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Review Article

Understanding Criminality as a Social Process: A systematic review of Contemporary Criminological Theories

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A B S T R A C T

The study understands criminality as a progression along a continuum; this is different from the often-held perspective that criminality is an individual trait or choice. In this way, the current study takes information obtained from systematic reviews of empirical criminological studies from 2000 to 2020 and synthesises contemporary theoretical insights about how criminal behaviour emerges, persists and ceases through social interactions between structural conditions and institutional responses over time through three core research questions using the PRISMA framework. As a result of this systematic review, there is substantial agreement on five theoretical perspectives that dominate contemporary criminological research: General Strain Theory, Social Learning Theory, Social Control Theory, Labelling Theory and Life Course Criminology. Although many studies are framed within one theoretical perspective, the majority of studies combine multiple theoretical perspectives, reflecting a growing recognition that criminality is cumulative and relational in nature and exists in relation to social environments throughout the life course. Methodologically, the literature predominantly utilises longitudinal designs, self-report surveys and administrative data and focuses on social interactions, institutional contacts and developmental trajectories. In conclusion, the review presents a pronounced shift in criminological research away from individualistic and descriptive explanatory models in favour of process-orientated explanatory models that will continue to shape theoretical development in future criminological research

Keywords: Criminality, Social Process, Systematic Review, Criminological Theory, Qualitative Synthesis

Introduction

Criminality has always played an essential role in criminological scholarship, but debates persist about how to define and understand crime (what is crime). Early and traditional criminological theories have focused mostly on biological characteristics (individual traits), decisions (rational choice), or opportunities (situational opportunity) to define criminality as something discrete or somewhat static. Although these approaches provide valuable insight into criminal decision processes and crime opportunity structures, these approaches have faced increasing criticism

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for failing to address the importance of social interaction, structural inequality, institutional responses, and time in the development of criminality (Cullen, 2011; Sampson & Laub, 2005). More recently, most of criminology has shifted away from the idea that criminality is an isolated form of behaviour or behaviour type and has been referred to as becoming "embedded" within social context and related to a dynamic process.

The focus of understanding criminality as a social phenomenon reflects that criminality begins, continues, and ends based upon an individual's relationship to their environment and, as such, is not only based upon a person's choice. Instead, to understand crime qualitatively, it is also critical to consider the concepts of exposure to social strain, social learning within peer networks, broken bonds to conventional institutions, and the nature of formal social reactions that occur over time (Agnew, 2006; Akers, 2009; Costello & Laub, 2020). This conceptualisation of crime represents a broader trend within sociology focusing on relational, structural, and developmental explanations for criminal behaviours, rather than static individual explanations (Matsueda, 2006; Sampson, 2012).

Criminological ideas from multiple schools of thought unite in Life-Course criminology; life-course criminology considers that criminal behaviour matures throughout an individual's lifespan. In using a life-course approach to study criminality, criminologists not only look at when crime begins, but also when it doesn't happen, i.e. when a person stop being a criminal (desists). Criminologists also study how turning points such as being gainfully employed, getting married and forming positive social ties to others can either inhibit/desist or enhance/continue criminal activity throughout the lifespan (Laub & Sampson, 2003, 2018; Sampson & Laub, 2005). Life-course criminology is based on the development of multiple theories of crime and criminology, but also on and the life trajectory concept, to explain how individuals have criminal careers and not only isolated acts of crime (Giordano et al., 2002; Giordano, 2020; Piquero, 2015, 2023).

There is an increase in empirical studies now investigating these process-orientated views; however, the available empirical research currently available on this subject is still very fragmented within various theoretical schools of thought and research methodology. The majority of studies on criminality have focused on only one theory or each of the criminal life-span stages making it more challenging to investigate how different social processes have affected an individual's criminal trajectory over time. Moreover, while each individual theory has undergone extensive empirical testing, there has been relatively less focus on how current research across different empirical contexts and levels of analysis collectively conceptualises and creates criminal behaviour as a social process.

Systematic reviews provide a valid method to combine results from studies into one document, making it easier to understand how they relate to each other and to formulating a more complete theoretical framework for the literature on crime. Systematic reviews have become increasingly common within criminology for evaluating how much cumulative evidence exists about what causes crime, developing ways of preventing criminal behaviour from developing over time, and for assessing crime-related methodologies (e.g., see Farrington, 2003; Thornberry & Krohn, 2000). However, while many systematic reviews have examined the issue of criminal behaviour using theories from within criminology, the literature has been relatively silent with respect to what is now commonly done with each of the different types of criminological theory in the literature regarding crime. Therefore, it is imperative that this research be done in order to further develop theoretical integration, which can lead to policies that focus less on individuals, but instead target more of the social aspects of society in order to help.

This study seeks to address the gap by conducting a systematic review of the empirical literature published between 2000 and 2020 on the relationship between criminal behaviour and the leading criminological theories. This review follows the guidelines developed by PRISMA, and will incorporate currently recognised methodologies for conducting systematic reviews within the social sciences (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019). The goal of this review is to explore how the current leading criminological theories conceptualise criminal behaviour as a social process; what the percentage of studies that utilise only a single/crime theory or a combined crime theory is; and how the major theoretical constructs associated with each of the major criminological theories have been operationalised in an empirical manner. Instead of trying to determine which single theory has the greatest predictive capability, the authors of this review will focus on how all of the leading criminological theories share a common understanding of criminal behaviour as a process, including the mechanisms and methodologies that are used by the leading criminological theories to explain or describe criminal behaviour.

