PhD Comprehensive Exam Reading List
Program in Criminal Justice, Washington State University

Nature of Crime/Criminology
Updated, Fall 2006
Overview/Structure

This reading list covers the major theoretical traditions in criminology. This exam builds upon your coursework in criminological theory, yet it is not merely a test of what students learned in their courses. The exam (and reading list) instead covers material not covered in your courses and, more importantly, is a test that expects students to integrate knowledge drawn from different courses and independent readings to achieve a high level of scholarly analysis.

A key component of this exam is the expectation that students will be able to integrate criminological theory and research. Students are expected to know the “empirical status” of the major theories—that is, to what extent to the existing studies support the propositions specified by these theories?

In addition, while this list covers the major works in the field, students are also expected to be familiar with the most current information regarding these theoretical traditions. That means that students should, in addition to this reading list, be familiar with relevant studies that have appeared in recent years in the major peer-reviewed journals in criminal justice/criminology. These journals include, but are not necessarily limited to: *Criminology, Criminology and Public Policy, Journal of Criminal Justice, Journal of Quantitative Criminology, Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, and *Justice Quarterly*.

Taking the Exam

No advice can be given that will ensure a passing grade on a PhD preliminary examination. Nevertheless, there are some broad issues that you should keep in mind.

First, it is essential that students know the theories accurately (what the theory argues; how theorists within that tradition differ from one another; how a theory has developed and changed over time).

Second, avoid merely displaying *surface* knowledge of the theoretical and empirical material. Stated positively, answers that display depth are viewed in higher regard—in other words, those that cite the appropriate works and discuss them with sufficient detail, yet still recognize the existence of other relevant studies. Stated negatively, answers that are filled with broad statements—which themselves are not supported by proper citations to the relevant literature—do not show convincingly that a student truly *knows* the literature. Remember this simple but important point: only what is written on the exam can be graded—professors cannot “fill in the blanks” or assume you know the answer.

Finally, citations to textbooks are forbidden (even if you are trying to make some point about how the discipline views certain theories). Textbooks on criminological theory—such as those by Akers, Siegel, Vold, or others—may be useful for you to organize your thoughts and to give you an initial impression of certain theories’ empirical status. These texts are not, however, replacements for being familiar with the original works these books are reviewing. In your exam, you must cite and discuss the original theoretical and empirical contributions.
**General considerations:**


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**The Chicago school and social disorganization theory:**


Anomie/strain theory:


**Differential association/social learning theory:**


Social bond/social control theory:


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**Self-control theory:**


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**Positivism and neo-positivist theories:**


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**Rational choice/deterrence theory:**


Routine activity theory:


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**Life-course theory:**


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**Labeling theory:**


Marxist/feminist and critical theories:


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**Integrated theories:**


