

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Cultural Criminology

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Cultural criminology is a theoretical orientation founded on the claim that crime and crime control cannot be understood apart from the domain of culture—that is, the domain of shared symbolism, collective meaning, and mediated communication. Cultural criminologists contend that the basic issues on which criminology has traditionally focused—issues like everyday crime, individual and corporate violence, patterns of victimization, and the practice of crime control—are in fact cultural in nature. They are constructed out of symbolic interactions among people and groups, and they are shaped by ongoing conflicts over their meaning and perception. Because of this, cultural criminology advocates widening the theoretical lens of criminology, such that the analysis of crime and crime control includes a critical conceptualization of subcultural rituals, shared emotional exchanges, mass media images, and other cultural phenomena. Noting the failure of conventional criminological theories and methods to engage with such phenomena, cultural criminologists in turn work to develop alternative theories and methods more attuned to the dynamics of culture and crime.

Overview

Cultural criminology developed from a synthesis of two theoretical traditions in criminology, one largely British and the other primarily American. The British tradition dates roughly to the 1970s, when scholars associated with British cultural studies and the “new criminology” began investigating and theorizing the cultural dimensions of crime and crime control. These scholars explored the links between social class, leisure worlds, illicit subcultures, and the politics of social control; they likewise documented the ideological messages promoted by mediated anti-crime campaigns that targeted youth subcultures and other marginalized groups. In this way, they developed a critical analysis of the cultural environments in which both crime and crime control emerge.

Around the same time, criminologists in the United States began to theorize and investigate the symbolic practices that shape crime and to ground this investigation in attentive field research in and around criminal subcultures. As encoded most distinctly in labeling theory, this approach conceptualized crime and crime control as ongoing cultural processes out of which the meaning of crime is constructed and contested. From this theoretical view, the social reality of crime—subcultural practices and rituals,

public fears of victimization, social harms spawned by violent crime, criminal justice strategies for containing crime—remains always under construction. The meaning and consequences of a criminal assault, a street arrest, or a court decision are not inherent in the acts themselves; they are negotiated in the ongoing interplay between perpetrators, victims, law makers, criminal justice agencies, the mass media, and the public.

Both the British and American traditions, then, came to conceptualize crime and crime control as inherently intertwined with cultural dynamics and to see that this sort of cultural understanding could aid in the critical analysis of key crime and justice issues. In the mid-1990s, the two traditions were synthesized for the first time into a distinct “cultural criminology” that also integrated newer [p. 250 ↓] work in postmodern theory, subcultural theory, cultural geography, and critical theory (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995). This emergent cultural criminology conceptualized in particular the ways in which criminal subcultures and criminal enterprises are shaped by shared styles, linguistic practices, codes of honor, and other cultural dynamics; it also focused on the media campaigns by which legal and political authorities criminalize alternative artists and musicians, political activists, and other cultural outsiders. Today, cultural criminologists continue to expand the purview of this approach, examining phenomena ranging from video games and Internet fight videos to crime news and terrorist subcultures.

Cultural criminology in this way seeks not only to expand the substantive focus of criminology but also to reconstitute its theoretical frameworks. From the perspective of cultural criminology, the subject matter of criminology cannot simply be crime and criminals. Instead, criminology must account (1) for the ways in which crime is *perceived* by others—that is, for the particular *meanings* that crime comes to have for criminals, victims, crime control agents, and everyday citizens—and (2) for the effects of these meanings and perceptions on criminal activities, crime-control policies, and the exercise of power in contemporary society. But if this is so, cultural criminologists contend, new theoretical tools are needed, since many current criminological theories exclude a thoroughgoing analysis of contemporary culture, communication, emotion, and meaning.

Theoretical and Conceptual Developments

A variety of concepts and theoretical models in cultural criminology are designed to analyze particular constellations of culture and crime and to situate this analysis within larger social and historical frameworks. Many of these likewise attempt to theorize the connections between the immediate, emotional experience of crime and the broader economic and political structures within which crime and crime control emerge.

Mike Presdee's *carnival of crime* concept, for example, presents a model for making sense of criminal and deviant acts such as arson, “joyriding” in stolen cars, drug taking, sadomasochistic sex, and gang rituals. In many human societies, “carnival” has historically denoted a significant event of collective excess, temporary vulgarity, and riotous celebration—and yet an event carefully confined to certain times, places, and cultural rituals. In contemporary Western societies, though, the indulgent practices of carnival are less likely to be contained within these cultural traditions. Instead, they are in some cases sold and consumed, in the form of pornography, degrading “reality” television programs, hard-core fight videos, and other carnivalesque titillations. In other cases, the remnants of carnival are enacted as crime, in the form of vandalism, arson, joyriding, or stylized assault—and, in many cases, the boundaries between carnival as commodity and carnival as crime overlap. Cultural criminologists argue, then, that many highly visible and aggressively sensual crimes in contemporary society reflect both long-standing cultural practices and recent social changes.