The focus of this research project is to provide answers to three research questions that are interconnected: (1) what does current criminology mean when speaking of Criminality as being a product of society; (2) What theories do the majority of criminologists use when determining why somebody becomes a "Criminal" ,taking into account how they fit within the framework of being part of society; and (3), How do criminologists define Criminal behaviour empirically; this concerns an emphasis on social traditions, responses by institutions to Crime and the

nature of Criminality developing over time. Ultimately, the integration of knowledge gained through different theoretical perspectives will stimulate discussions to continue defining Criminality better and establishing a comprehensive, sociologically based framework to pursue and reduce violence.

Overview Of Criminality As A Social Process

Scholars in the fields of criminology and criminal justice are increasingly shifting their focus away from a "lone wolf" perspective on crime (meaning something that is done by one person without any outside influences) toward an approach that considers crime to be influenced by many social factors (such as family, environment, culture) over time. These social contexts provide the framework for understanding how individuals develop criminal behaviours.

According to General Strain Theory (GST), crime is an outcome of the social pressures that come with the inability to obtain or maintain desired goals and experiences, as well as exposure to negative experiences. The work of Robert Agnew has been instrumental in identifying the types of strains that can create this emotional state and lead individuals to adopt a criminal coping style. Thus, general strain theory links structural inequality to individual adaptation via social interaction, not by way of fixed characteristics.

Social learning theory (SLT) holds that criminal behaviour is acquired through social interaction and reinforcement through interaction with others in normative networks. Akers (2009) expanded on social learning theory research to propose that individuals learn criminal definitions, skills, and motivations through interactions with people who reinforce criminal behaviour. Research examining the frequency, duration, and intensity of peer interactions demonstrates how peer interaction influences learning about criminality and further supports that criminal behaviour is not based in an isolated psychological construct; rather criminal behaviour is embedded within relational contexts. Additionally, recent syntheses of social learning theory and life-course perspectives show how socialisation in early relationships (e.g., family, peer groups) continues to influence the course of an individual's criminal trajectory and desistance from crime throughout their life course (Giordano, 2020; Giordano et al., 2002).

According to label theory, reactions by society and institutional responses to an individual's deviance contribute to the construction of an individual's criminal identity and ultimately contribute to the continuation of their criminal behaviour. Labelling an individual as a "criminal" by formal and informal sources results in more severe social exclusion, less access to legitimate roles, and a greater likelihood of involvement with deviant subcultures, creating a cycle of feedback that perpetuates criminality over time. Empirical evidence demonstrates that stigma related to having a criminal record has a measurable effect on the ability of that individual to find employment and reintegrate into society; this supports the idea that crime is created by the interactions of society and institutions (Bernburg, 2009; Pager, 2003).

Criminality over the life course emphasises the developmental nature of all crime, indicating how social connections and inflection points throughout an offender's life create a path of crime and eventually stop offending. Sampson and Laub's age-graded informal social controls theorise that changes in social relationships (i.e., marriage, employment, or supportive social networks) increase or decrease an offender's likelihood to commit future offences by changing day-to-day activities and opportunities to behave conventionally. In addition to viewing criminal career behaviour as a dynamic process shaped by social structures and individual choices, Sampson and Laub provide a view of the interaction of social bonds and individual choice and action as contributing to criminal behaviour. Cognitive transformations that occur from shifting self-conception, identity, and relationship patterns go hand in hand with decreased likelihood of recidivism, further supporting the processes of how the past creates the present and the future

Theoretical explanation of criminality as a Social Process

Since criminality is a main field in criminology, scholars have attempted to apply different criminological theories used to explain traditional crime to understand criminality and victimisation (Bernburg, 2009; Pager, 2003; Giordano et al., 2002). This study will describe the five dominant theories used by researchers to understand criminality as a social process. These theories include; general strain theory, social learning theory, social control theory, labelling theory and life-course theory.

When considering criminality as a social process, it cannot be defined simply as individual mental illness, rational thought, or the individual act of crime. Rather, it is the result of the dynamic interaction between individuals and their social environment over time. Modern Criminological theory has increasingly come to recognise that crime happens in the context of the social relations between people, how they respond to institutions' responses to crime, and how these institutions develop structures that create meanings, opportunities, and identities for the offender. This will affect how the offender perceives his or her environment and will ultimately influence how the offender may act (Sampson & Laub, 2005; Cullen, 2011). Viewing criminality as a process can lead to a better understanding of criminality

than static viewpoints, and therefore can produce a more accurate depiction of how crime has developed based on cumulative social experiences.

General Strain Theory

The General strain theory (GST) accounts for social influences, systemic and prolonged influences, versus personal pathology or choices as a cause of criminal behaviour; therefore, GST's view of criminal behaviour has changed the way criminologists view crime by using a broader scope of stressors and emphasising emotions when connecting strains with offending actions.

Aseltine (2000) discusses that criminal behaviour is influenced by how people interact with other individuals and what they experience in their lives. When an individual experiences stressful events in their life, the result can create negative feelings or emotions which, combined with limited ability to manage their feelings and lack of support, can increase the chances of criminal acts occurring. Therefore, there is an important relationship between strain, feeling, or emotion, and crime, which affects how people behave in society.

