Criminological Theory

Introduction

Dynamics of Crime Theory

Early Schools of Thought

The Classical School
The Positive School
The Chicago School

Classical and Rational Theories: Crime as Choice

Cohen & Felson's Routine Activities
Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo's Lifestyle Theory
Walters & White's Cognitive Theory

Biological & Physiological Theories: Born Criminals

Lombroso's Criminal Born Man and Woman
Sheldon's Somatotyping
XYZ Chromosome
Sociobiology
Eysenck's Differential Conditionality

Psychological & Psychiatric Theories: The Criminal Mind

Social Learning Theories

Bandura's Modeling/Imitation

Sutherland's Differential Association
Glaser's Differential Identification
Jeffery's & Akers' Differential Reinforcement
Akers' Social Learning Theory

Psychoanalytic Theories

Freud's Pscychoanalytic Theory
Warren & Hindelang's Psychoanalytic Theory

Moral Development Theories

Kohlberg's Moral Development
Yochelson & Samenow's Criminal Personality Theory

Sociological Theories I: Crime and Social Structure

Social Strain Theories

Social Disorganization
Durkheim's Anomie Theory
Merton's Strain Theory
Agnew's General Strain Theory

Subculture Theories

Overview of Subculture Theories
Sellin's Culture Conflict Theory
Cohen's Subculture of Delinquency
Cloward & Ohlin's Differential Opportunity
Miller's Lower-Class Focal Concerns
Shaw & McKay's High Delinquency Areas
Wolfgang & Ferracuti's Subculture of Violence

Sociological Theories II: Crime and Social Process

Labeling Theories

Overview of Labeling Theories

Tannenbaum's Concept of Tagging
Lemert's Primary & Secondary Deviance
Becker's Developmental Career Model
Schur's Radical Non-Intervention

Social Control Theories

Overview of Social Control Theories
Reckless' Containment Theory
Hirschi's Social Bond Theory
Sykes & Matza's Techniques of Neutralization
Gottfredson & Hirschi's Low Self-Control Theory

Peacemaking Criminology Theories:

Overview of Peacemaking Theories
Braithwaite's Reintegrative Shaming

Radical, Feminist, & Conflict Theories: Crime, Sex, Inequality & Power

Overview of Radical, Feminist, Conflict and Marxist Theories
Marxism and Crime
Quinney & The Social Reality of Crime
Turk's Conflict Theory
Greenberg's Adolescent Frustration
Adler's Liberation Theory
Simon's Opportunity Theory
Hagan's Power-Control Theory
Schwendinger's Instrumental Theory
Feminism & Crime

This page is designed and maintained by Diane M. DeMelo.

Questions or comments are encouraged. Also, please read the disclaimer.

dianedemelo@mediaone.net

Last revised on November 14, 1999

This page continues to be **a work in progress** and will be under construction until all theories are made available. Be sure to check for updates and changes.

Introduction to Criminological Theory

Defining Criminology

Criminology, according to Edwin H. Sutherland, one of the modern founding scholars of American criminology, is the body of knowledge which regards crime as a social phenomenon. It includes the processes of making laws, breaking laws, and the reacting toward the breaking of laws. Together, these three processes form a unifed sequence of events.

Criminologists have adopted methods of study from varying social and behavioral sciences. Like other scientists, criminologists measure and assess crime over time and place. They also measure the characteristics of criminals, crimes, and victims using various methods.

Certain acts, regarded as "undesireable" by political society are defined as such. Society reacts by punishment, treatment, or prevention. These sequences of events come together to comprise the object matter of criminology.

Studying Theory

While many people are intimidated at their very first encounter with theory, it is used almost on a daily basis. You may be one who believes that theory is abstract and has no fundamental basis in the real world. However, whether you realize it or not, you use theory almost all the time. We all make assumptions and generalizations about certain things we are in contact with daily; thus we theorize.