The concept of *edgework*, as developed by Jeff Ferrell, Dragan Milovanovic, and Stephen Lyng, likewise locates the emotional drama of crime within contemporary cultural and social situations. Here, the focus is on acts of extreme and often illegal risk-taking—street racing, BASE jumping, writing graffiti atop billboards and freeway signs—and on the ways in which these acts incorporate both high risk and high levels of skill. For participants, this exhilarating mix of risk and skill not only shapes their growing commitment to the addictive “adrenaline rush” of illegal edgework; it also allows them to craft a sense of personal accomplishment and an independent self, generally missing from the everyday, law-abiding worlds of deskilled work or prepackaged entertainment. Cultural criminologists argue that this understanding of edgework in turn helps explain an ironic connection between illegal edgework and criminal justice attempts to stop

it. Thus, aggressive enforcement programs designed to stop illegal edgework often serve to heighten the risk associated with it, and so to promote the development of further edgework skills among participants, thereby enriching the very experience that edgeworkers seek and criminal justice agents seek to eliminate.

Both the carnival of [p. 251 ↓] crime and edgework concepts also highlight an essential theoretical orientation within cultural criminology—an orientation toward what Jack Katz calls the “foreground” of crime and *seductions of crime* that emerge in the midst of the criminal event. From the view of cultural criminology, much existing criminological theory is constituted in an oddly back-to-front manner; that is, it conceptualizes the sorts of background economic, social, or ethnic structures that spawn crime, but fails to address the experiential foreground of the actual criminal event. In contrast, concepts like the carnival of crime and edgework are designed to begin with a close examination of the emotional dynamics, experiential meanings, and performative drama of crime for perpetrators and victims alike, and then to discover in this criminal foreground larger historical and social forces.

Two other theoretical developments attempt especially to conceptualize crime and criminal justice in the context of contemporary culture. Jock Young's theory of *exclusion/inclusion*, or *the exclusive society*, explores the tension between social exclusion and cultural inclusion, and the ways in which this tension can generate criminality. On one hand, contemporary society increasingly excludes many groups from full social and economic participation, by way of job loss, low-wage work, underfunded public education, and mass incarceration. On the other hand, the power of mass marketing and mass consumerism is such that these groups remain culturally included, socialized into desiring the same consumer goods and lifestyle products as others. Recalling the Mertonian model of adaptations to social strain, the concept of exclusion/inclusion suggests that this tension will produce increasing levels of resentment, insecurity, and humiliation, and with them crimes of retaliation, frustration, and illicit acquisition as well.

A final theoretical approach focuses in particular on another distinctive aspect of contemporary society: the constant interplay of the media, crime, and criminal justice. Ferrell, Hayward, and Young's model of *media loops and spirals* suggests that traditional, linear models examining the effects of media images on subsequent crime, or the accuracy of the media in reporting on previous criminality, are now largely

outmoded. Instead, a model is needed that can account for a world so saturated with media technology and media images that distinctions between an event and its mediated image are often lost. In this world, crime and media are linked by a looping effect in which crime and the image of crime circle back on one another, together constructing the reality of crime for participants and the public. When squad car cameras affect everyday policing, when police officers watch “reality” television policing programs for tips and pointers, when juries demand evidence like that presented in *CSI*-style television shows, when gang members stage violent assaults so as to record them and post them on the web, cultural criminologists argue, crime, criminal justice, and media are operating as part of an ongoing feedback loop. Moreover, these loops reproduce themselves over time—as images are reused or contextualized, as crimes are copied and reproduced—and so spawn longer spirals of crime, criminal justice, and media. Because of this, cultural criminologists contend, the analysis of media dynamics and representation is essential to a full understanding of crime, policing, courts, or any other of criminology's concerns.

Methodological Orientations and Methodological Critique

To perhaps a greater degree than many theoretical approaches, cultural criminology advocates and employs distinctive methods designed to complement its conceptual orientations. Further, a significant amount of work in cultural criminology addresses the alleged inadequacies of conventional criminological methods; in this sense, cultural criminology offers not only a theory of crime and crime control but also a theoretical critique of criminology and its everyday operations.

Cultural criminologists argue, for example, that the most commonly used methods in criminology—survey research and the statistical analysis of survey results—are by their own design unable to achieve an adequate understanding of cultural dynamics involving meaning, representation, and emotion. By reducing research subjects to pre-set categories and cross-tabulation, cultural criminologists maintain, such methods extract crime and crime control from the cultural contexts in which they take shape and exclude essential human dynamics of surprise, ambiguity, and anger from the process

of criminological research (Kane, 2004). Likewise, the widespread use of quantitative content analysis—the measurement of discrete textual categories—to [p. 252 ↓] study media coverage of crime issues precludes an understanding of the looping interplay of media and crime, and it misses the larger aesthetic and structural frames which shape the text's meaning.