General strain theory shows that there are three major ways that people experience strain failure to reach positively valued goals, removal of things that help them achieve their goals(s) and exposure to the negative experiences (negative stimuli) associated with those things (Agnew, 2006). These strains do not randomly occur but exist in a structure, i.e., "Society," that has systemic inequalities/ marginalisation's and institutional breakdowns. The more a person experiences chronic strains such as poverty, discrimination, family conflict, educational exclusion, etc., the more negative (Angry/Frustrated) emotions a person experiences, and these emotions increase the likelihood of using criminality as a coping mechanism (Agnew, 2001).

The general strain theory outlook is that criminality is the result of the accumulation of stressors which interact over time with socialisation experiences and social controls. Crime occurs when one or more stressors create value that exceeds the costs to the criminal; the cost/benefit ratio of the stressor to the potential criminal response will depend upon perceptions of legitimacy in coping with such stressors, perceived social expectations, and socialised responses from peers (Agnew, 2006; Cullen, 2011). Research has shown that individuals who have little support from their social networks, and experience the greatest amounts of association with delinquent peers, are more likely to engage in criminal behaviours in response to the stressor(s) identified (Broidy & Agnew, 1997).

According to Bao (2014), criminality is a product of social interaction and is the outcome of cumulative environmental changes that occur due to ongoing pressure, diminished levels of control within community-based institutions and services, and experiencing similar behaviours through both friends and acquaintances who commit crimes. Through the combination of social relationships and institutional systems, juvenile delinquency develops over time, not just due to one or two external factors, but also as a result of numerous events that accumulate over time.

In its view of crime as a process, general strain theory indicates that crime is not a direct result of stressful events, but rather that it evolves out of certain avenues defined by society through the laws and norms of society, through the process of emotional management and regulation, and limited by certain economic conditions such as poverty or low levels of education, to name a few. The General strain theory situates stress in a greater historical and systematic context of society to determine the effects of socio-economic inequality and social disorganisation over time on the development of long-term patterns of delinquency (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2007).

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory is a method of explaining criminal behaviour via social interactions that provide individuals with definitions, methods, and incentives for committing crimes. Building upon the basis of Differential Association Theory and Akers (2009), criminality is learned by using four interconnected mechanisms (or processes), Differential Association; Definitions; Differential Reinforcement and Imitation. Thus, crime cannot be seen as a random occurrence that happens to individuals; instead it is a method of socially transmitting behaviour s from everyday interactions, and the contexts of groups to which they belong.

The main idea of Social Learning Theory is the idea of Differential Association, which refers to the frequency, time spent, strength and importance that a person places on the relationships that exist with others who either commit or approve of criminal behaviour. The more an individual is involved with peers who are delinquents, the more likely it becomes that an individual will adopt the norms that are justified or sanctioned by these peers (Warr, 2002). Definitions that support criminal behaviour become meaningful when the actual behaviours are reinforced by various forms of reinforcement – either materially, socially and/or emotionally - and the behaviour of conforming to society's rules is often punished and/or devalued (Akers & Jennings, 2019).

Social Learning Theory describes how criminals do not commit one-time crimes but rather how they are part of an ongoing process of learning criminal behaviour , which occurs through repeated exposure to social environments in which criminal behaviour is modelled or rewarded

(Cullen, 2015) Social Learning Theory empirically supports the notion that peer influence remains one of the most significant predictors of delinquent behaviour for both adolescents and adults, even when controlling for individual traits or structural factors (Matsueda, 2006). In addition, Social Learning Theory recognises that an individual's learning occurs both ways; people shape their environment through their social interactions, and vice versa, creating a reinforcing cycle of criminal behaviour that develops over time.

From a larger social process perspective, Social Learning Theory posits that criminals develop their behaviour as a result of repeated patterns of social interactions with others, where these same interactions are shaped by a variety of structural and social factors. People who have limited access to socially acceptable means of achieving success may become more likely to form friendships with "deviant" peers, resulting in greater exposure to definitions and rewards for engaging in criminal activity (Cullen, 2011). Therefore, rather than viewing criminal activity as a choice made independently from one's social setting, Social Learning Theory posits that crime is produced through the combination of social interaction, communication, and shared meaning with others.

Social Control Theory

The social control theory provides an explanation of criminal conduct as a result of damaged or broken relationships between people and the institutions of society that encourage them to conform. Instead of looking at why some individuals break the law, it seeks to determine why the vast majority of individuals do not offend. Social control theory emphasises social bonds, social commitments, and social constraints as the main reasons why most people do not offend (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 2005). Therefore, from the viewpoint of social control theory, criminality occurs when individuals are unable to be controlled over time through informal social controls.

According to Hirschi's original model, the social bond is made up of four main components, including the attachments that an individual has to important people, the commitments that an individual makes to legitimate or conventional goals, the involvement that an individual has in positive, pro-social, or constructive activities, and the belief that an individual has in social norms. Once social bonds become weak, which may happen because of a disruption in family life, a failure in school, or being placed in poverty, the probability of the individual engaging in criminal behaviour increases (Sampson and Laub, 2003). Thus, social control theory suggests that understandings of crime should be made within the context of an individual's relationship to their environment, and not through the lens of the individual's potential predispositions.

The Social Control Theory defines Social Control as a process of exercising Authority Over an Individual or Individuals. It also indicates that all societies use some form of Social Control, regardless of their level of social inequality. In other words, society controls individuals through their economic and social means. In increasing cases, individuals living in low socio-economic neighbourhoods are denied access to educational opportunities, which results in limited career opportunities, causing them to Instead become involved in crime, becoming a burden on their families and a drain on society. As stated by Näsi and coworkers (2016), criminality occurs as a result of social factors, with youth engaged in hate crime offences arising from an interaction between strain, weak social controls, and low levels of self-control; therefore, social pressures combined with the lack of sufficient means of regulation produce behaviours that lead to motivation and bias resulting in criminal behaviour.