Theories are logical constructions that explain natural phenomena. They are not in themselves always directly observable, but can be supported or refuted by empirical findings. Theory and empirical research are connected by means of hypotheses, which are testable propositions that are logically derived from theories. The testable part is very important because scientific hypotheses must be capable of being accepted or rejected.

Understanding Theory

Theories can be simple or complex, it depends on how relationships are made in formulating them. Theory can be fun, depending on how it is applied. If you spend the day in a shopping mall you can see how much fun theory can be. So why study theory? The truth of the matter is, we need theory in order to function, in order to better understand the world around us. Life would be pretty dull if we couldn't generalize or make assumptions about people and things. Most of our daily theories tend to be illogical and are a product of our own selective observation. Often we perceive what we want to perceive. Human behavior tends to be very complex, almost abstract. Theories on crime causation are complex, too. Most theories introduced here are from research, both past and present, on criminal behavior which reflects both systematic observation and very careful logic. Theories not only provide a framework for us to interpret the meanings of observed patterns but they help us to determine when these patterns are meaningful and when they are not.

I've decided to include an interdisciplinary approach toward studying criminological theory because we need to gather as much as possible from other theoretical interpretations in our overall understanding of crime. While my interest is mainly sociological, I've decided to include many biological and psychologial based interpretations. While many such theories are not in and of themselves specific to crime causation many of them focus on specific types of behavior which may be important to our overall understanding and application of general knowledge of crime.

All theories featured here are equal in importance in our study on crime. While it is true that some of these theories do not answer the questions we want them to answer, they are still important to our understanding of such phenomena.

Let us remember one thing. Some theories define a certain type of criminal behavior, whether it explains juvenile deliquency (such as the many control and subculture theories) or other criminality, it will be indicated what the theory set out to explain. While crime in and of itself is often regarded as a deviant activity, not all deviant activities are defined as crime. For example, people who suffer from mental disorders may be labeled or viewed as "deviant" but mental illness in and of itself is not criminal.

I have always been intrigued by social behavior, especially that which is defined as deviant or criminal. It is my hope that you enjoy theory as much as I do and seek to better understand it in your own everyday interaction.

Diane M. DeMelo
crimtheory@hotmail.com
Criminological Theory

Classical School

Classical criminology grew out of a reaction against the barbaric system of law, justice and punishment that was in existence before 1789. It sought an emphasis on free will and human rationality. The Classical School was not interested in studying criminals, but rather law-making and legal processing. Crime, they believed, was activity engaged in out of total free will and that individuals weighed the consequences of their actions. Punishment is made in order to deter people from committing crime and it should be greater than the pleasure of criminal gains. Classical theory **emphasized** a legal definition of crime rather than what defined criminal behavior. The Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution reflect the Classical movement, thus the law of today is classical in nature.

Two famous writers during this classical period were **Cesare Beccaria** (1738-1794) and **Jeremy Bentham** (1748-1832), both led the movement to human rights and free will. Becceria thought that crime could be traced to bad laws, not to bad people. A new modern criminal justice system would be needed to guarantee equal treatment of all people before the law. His famous book, **On Crimes and Punishment** presented a new design for the criminal justice system that served all people. His book dubbed him the "father of modern criminology."

Bentham's concern was upon **utilitarianism** which assumed the greatest happiness for the greatest number. He believed that individuals weigh the probabilities of present and future pleasures against those of present and future pain. Thus people acted as human calculators, he believed, and that they put all factors into a sort of mathematical equation to decide whether or not to commit an illegal act. He believed then that punishment should be just a bit in excess of the pleasures derived from an act and not any higher than that. The law exists to create happiness for all, thus since punishment creates unhappiness it can be justified if it prevents greater evil than it produces.

Classical School Positive School Chicago School Criminological Theory

Positive School

Positivists, unlike the classical reformers, sought to explain the world around them. They saw behavior as determined by biological, psychological, and social traits. They focused on a deterministic view of the world, on criminal behavior instead of legal issues, and the prevention of crime through the treatment (or reformation) of offenders.

