

## 5.2: What Makes a Good Theory?

Numerous criminological theories attempt to explain why people commit a crime. What makes one better than another? How do we judge theories against each other? The natural and physical sciences mostly agree on the knowledge of their disciplines. However, criminology is interdisciplinary, and many criminologists may not agree on what causes criminal behavior. For instance, Cooper, Walsh, and Ellis (2010) have looked at the political ideology of criminologists and their preferred or favored theories. Even one's political leanings can influence a person's set of beliefs about the causes of crime.<sup>[1]</sup>

We must apply the scientific criteria to test our theories. Akers and Sellers (2013) have established a set of criteria to judge criminological theories: logical consistency, scope, parsimony, testability, empirical validity, and usefulness.<sup>[2]</sup> Logical consistency is the basic building block of any theory. It refers to a theory's ability to "make sense". Is it logical? Is it internally consistent? A theory's scope refers to its range, or ranges, of explanations. Does it explain crimes committed by males AND females? Does it explain ALL crimes or just property crime? Does it explain the crime committed by ALL ages or just juveniles? Better theories will have a wider scope or a larger range of explanation.

A parsimonious theory is concise, elegant, and simple. There are not too many constructs or hypotheses. Simply put, parsimony refers to a theory's "simplicity". A good scientific theory needs to be testable too. It must be open to possible falsification. "Every genuine test of a theory is an attempt to falsify it or to refute it. Testability is falsifiability; but there are degrees of testability: some theories are more testable, more exposed to refutation than others; they take, as it were, greater risks...One can sum up all this by saying that *the criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability*" (Popper, 1965, pp. 36-37).<sup>[3]</sup>

After many tests and different approaches to research, those theories supported by evidence have empirical validity. Thus, according to Gibbs (1990), the verification or repudiation of a given theory through empirical research is the most important principle to judge a theory.<sup>[4]</sup>

Finally, all theories will suggest how to control, prevent, or reduce crime through policy or program. The premise of a particular theory will guide policy-makers. For example, if a theory suggested that juveniles learn how to commit crime through a network of delinquent peers, policymakers will try to identify juveniles at-risk for joining delinquent subcultures.

1. Cooper, J., Walsh, A., & Ellis, L. (2010). Is criminology ripe for a paradigm shift? Evidence from a survey of American criminologists. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 2, 332-347. [↩](#)
2. Akers, R.L., & Sellers, C.S. (2013). *Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application*. New York: Oxford. [↩](#)
3. Popper, K.R. (1965). *Conjectures and refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge*. New York: Harper Torchbooks. [↩](#)
4. Gibbs, J.P. (1990). The notion of theory in sociology. *National Journal of Sociology*, 4, 129-159. [↩](#)

This page titled [5.2: What Makes a Good Theory?](#) is shared under a [CC BY-SA](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Alison S. Burke](#), [David Carter](#), [Brian Fedorek](#), [Tiffany Morey](#), [Lore Rutz-Burri](#), & [Shanell Sanchez](#) ([OpenOregon](#)) .

- [5.2: What Makes a Good Theory?](#) by Alison S. Burke, David Carter, Brian Fedorek, Tiffany Morey, Lore Rutz-Burri, & Shanell Sanchez is licensed [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).