The result of a lack of access to education and upward mobility creates a sense of hopelessness in an individual and leads to a feeling of being disconnected, not only from their community but also from society as a whole. By viewing crime as a reaction to social disconnection, rather than as a result of individual deviance, the Social Control Theory provides insight into how crime occurs as a result of continuous relational and institutional disconnection. It is essential to strengthen social bonds and to address structural barriers as essential strategies for crime prevention and reducing recidivism.

Labelling Theory

Labelling Theory defines crime as a social construct based on society's reaction to the act of breaking a rule, instead of merely being determined by the act of breaking a rule alone. Labelling Theory is based on the theory of Symbolic Interactionism, where the official response of an arrest, conviction and incarceration are vital in creating a criminal identity and determining future criminal behaviour (Bernburg, 2009). Crime is a function of how society has created a criminal status in relation to society's interaction with both the individual and a formal institution.

Labelling Theory also differentiates between the two types of deviance; Primary Deviance and Secondary Deviance. Primary Deviance is the first time an individual break a rule, and may occur sporadically or situationally, while Secondary Deviance is a result of the individual's acceptance of the label of being deviant, which creates the basis for their self-identity (Bernburg et al., 2006). Studies show that when individuals are officially labelled as being deviant, the stigma attached to it causes them to re-offend, as they no longer have access to traditional opportunities and become part of deviant networks (Chiricos et al., 2007). The theory of labelling emphasises that criminality emerges over time through various social processes and

creates cumulative disadvantages.

Labelling leads to the eventual exclusion of individuals from education, employment and social institutions, which results in a self-perpetuating cycle of disadvantage that will continue to generate criminal behaviours (Pager, 2003). Institutional barriers created by the labelling of the individual serve as structural constraints on the legitimate options for living a life, increasing the likelihood of future offending. From a life-course perspective, when someone first comes in contact with the justice system, it can disrupt normal turning points and weaken social bonds, ultimately leading to a long-term association with criminality (Sampson & Laub, 2005).

Labelling theory does not claim that deviance did not exist prior to labelling, it merely shifts the focus of inquiry from deviant acts to the ways that societal responses to deviance amplify and solidify an individual's criminal career. Criminality in this way is a socially created outcome resulting from the implementation of formal control mechanisms by social institutions, the utilisation of power dynamics, and assigning symbolic meanings to criminal behaviour (Bernburg, 2009). By explaining how the application of formal criminal justice controls will change an individual's short-lived deviance into a long-term criminal career, Labelling Theory points to significant insights into how criminal justice sanctions can be effective on a kinaesthetic and emotional basis.

When Labelling Theory is viewed in conjunction with a broader framework of social processes, Labelling Theory urges us to examine crime not only at the moment of rule violation, but through the entire chain of reactions and identities as they unfold. This perspective is valuable in understanding how patterns of inequality, stigma and responses of social institutions affect all criminal contexts.

Life-course Perspectives

Criminality is a formative concept in the life-course view (Sampson & Laub, 2003; Piquero, 2015). Life-course criminology depicts criminal behaviour as a changing phenomenon, where individual transitions and social contexts, and interactions with social/institutional factors, lead to a dynamic process that develops over time. With life-course criminology, the focus is placed on patterns of stable and changing behaviours, as they relate to an individual's criminality throughout their life course as opposed to an individual's criminality being fixed or an isolated event.

The Life-Course Perspective has contributed to our understanding of criminality by providing a framework for distinguishing between the onset of criminal behaviour (how and when an individual becomes involved), how long an individual remains involved, and how an individual can ultimately cease engagement in criminal acts. Sampson and Laub (2005) argue that an individual's criminal behaviour is influenced by the creation of age-graded social connectivity, especially through the establishment of stable employment, marriage and/or military service. Such age-graded connections create turning points in an individual's life course that can change their normal daily routines and allow individuals to form new identities, increase informal social controls, and disrupt their previous criminal pathways. Conversely, if such stabilising events do not happen (often related to structural disadvantage), this can cause long-term continuance or persistence in engaging in criminal behaviour (Laub & Sampson, 2018).

Life-course theories place emphasis on the cumulative nature of disadvantage (Thornberry (2005). Negative consequences may be experienced through a chain of events such as:

- Early childhood poverty
- Family instabilities
- School failure or lack of educational opportunities
- Criminal Justice Intervention (Bernburg (2009).

Official labelling and incarceration also provide a further weakening of social bonds, limiting access to conventional opportunities and reinforcing criminal trajectories across adulthood. As a result, criminality results not just from an individual's early risk factors but rather is the product of continuous interactions between the social framework and the social institutions within which individuals operate.

The emphasis of life-course perspectives is to recognise the individual's agency and structure. Giordano et al. (2002) believe cognitive transformation is key to understanding criminality and desistance. Individuals experience cognitive transformations by altering their self-concepts, developing new methods of moral reasoning, and increasing their willingness to pursue opportunities. Many of these changes occur due to the connections that build through social relationships/support, as well as the existence of supportive institutions. Therefore, criminality is seen as a social/structural process, wherein criminal choices can be both limited and encouraged by the social structure. Life-course perspectives see criminality as a temporal and relational process. They bring together the structural elements of social

structure, the bonds that connect individuals, and the agency of the individuals involved, providing insight into how crime is born, continues, and ceases to take place throughout the lifespan of an individual.