In order to conduct research that is conversant with their theoretical orientations toward meaning and representation, cultural criminologists instead turn to a variety of methods that are informed by an ethnographic sensibility. Traditionally, ethnography denotes the sort of long-term, in-depth field research that allows the researcher to become part of the process by which people utilize symbolic codes and shared language to make sense of their experiences. This approach likewise allows the researcher to partake in the emotions that course through people's experiences of crime, victimization, and criminal justice, and so to understand shared fear, excitement, and anger. Indeed, this approach has produced some of the best-known studies in cultural criminology—in-depth ethnographic accounts of illicit groups ranging from neo-Nazi skinheads, right-wing domestic terrorists, and urban street gangs to hip-hop graffiti writers, urban environmental activists, and homeless trash scroungers.

In addition to this traditional practice of ethnography, cultural criminologists are developing alternative ethnographic methodologies designed to incorporate the conceptual orientations outlined above and to resonate with the particular cultural dynamics of contemporary society. Concepts like edgework and the seductions of crime, for example, focus analytic attention on the immediate dynamics that shape criminal experiences and emotions. Consequently, cultural criminologists, such as Ferrell, Hayward, and Young, have developed the notion of *instant ethnography*—the researcher's deep immersion in fleeting moments of criminality or transgression—and have begun to use the method in studying BASE jumpers and other groups. Likewise, the concept and practice of *liquid ethnography* has developed from the understanding that many subcultures and situations today embody a swirl of global identities, mediated images, and ambiguous affiliations. Liquid ethnography denotes a researcher sensibility attuned to these dynamics—a style of in-depth research sensitive to images as well as people, to identities more shifting than stable, and to groups that remain in transition. Finally, cultural criminologists employ David Altheide's *ethnographic content analysis* in their analysis of the media and its interconnections with crime and crime control.

In place of the discrete textual categories and quantification of conventional content analysis, this approach conceptualizes media texts as emergent, contested cultural processes. It is also designed to assist the researcher in producing a deep, textured account of the text and its many meanings.

All of these methods are connected to cultural criminology's theoretical orientations by the Weberian notion of *verstehen*, or, as it is often presented within cultural criminology, *criminological verstehen* (Ferrell, 1997). This concept denotes the subjective or appreciative understanding of others' actions, emotions, and meanings; it suggests that full knowledge of a situation is gained only when the researcher is able to grasp the emotional climate and cultural logic that defines that situation. The concept of *verstehen* is of importance, then, not only because it encapsulates cultural criminology's focus on the meaning of crime and victimization, but also because it further highlights the contrast between cultural criminology and more conventional criminological approaches. Rather than objectivity guaranteeing the validity of criminological knowledge, here it is emotional subjectivity and cultural attentiveness that ensure an accurate understanding of the situation under study.

Applications and Implications

Cultural criminologists apply these theories and methods to a variety of substantive issues. Media research in cultural criminology often investigates the dynamic by which the mass media's construction of particular crime issues intertwines with public perceptions and criminal justice policy. Research has also been undertaken on popular media forms such as heavy metal and goth music, cartoons and comic books, and prison films, as well as on public shrines, do-it-yourself subcultural promotion, and other forms of communication outside the mass media. Urban culture and urban criminality constitute another ongoing focus, with researchers such as Keith Hayward examining the links between urban consumerism, crime, and social control, or researchers such as Louis Kontos, David Brotherton, and Luis Barrios reconceptualizing the cultural and political practices of street gangs and graffiti crews. In addition, cultural criminologists increasingly explore the gendered meanings of crime; research has, for example, examined women's practices of edgework, the intersections of ethnicity and gendered

expectations in domestic violence, and the lived experiences of street prostitutes and other sex workers.

In all of this, cultural criminologists emphasize that the subject matter of criminology is not the objective, measurable reality of crime and criminal justice, but rather the complex cultural process by which this reality is constructed and made [p. 253 ↓] meaningful. Finally, in reflexive fashion, they argue that criminology itself must be attentive to its own styles of representation if it is to make a useful contribution to public discourse and the common good. Because of this, cultural criminologists increasingly experiment with new forms of scholarship and alternative modes of communication —“true fiction,” manifestos, vignettes, visual analysis, websites, and films—with the hope of making criminology more engaging for students, policymakers, and the public.

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See also

- [Postmodern Theory](#)
- [Spector, Malcolm, and John I. Kitsuse: Constructing Social Problems](#)
- [Taylor, Ian, Paul Walton, and Jock Young: The New Criminology](#)

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