The use of scientific techniques was important to the positivists. Data was collected in order to explain different types of individuals and social phenomena. Naturalists and anthropologists formed the theory of evolution which was a very critical component to the study of human criminal behavior by the positivists. Humans were responsible for their own destinies.

The focus on positivism then is on **systematic observations and the accumulation of evidence and objective fact within a deductive frame work**, thus moving from a general statement to a more specific one.

Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) replaced the notion of free will and rationality with the notion of determinism. Together with his followers, Enrico Ferri and Raffaele Garofalo, he developed the positivist school of criminology which sought explanations for criminal behavior through scientific research and experimentation. Lombroso believed in the **"criminal born"** man and woman. He believed they had physical features of ape like creatures that were not fully developed as humans were. Lombroso measured thousands of live and dead prisoners to prove his theory. He noted that criminals lacked moral sense, had an absence of remorse and used much slang. Lombroso later added social and economic factors to his list of crime causation but said they were second in nature to biological, predetermined factors. His theory however has been kept alive, not by agreement but by much criticism.

Classical School Positive School Chicago School Criminological Theory

Chicago School

The theme of the Chicago school focused upon human behavior as determined by social and **physical environmental** factors, rather than genetic, personal characteristics. The school believed the community to be a major factor on human behavior and that the city functioned as a microcosm.

Researchers from this school developed **empirical sociology**, that is, studying humans in their natural environment rather than an armchair look at the social environment. Chicago theorists combined data, such as individual cases with population statistics which constructed an important foundation that has since been the basis for many criminological theories of today.

Members of this school focused upon the city of Chicago (hence the name) as a source for many answers to its probing questions. Many scholars of this time believed that urbanization and mobility into the city was a cause for many of the problems experienced at the time.

Crime was fostered mainly in the slums. Many unemployed people, male, female, young and old, became transients. A plethora of social problems emerged, ranging from poor sanitation, inadequate housing, juvenile gangs, vice, to name a few. People were no longer closely-knit, nor were communities familiar. Many had no one to turn to during these troubled times. Crime was mainly fostered in the slum areas, where many of the immigrants lived. People began to form their own support groups and gangs, which emphasized deviant values. All of this served as a laboratory for the new sociologists at the University of Chicago.

The school contributed two methods of study. The first was the usage of official data, such as census reports, housing/welfare records and crime figures. High areas of crime, truancy and poverty were applied to different geographical areas of the city. The second method was the **life history**, as first studied by early Chicago school theorist, W.I. Thomas. This contributed a shift away from theoretical abstracts to more concrete approaches of the real world and real world related phenomena. The process of becoming deviant or criminal was explained by psycho-social phenomena. They wanted to present human behavior in its natural environment, and this is why the Chicago School is often referred to as the Ecological School.

Further observations by researchers provided a clear analysis that the city was a place where life is superficial, where people are anonymous, where relationships are transitory and friendship and family bonds are weak. They saw the weakening of primary social relationships as leading to a process of social disorganization.

Chicago criminologists clearly saw pathology in the city which led to criminality. Much of the research conducted by Shaw and McKay illustrated this point. The Chicago School clearly stressed humans as social creatures and their behavior as a product of their social environment. The social environment provides values and definitions that govern behavior. Urbanization and industrialization break down older and more cohesive patterns of values, thus creating communities with competing norms and value systems. The breakdown of urban life results in basic institutions such as the family, friendships and other social groups to become so impersonal, almost anonymous. As values became fragmented, opposing definitions about proper behavior arise and come into conflict with other behavior.

Disorganization is more prevalent in the center of the urbanized city, and decreases with distance. Thus, crime developed through frequent contact with criminal traditions, goals and values that have developed over a period of time in disorganized areas of the city.