Current study

Building on what is known in the studies of criminality, this study seeks to enhance the field by reviewing the body of knowledge, through the systematic review of studies. The review followed four stages identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion resulting in a final corpus of studies for qualitative theoretical synthesis. Hence, this study uses a PRISMA systematic review process (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019) to examine the following questions;

- What are the concepts of criminality?
- What are the theoretical approaches used by studies in criminality as a social process?
- How do studies measure the theoretical approaches?

Methods

This research is based on an established method of conducting studies and by following the method of PRISMA, or the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019), to create the systematic review process and as a guide for creating a report on a systematic review. Following this model, the first step of the research project was determining what criteria to include or eliminate when determining whether to include a specific study in the systematic review or eliminate it from consideration in the systematic review. Therefore, it included (1) the identification of a specific topic area, (2) the development of a list of research questions to use when considering studies related to this specific topic area, and (3) development of key words that would allow the discovery of and retrieval of relevant studies.

Eligibility and inclusion criteria

A comprehensive literature search was conducted to identify literature associated with crime. Since crime relates to numerous disciplines, searches were focused specifically on literature falling under criminology in association with crime as a social process, in the study paradigm, through a variety of journals. The selection of literature from the years 2000 through 2020 reflects the consolidation, refinement, and critical expansion of criminological theories in the 21st Century; during this period criminological theories have increasingly been constructed as a dynamic social process rather than as a static entity.

In addition, Google Scholar and Research Rabbit were the main websites used by this study to look for research on crime and criminal behaviour. Research Rabbit is an online academic search tool designed to assist researchers with the systematic review of literature. Research Rabbit provides access to a broad range of academic literature and is a valuable resource for researchers looking to quickly locate, compile, and review scholarly research articles relevant to their own research. The Research Rabbit platform enables researchers to visually see and navigate to important studies in the same discipline or area of research through interactive network mapping.

Because most of the relevant studies in this discipline are written in English, the search for literature was limited to articles published in English. The keywords used to identify the appropriate research were “crime and criminology,” “criminality,” “criminality as a social process,” and “empirical research in criminology.” To qualify for inclusion, research articles needed to have criminality as part of their title, keywords, and abstract. The initial search yielded many different types of research articles, including descriptive, review, and empirical types that are not included in this paper. Since this systematic review seeks to determine what criminological theories are used to study cybercrime, as well as how the theories are evaluated, an evaluation of these goals would best include empirical studies. Therefore, based on the research purposes, only empirical, peer-reviewed research articles related to criminality were incorporated to help narrow down the large selection of research articles. No specific limit was placed on the country from which the data was obtained. In addition, a Microsoft excel spreadsheet was used to record the abstract, year of publication, research question, conceptual approach, theoretical approach, operationalisation, data sources, analysis and the result.

Result

This study examined the body of literature on crime, criminology, and all aspects related to those subjects published between 2000 and 2020 through 20 empirical papers. The characteristics of the study are described in Table 1, and the selection process that led to these 20 empirical papers is illustrated in Fig. 1 - The initial literature search for the keyword ‘criminality’ yielded over 1,000 publications, including books, reviews, reports, and empirical research. When applying elimination criteria that focused on empirical studies written from a criminological perspective to explain

criminality, 800 papers had to be excluded from the initial search pool. A thorough review-of the abstracts and/or full texts of the 200 remaining empirical papers allowed identification of 20 relevant empirical social science studies. The most prevalent source of empirical studies was Google Scholar; however, Research Rabbit also provided a way to create an interactive and visual connection between the other articles used within the study.

Table 1.Summary of Authors, Conceptual Categories, Theoretical Approaches, Measures, and Data Sources in Studies of Criminality as a Social Proces

Authors (Year)	Conceptual Category	Theoretical Approach	Measure of Theory / Key Indicators	Data Source
Agnew (2001)	Structural Strain	General Strain Theory	Types of strain, negative emotions, coping responses	Survey data (youth & adult samples)
Agnew (2006)	Structural Strain	General Strain Theory	Chronic strain, emotional reactions (anger, frustration)	Survey data; secondary datasets
Akers (2009)	Social Learning	Social Learning Theory	Differential association, reinforcement, imitation	Survey data; self-reports
Broidy & Agnew	Gendered Strain	General Strain Theory	Gender-specific strain exposure and responses	Survey data
Laub & Sampson (2003)	Desistance	Age-Graded Social Control	Turning points (marriage, work, military)	Longitudinal cohort data
Matsueda (2006)	Social Organization	Social Learning / Control	Collective action, normative climates	Survey & contextual data
Sampson & Laub (2005)	Social Bonds	Social Control / Life-Course Theory	Attachment, commitment, involvement, belief	Longitudinal survey data
Warr (2002)	Peer Socialization	Social Learning Theory	Peer influence, co-offending, definitions favourable to crime	Survey data; longitudinal self-reports
Bernburg (2009)	Identity & Labelling	Labelling Theory	Official labelling, stigma, secondary deviance	Administrative & survey data
Bernburg et al. (2006)	Institutional Labelling	Labelling Theory	Criminal embeddedness, justice contact	Longitudinal survey & records
Chiricos et al. (2007)	Formal Sanctioning	Labelling Theory	Conviction labels and recidivism	Correctional records
Cullen (2011)	Theoretical Integration	Integrated Criminological Theory	Cross-theory synthesis	Theoretical & review-based sources
Giordano et al. (2002)	Cognitive Transformation	Life-Course Theory	Identity change, hooks for change	Longitudinal interviews
Kirk & Sampson (2013)	Institutional Harm	Labelling / Life-Course	Arrest effects on education	Administrative records
Messner & Rosenfeld (2007)	Institutional Anomie	Macro-Structural Strain	Economic dominance, social imbalance	Cross-national & secondary data
Pager (2003)	Stigma & Exclusion	Labelling Theory	Criminal record effects on employment	Experimental audit data
Weerman & Smeenk (2005)	Peer Influence	Social Learning Theory	Delinquent peer similarity and interaction	Survey data; network measures

