited book, the chapters are written by different authors who focus on specific questions. M. Bunge presents the limitations of holistic and individualist perspectives on crime and the benefits of a systemic (i.e. integrative) perspective. R. J. Sampson discusses whether there are contextual effects on individual development; and what causal mechanisms are involved in order to explain community variations in crime rates. P. O. H. Wikström emphasizes the importance of identifying what moves individuals to commit acts of crime when investigating explanations of individual differences in crime involvement, area and place variation in crime rates, and changes over time in the crime rate of a geographical location. T. Moffitt and A. Caspi review studies using behavioral-genetic designs to address the interplay between measured environmental risks and genetic risks in the origins of antisocial behavior: evidence about gene-environment interactions suggests that environmental risks can affect some people more strongly in genetically vulnerable segments of the population. R. Loeber, N. W. Slot, and M. Stouthamer-Loeber uses unconventional three-dimensional visual representations to display developmental pathways from minor to serious delinquent behavior; developmentally graded cumulative onset of risk factors; dose-response relationships between the number of risk factors and the probability of later delinquency and violence, and many other relationships relevant for the understanding of delinquency. M. Le Blanc, concerned that many criminological theories and models fail to capture the complexity of the phenomena they try to explain, uses approaches from field theory and the chaos-order paradigm to illustrate the interdependent development of self and social controls in interaction with community contexts. Finally, A. Bottoms explores how human agency interacts with the social context within which agency is exercised to explain desistance from crime.

Overall, the book is very interesting, intellectually stimulating, and even a little wild (e.g. Le Blanc presents vortex-like figures to illustrate the development of self and social control from a chaos theory viewpoint). The tradition in criminology has been to separate contextual and individual

explanations of crime; this book points toward the importance of integrating these explanations and discovering the mechanisms by which they interact. Fortunately, the methodological tools required to test these more complex theories (multilevel regression and multilevel structural equations models / path analysis) are increasingly available and used by scholars.

A traditional criticism of theory integration is that many criminological theories have incompatible basic assumptions (Hirschi, 1979). One can only integrate them by modifying these contradictions, which mean that the original theories are not really integrated. Rather, elements of different theories are assembled together, leading to the creation of a new theory inspired by its predecessors. If this new theory provides a better explanation for crime, then we have falsified the prior theories, not integrated them. We see this criticism, however, more as a semantic issue than a major problem. The development of better theories of crime typically involves the combination of prior knowledge with new creative approaches. Whether one prefers to refer to this process as the “development of integrated theory” or “the falsification of prior theory” is not a fundamental point.

Perhaps the main issue with the book is that it fails to deliver what it advertises: “to provide a unified and focused approach to the integration of knowledge” in criminology. This is because as an edited book, it presents a collection of manuscripts written by different scholars who discuss different ideas. While each chapter is interesting in itself, the sum of these chapters does not provide unified or integrated criminological knowledge.

Given the complexity of the issues, this book’s target audience probably includes professional researchers and scholars interested in understanding the causes of crime. The book is too advanced for undergraduate courses in criminology, but might be appropriate for some graduate level courses, especially a doctoral level seminar.

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