

individuals and groups commit more crime than others, nothing could be further from the truth. Ultimately, all theories of criminal behavior will be judged based on how much each theory can explain the observed rates of crime shown by the measures of criminality among individuals and groups.

What Is Criminology, and How Does It Differ from Other Examinations of Crime?

Criminology is the scientific study of crime, and especially of why people commit crime. Although many textbooks have more complex definitions of crime, the word *scientific* separates our definition from other perspectives and examinations of crime.¹ Philosophical and legal examinations of crime are based on logic and deductive reasoning, for example, by developing propositions for what makes logical sense. Journalists play a vital role in examinations of crime by exploring what is happening in criminal justice and revealing injustices and new forms of crime; however, they tend to examine anecdotes or examples of crime as opposed to objective measures of criminality.

Taken together, philosophical, legal, and journalistic perspectives of crime are not scientific because they do not involve the use of the **scientific method**. Specifically, they do not develop specific predictions, known scientifically as **hypotheses**, which are based on prior knowledge and studies, and then go out and test these predictions through observation. Criminology is based on this scientific method, whereas other examinations of crime are not.

Instead, philosophers and journalists tend to examine a specific case, make conclusions based on that one example of a crime incident, and then leave it at that. Experts in these nonscientific disciplines do not typically examine a multitude of stories similar to the one they are considering, nor do they apply the elements of their story to an existing theoretical framework that offers specific predictions or hypotheses. Further, they do not test those predictions by observation. The method of testing predictions through observation and then applying the findings to a larger body of knowledge, as established by theoretical models, is solely the domain of criminologists, and it separates criminology from other fields. The use of the scientific method is a distinguishing criterion for many studies of human behavior, such as psychology, economics, sociology, and anthropology, which is why these disciplines are generally classified as **social sciences**; criminology is one of them.

To look at another perspective on crime, religious accounts are almost entirely based on dogmatic, authoritarian, or reasoning principles, meaning that they are typically based on what some authority (e.g., the Pope, the Bible, the Torah, or the Koran) has to say about the primary causes of crime and the best ways to deal with such violations. These ideas are not based on observations. A science like criminology is based not on authority or anecdotes but on empirical research, even if that research is conducted by a 15-year-old who performs a methodologically sound study. In other words, the authority of the scientist performing the study does not matter; rather, the observed evidence and the soundness of the methodology—how the study was performed—are of utmost importance. Criminology is based on science, and its work is accomplished through direct observation and testing of hypotheses, even if those findings do not fit neatly into logical principles or the general feelings of the public.

What Is Theory?

Theory can be defined as a set of concepts linked together by a series of statements to explain why an event or phenomenon occurs. A simple way of thinking about theories is that they provide explanations of why the world works the way it does. In other words, a theory is a model of the phenomenon that is being discussed, which in this case is criminal behavior. Sometimes, perhaps quite often, theories are simply wrong, even if the predictions they give are highly accurate.

For example, in the early Middle Ages, most people, including expert scientists, believed the Earth was the center of the universe because everything seemed to rotate and revolve around our home planet. If we wake up day

¹Stephen Brown, Finn Esbensen, and Gilbert Geis, *Criminology*, 8th ed. (Cincinnati: Anderson, 2013).