Näsi et al. (2016)	Hate crime and social regulation	Strain + Social Control	Strain exposure, self-control, social bonds	Survey data (youth samples)
Bao (2014)	Integrated social processes	General Strain + Social Control + Social Learning	Repeated strains, peer delinquency, parental control, learned behavior	Longitudinal survey data (youth samples)
Aseltine (2000)	Stress, emotion, and delinquency	General Strain Theory	Life stressors, negative affect, delinquent behavior	Longitudinal survey data
Piquero (2015)	Criminal Careers	Life-Course Theory	Onset, persistence, desistance	Longitudinal datasets
Sampson & Laub (2003)	Criminal Trajectories	Life-Course Criminology	Stability and change over time	Longitudinal cohort data
Thornberry (2005)	Cumulative Disadvantage	Interactional Theory	Reciprocal effects of structure and behaviour	Longitudinal survey data
Warr (2002)	Peer influence and social interaction in criminal behavior	Social Learning Theory / Differential Association	Peer delinquency, co-offending, frequency of interaction with delinquent peers, reinforcement of criminal behaviour	Longitudinal survey data and self-reported delinquency from adolescent and young adult samples
Messner & Rosenfeld (2007)	Institutional Anomie	Macro-Structural Strain	Economic dominance, social imbalance	Cross-national & secondary data

Theoretical approaches and operationalization

Many researchers investigating criminal behaviour have used a number of traditional criminological models such as: General Strain Theory; Social Learning Theory; Social Control Theory; Labelling Theory; and Life Course Perspective to study criminal behaviour as a social phenomenon. Some researchers study criminal behaviour based upon one theoretical model, while others employ several theoretical models to provide a more complete understanding of criminality. Of the twenty-four research studies reviewed by the authors, the authors found that 75% (eighteen studies) utilised one theoretical model, while 25% utilised more than one theory to analyse their research. Of those studies reviewed, four studies were founded upon General Strain Theory, five studies were founded upon Social Learning Theory, four studies were founded on Social Control Theory, four studies were based on labelling Theory, and three studies were based on Life Course Theory. From the authors' analysis of the studies reviewed, it is clear that criminal behaviour can be analysed utiliing a number of different theoretical frameworks.

The literature reviewed shows a shift towards a social embeddedness and dynamic perspective of criminality rather than as an individual, static characteristic. All of the studies reviewed used well-established criminological theories to describe the development, persistence, and cessation of criminal behaviours. The most frequently employed theories included social learning theory, labelling theory, social control theory, life-course criminology, and general strain theory. Some studies used a single theoretical approach, while most combined multiple theoretical approaches to explain how criminal behaviour arises through social interactions, structural settings, and institutional responses.

The majority of the studies reviewed explicitly used criminological theory as the framework for their analyses. Life-course and social learning perspectives were the two most commonly used frameworks. A large number of studies employed a single theoretical approach to explain criminal behaviour, while a smaller, but significant, number of studies used integrative models which combined social learning, strain, and control mechanisms. This reflects a general movement towards understanding criminality as a cumulative and relational process, being shaped by its social environment over time (Sampson & Laub, 2005; Piquero, 2023).

Researchers utilised data collected longitudinally over time from different sources (i.e., cohort and administrative data) to study the concept of life-course criminology. Specifically, researchers analysed criminal behaviour as it related to the following four dimensions: (1) the age at which an individual began offending; (2) the frequency with which an individual continued to commit crimes; (3) the length of time an individual was criminally active; and (4) the age at which an individual ceased to commit crimes (Farrington, 2003; Piquero et al., 2007). Researchers utilised indicators of age-

graded social bonds, such as stable employment, marriage status, education level, and moving to different residences, to study the effects of age-graded social connections on an individual's criminality over time (Laub & Sampson, 2018). Researchers were able to demonstrate that the cumulative disadvantages faced by an individual over time could encourage (or discourage) their continued criminal activity, as well as that an individual's transitional stages could also impact their criminal activity over time.

Survey-based indicators of family attachment, school engagement, peer relationships, and participation in structured activities (e.g. Thornberry & Krohn, 2000) were the most frequently used and accessed by the various operational measures of social control. A number of longitudinal studies found evidence for the relationship between social bonds and changes in offending behaviour, adding to the body of research supporting the idea that fluctuations in social integration are the primary drivers of criminality (Thornberry, 2005).

The operationalisation of social learning theory (Warr, 2002; Weerman & Smeenk, 2005) has primarily relied on the measurement of peers' delinquency and frequency of exposure to deviant peers, as well as the perception of reward from crime and adoption of definitions which favour crime. A majority of the data collected has been self-reports, but in some studies social network data has also been included. More recently, studies have extended the operationalisation of social learning to include cognitive and emotional processes in learning, such as memory reinforcement and decision making (Retrocagno, 2020; Giordano et al., 2020).

