Criminological Concepts Handout

Biological determinism: A view that an individual's criminal actions are the direct result of a genetic inheritance or biological predisposition. *Soft determinism* acknowledges that other factors, such as environment, may also interact with biological ones.

Conflict: Conflict theory sees society as being divided into two or more groups with competing values, but with only the most powerful group(s) making the laws. Groups lacking formal power to make rules may maintain their own group norms, but find these criminalised by the larger society.

Control: Control theories focus on explaining what stops or prevents people from committing crimes, including both internal controls (guilt, shame, fear, altruism) and external controls (parents, police).

Cultural criminology: Looks at all the cultural forces and influences in and around the crime, the offender and the criminal justice system trying that offender.

Deterrence: Deterrence theory states that crime can be controlled by making individuals understand that offending will result in a negative outcome that is certain, swift and serious.

Differential association: A theory of crime in which criminality is the result of imitating inappropriate behaviours exhibited by others, such as family members or peers.

Differential identification: A modification of differential association theory that suggests people commit criminal acts to gain acceptance or approval by people important to them.

Diversion movement: Efforts to divert individuals, particularly young, minor or low-risk offenders, from the full and formal processes of the justice system in recognition that applying such processes may exacerbate rather than prevent delinquency.

Drift: Drift theory states that people can 'drift' back and forth between conforming and criminal behaviour depending on the level of social control upon them and the degree to which neutralising definitions offer them an excuse for crime.

Gendered pathways approach: An examination of how pathways into offending differ according to gender, such as female offenders frequently having been victims of physical or sexual abuse.

Life-course: Life-course theories explain how criminality relates to different life stages, with late adolescence/early adulthood being the peak offending period due to the weakening of previous social controls (parents, school) and other social controls (marriage, employment) not yet being in place.

Labelling: Labelling theory argues that the formal and informal application of stigmatising 'labels' of deviancy to an individual by society will not deter, but rather instigate further criminal acts.

Marxism: Under Marxist theory, the law and criminal justice system is primarily a tool used by the capitalist class to oppress the working classes. Crimes committed by the working classes can be understood as a form of resistance of the upper classes or capitalist system.

Neutralising definitions: A neutralising definition helps a person justify committing a crime by making it seem that the act itself is all right, at least under certain conditions.

Personality: Personality theory deems criminal activity the result of defective, deviant or inadequate personality.

Power-control: Power-control theory explains the discrepancy in offending rates between genders by arguing that families and communities exert greater supervision over females than males.

Psychoanalytic: Psychoanalytic theory states that the causes of criminal behaviour can be found in the mind of the individual.

Psychological: Psychological theory looks to the psychological functioning, development and adjustment of an individual in explaining criminal or deviant acts.

Rational choice: Rational choice theory posits that most crime is the result of individuals conducting a cost-benefit analysis of offending and deciding that the reward outweighs the potential risks.

Reintegrative shaming: A process by which an individual is punished and made to feel shame for committing a deviant act, but this is done in such a way that the individual is afterwards reintegrated into the community with their respectability and self-concept restored. *Disintegrative shaming* occurs when the person is punished and shamed for a deviant act in a way that degrades and devalues the individual without trying to reconcile them to the larger community.

Selectivity hypothesis: The belief that the criminal justice system is more lenient towards certain individuals, specifically Caucasian, female and middle or upper-class offenders.

Social bonding: Social bonding theory argues that individuals will commit crimes when their ties to society are weakened or have broken. Social bonds can include attachment to individuals (parents, spouses), commitment to social norms or institutions (employment, school attendance), involvement in activities that strengthen these connections (dating, organised recreation) and belief that these things are important.

Social disorganisation: A term most often applied to urban crime, in which deviant activity results from breakdown of traditional social controls and organisation within the community, neighbourhood or family.

Social learning: Social learning theory says that both criminal and conforming actions are acquired, encouraged or changed by social interactions with others that influence values and attitudes.

Strain: Strain theory posits that society puts pressure on individuals to achieve certain goals (financial independence, power), but where individuals lack the means to achieve those goals through legitimate means the resulting strain may lead people to try to achieve them through crime.

Structural: Structural theories account for differences in crime rates across communities by looking at variations in structural characteristics of each community, such as income level, unemployment rate, educational attainment, family structure and community composition.

Subculture: Subcultural studies posit that close contact with a group of delinquent peers may influence an individual to commit criminal acts in order receive group approval.