

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH INTERDISCIPLINARITY

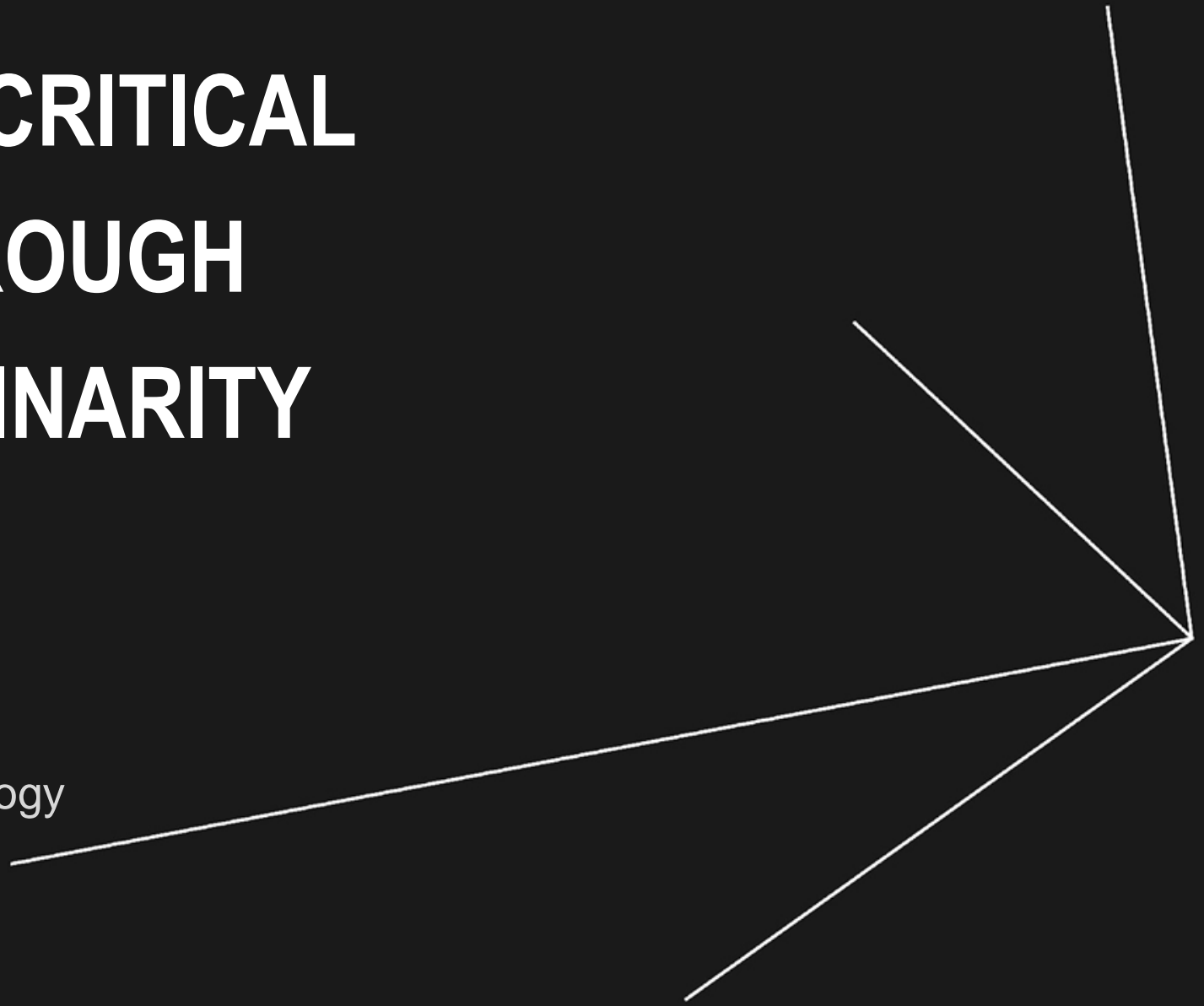
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Developing critical thinking through the lens of interdisciplinarity: a case study of a criminological theory module

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Abstract

The Problem: Teaching a Fragmented Discipline

Criminology draws on sociology, psychology, law, neuroscience — yet theories are rarely taught in ways that make connections explicit.

Bruinsma (2016): hundreds of crime causation theories, but not necessarily greater explanatory power.

Challenges for first-year students:

- Theories operate on different, sometimes mutually exclusive, assumptions
- Students default to familiar frameworks (“comfort zone bias”)
- Ideology and disciplinary silos shape which explanations are favoured

What We Did: Module Design

- **Lectures (11 x 2hr):** Epistemology and philosophy of science from week 1; integration frameworks (end-to-end, side-by-side, up-and-down); analytic criminology
- **Seminars:** Circle of voices, debates, comparison tables, concept maps, peer feedback
- **SGOA “Jigsaw Module”:** With FIU Science and Fiction Lab — criminology, neuroscience, and supernatural fiction
- **Assessment:** 3000-word essay applying a chosen theory to any crime; top marks require cross-disciplinary comparison and epistemological reflection



Methods

- Qualitative case study design
- Semi-structured focus groups with 5 first-year undergraduates (Jan 2025)
- Purposive sampling: students who completed the module and SGOA reflective essay
- Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke)



Findings

1. Critical thinking and interdisciplinary understanding

“I now think about why a crime happened ... not just that it happened” — Emma

2. Jigsaw module: eye-opening but abstract

Students valued seeing how disciplines interlink, but wanted clearer learning outcomes and practical application.

3. Practical tools that worked

Case studies, Coleman’s boat, comparison tables, and concept maps helped bridge theory and application.

4. Balancing disciplinary coverage

Students defaulted to familiar sociological theories; wanted more psychology and biology.

Takeaways

Embedding critical interdisciplinarity in a criminological theory module supports three dimensions of critical thinking:

Analytical depth — Students moved from “what happened” to “why it happened”, interrogating assumptions behind each theory.

Cross-disciplinary synthesis — Seminars shifted from “versus debates” to “together debates”; integration frameworks gave students a shared vocabulary.

Reflective engagement — Peer feedback and collaborative activities built confidence and self-regulation over the semester.

Questions?



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