The operationalisation of labelling theory has come primarily from longitudinal surveys and administrative data which measure official contact with the justice system and subsequent offending (Chiricos et al., 2007; Kirk & Sampson, 2013). Longitudinal surveys and administrative data have also collected data on arrest histories, criminal records, experiences of incarceration and post-labelling job and educational status. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies have used labour market discrimination as a second means of operationalising labelling, to show how criminal records serve as structural impediments that perpetuate criminality.

The operational measures included chronic stress indicators from surveys, people's feelings like anger and frustration, and their access to ways to cope with stress (Aseltine, 2000; Mazerolle et al., 2000). Multiple studies combined measures of social learning and social control with measures of stress, which indicate how these types of social processes are linked together (Bao, 2014; Näsi et al., 2016).

Across all theoretical approaches, the studies examined so far show that there is a growing consensus that understanding criminality as a process is important. Despite some differences in the way the different disciplines emphasise theory, how they operationalise theory has been consistent in terms of using longitudinal design, data from survey self-reports, and data from government records to track the social interactions that lead to individuals acting criminally, the role institutional responses play in creating opportunities for criminal behaviour, and how structural constraints affect the development of criminal behaviour over time (Piquero, 2023). The convergence of all these findings supports the notion that criminal behaviour is best understood as a process developed through social interaction.

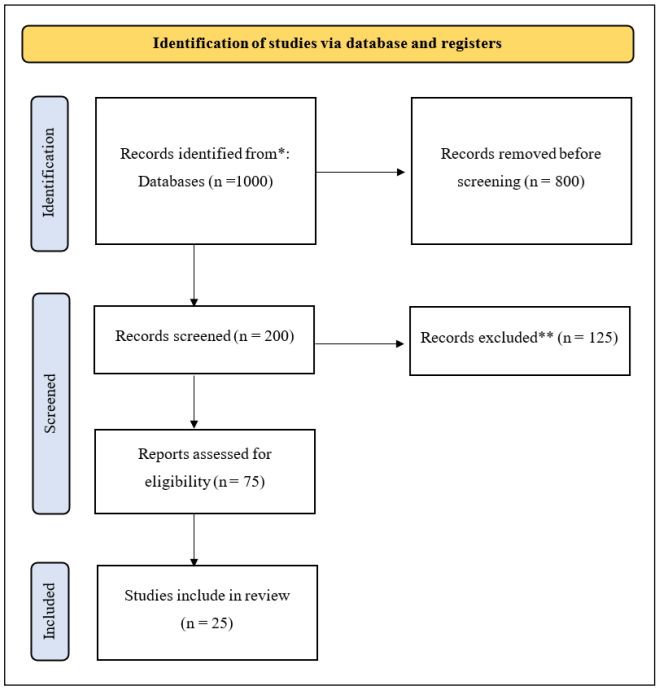

Figure 1.Flow chart of study selection process.

Discussion and Conclusion

The overall goal of this systematic review was to investigate the ways in which modern criminological theory represents criminal behaviour as a process dependent upon social context, rather than as an isolated individual action or a fixed attribute of the individual character. The literature reviewed for this systematic review was based upon empirical research published between the years 2000 and 2020, and clearly demonstrates a trend toward a convergence of theories around the idea of process-orientated explanations of deviant behaviour that incorporate elements such as social interaction, institutional responses, and development over time in their explanation of criminality. Criminality does not exist as a singular incident, but is rather an accumulation of historical events that are formed through the process of structural strain, learned behaviour, weakened social bonds, the reaction of society, and the course of one's life.

An important finding of this review was that social and interactional forms of theory dominated the explanations for deviant behaviour. The major theoretical frameworks utilised by criminologists included General Strain Theory, Social Learning Theory, Social Control Theory, Labelling Theory and life-course perspectives. By frequently integrating theories of this nature, researchers are beginning to recognise the limitations of a "single factor" model to explain deviance, and now view criminality as being multi-layered and a function of the interaction of social mechanisms over time. This movement towards theoretical pluralism signifies a major shift in the field of criminology towards an understanding of how structural and social conditions, interpersonal relationships, and institutional processes all interact over time to create criminal trajectories.

General Strain Theory has contributed greatly to the understanding of the developmental process of crime by pointing to the effects of chronic or repeated strains upon an individual and the resulting emotional stresses associated with these strains as a cause of criminal coping behaviour. All of the reviewed studies indicated that strain does not exist in a vacuum; rather, the criminal nature of strain is shaped by other social supports, social learning and institutional reaction. Thus, it is important to understand strain as something that is mediated by social networks, and is situated within the larger context of disadvantage. Therefore, criminality is a method of coping with the pressures placed upon individuals by structural constraints, rather than being the result of an individual's inclination toward deviance.

Similarly, Social Learning Theory supports the idea that criminal activity occurs through the process of social interaction over time. The studies reviewed have shown that people who engage in criminal activity typically do so through associations with delinquent peers and receiving positive reinforcement for deviant behaviours and developing internalised definitions of what constitutes criminal behaviour. Additionally, the studies show that social learning is a process that is ongoing and cumulative and continues throughout the life course. In addition to providing evidence that social learning occurs at various stages of an individual's life course, it should also be noted that social learning occurs in environments where individuals are limited in their access to legitimate opportunities, and as such, these environments provide a pathway for individuals to adopt the criminal norms and behaviours of those who are engaged in criminal behaviour. Thus, criminal behaviour is a product of the social structure, rather than the individual.

Through Social Control Theory, we have seen how Social Bonds (or Social Networks) are diminished (failed) through Social Control Mechanism failure, enabling criminality. The literature reviewed in this study provides strong empirical evidence that close, strong relationships with family, education, jobs, and other Social Interaction Networks can provide a strong protective effect against psychopathy (deviant behaviour). On the other hand, Social Controls in the form of Structural Barriers (i.e. poverty, lack of access to education, unstable job markets) will impede (destroy) those strong Social Bonds and generate a population of at-risk individuals who will have increased likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour. Overall these findings highlight the fact that criminal behaviour is often the result of a gradual breakdown in Social Integration and the importance of Institutions in regulating behaviour over long periods of time.

Labelling Theory has provided an important institutional layer to the Social Process Perspective. Labelling Theory has shown how Institutional reactions to deviant behaviour (through arrest, conviction, and incarceration) will result in a permanent Stigma attached to the former offender creating barriers to Pursue Legitimate Opportunities and resulting in increased likelihood of future criminal behaviour. Results from the studies reviewed in this report provide strong empirical support for the Cumulative Disadvantage hypothesis in that previous, and continued, contacts with the Justice System will alter an individual's life course and reinforce their criminal behaviour. A Social Process Perspective views criminality developed from behaviour as being shaped by behaviour and also by the social meaning and identities created by Institutional Response to Criminal Behaviour.

A life course perspective provides a historical context for bringing these various theoretical understandings all together. The studies included in our systematic review show how criminal behaviour changes over the life span with respect to various turning points such as getting a job, marrying, or receiving social support. Life course research also highlights both the agency of the individual and the structure of their environment, allowing for the possibility of transformation cognitively through alteration of relationship dynamics while being restricted by their environment. Thus, a life course perspective emphasises that criminal behaviour is not a fixed thing, nor is it an inevitable outcome, but instead depends upon evolving social situations and the opportunities presented as an individual develops throughout their life.

In addition, the findings of this systematic review support the theory that criminal behaviours are socially constructed and through time will change and grow based on the experiences of individuals. Instead of competing with each other, the major criminological theories identified in this review are seen to represent various mechanisms

that occur within the same social structure. For example, strain induces stress; learning provides an opportunity; weakened control reduces limitations; labels reinforce deviant behaviour; and life course developments create continuity and change. Collectively, these theories enhance our overall understanding of how our societies view and respond to criminality and have moved beyond individual explanations of criminal behaviours into a more comprehensive approach.

The current findings have substantial implications for policy and practice. A focus on individual-level risk factors only likely will not succeed unless the more extensive, social factors or processes producing and continuing criminal behaviour are addressed. Therefore, policy intervention efforts to reduce inequality, strengthen connections within a community, reduce unnecessary criminal justice system involvement, and provide support for positive (life) transitions are more consistent with the evidence presented in this study than interventions solely aimed at addressing individual-level risk factors. Future prevention and rehabilitation efforts also need to incorporate social integration, fairness of institutions, and long-term support rather than relying solely upon punitive measures which increase cumulative disadvantage.

In conclusion, this study indicates that most scholars today view crime as a social process that unfolds over time. By providing a synthesis of empirical data from many different theoretical traditions, the authors of this systematic review provide a framework for understanding crime as a product of social interactions, structural conditions and institutional responses. Future research should continue to integrate these perspectives into research design, including longitudinal research designs, to better understand how social processes function across a variety of cultural and institutional contexts. Such efforts will aid in developing a theoretically informed, social response to crime that is successful.

Criminality is viewed as a social process by criminologists based on a large body of theory about crime. One theory concerning how crime develops is called General Strain Theory. According to this theory, crime develops when an individual experience strain due to economic marginalisation, sociocultural exclusion, and a lack of opportunities to achieve their goals. Strain causes an individual to experience negative emotions that lead to the likelihood of utilising criminal coping strategies (Agnew, 2001, 2006; Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Another theory aiding in explaining how individuals develop a criminal definition, technique, and motivation to commit crime is Social Learning Theory, which asserts that an individual learns these things through interaction with significant others and the influence of peer networks and social contexts on their behaviour (Akers, 2009; Akers & Jennings, 2019; Warr, 2002). Modifications and refinements of the Social Learning Theory using insights from cognitive Ps and neuroscience have continued to substantiate the position of Social Learning Theory regarding the ongoing and adaptive nature of learning as a social process (Retrocagno, 2020).

Social Control Theory supports this argument by focusing on how a weakening of bonds with family, school, and other conventional institutions creates fewer restraints on an individual committing a criminal act, leading to an increase in the likelihood of that individual becoming involved in crime (Costello & Laub, 2020). Another theory that supports the notion of social bonds influencing an individual's social behaviour toward crime is Labeling Theory. Labeling Theory focuses on how formal social reactions, such as the police, can stigmatise individuals, disrupt their conventional opportunities, and embed them deeper into criminal networks (Bernburg, 2009). Research demonstrates that individuals who are labelled or victimised by the police experience cumulative educational, employment-related, and social disadvantages, which contribute to their becoming embedded in crime and lead to their committing subsequent crime (Bernburg et al., 2006; Chiricos et al., 2007; Pager, 2003).

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