Classical School Positive School Chicago School Criminological Theory

Cohen & Felson's Routine Activities

Larry Cohen and Marcus Felson proposed their Routine Activities theory in 1979. It remained very popular in the 1980s. Their theory is closely linked with the Rational Choice perspective in that it focuses on the characteristics of crime rather than on the characteristics of the offender. Cohen and Felson argue that there will always be a vast supply of crime motivation and that such motivation and supply of offenders remains constant. They state that three crucial components are necessary for a predatory criminal act, that is, violent crimes against the person and crimes which an offender attempts to stael a direct object. These three elements include motivated offenders, suitable targets, (something worth taking), and the absence of capable guardians, in order to prevent would be criminal acts. If one such component is missing, crime is not likely to occur. If all three elements are present, then the chances for crime increase.

Cohen and Felson argue that the rate in which crime rises is equal to the number of suitable targets and the absence of individuals to protect those targets. The routine patterns of work, play, and leisure affect the convergence in time and place of the would be offenders, suitable targets, and absence of guardians, they argue. The number of caretakers, acting as guardians, who are at home during the day has decreased because of an increase participation of women into the work force. Homes are often left unguarded while both parents are at work and children are either in day care or at school. Also, the growth of suburban living and the decling rate of traditional neighborhoods has decreased the number of familiar guardians, such as family, neighbors, or friends. Finally, the baby boom generation coming of age during the years 1960 to 1980 resulted in an excess number of motivated offenders.

Routine Activities states that criminal offenses are related to the nature of everyday patterns of social interaction. Cohen and Felson used their approach to explain the rise in crime between the years 1960 to 1980. They were concerned with the changes occuring in society, which they believed led to social disorganization, which further led to crime opportunity. Their perspective shows that crime is not soley related to biological and psychological characteristics, nor to social or economic conditions, but that it is just as important to concentrate on situational factors which give rise to criminal opportunity. Routine Activities approach is important to crime prevention and to the changing of conditions and circumstances in which crime is committed.

One measure of situational crime prevention is target hardening. Target hardening makes it more difficult for offenders to carry out crimes on specific targets. The use of locked doors, windows, alarm systems, watch dogs, and community crime watch programs are all examples of target hardening--making it harder to become a victim of crime.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Social Disorganization

The growth of cultural relativity, that is, the view that cultures are not better or worse than one another, but simply different, in sociology led to a questioning of the existence of a universal set of values. The pronounced social changes following World War I and the Great Depression, included immigration, urbanization, and industrialization into the U.S. The crowding of large cities and the cultural diversity within them led to a huge urban development, which was conducive to deviance. An explanation was needed to sort out and understand this new phenomena. The concept of Social Disorganization is largely associated with the "Chicago School" of sociology and was based on the work of **W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki** as well as **Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay**, to name a few. Thus, the term social disorganization refers to both an explanation of deviance and a state of society that produces it. It was the result of intellectual development that had taken place since 1910 in Sociology. It rooted its explanation of deviance in social norms and community activities.

Crime was seen as a product of uneven development in society, with change and conflict which affects the behavior of those within it. This theory emphasized that society was organized when people are presumed to have developed agreement about fundamental values and norms, with behavioral regularity. Social organization, or social order, exists when there is a high degree of internal bonding to individuals and institutions in a conventional society. This cohesion consists largely of agreement about goals that are worth striving for and how to behave and how to not behave. Simply put, social disorganization is social disorder.

It was believed that social organization involved an integration of customs, teamwork, high morale, and bonding. This led to harmonious social relationships. Such a group showed solidarity and homogeneous and traditional behavior. Social disorganization theorists believe social disorganization existed in much of city life. They made such a relationship almost unmistakable. They used the city as their laboratory in which they studied deviance and crime. They concentrated their research on disorganized local areas, slums or inner-city areas of high crime, prostitution, suicide and other deviant forms of behavior. Thus, in their theoretical framework, social patterns of the urban environment produced social disorganization, which led to crime and deviance.

Thomas and Znaniecki compared the conditions immigrants had left in Poland with those they found in Chicago. They also studied the assimilation of Polish immigrants. They found that older immigrants were not very much affected by the move, due to managing to continue living as peasants, even in the urban slums. The younger generation did not grow up on these Polish farms and thus were city dwellers. They had very little traditions of the Old World and were not assimilated into the new ones. The rates of crime and delinquency started to rise and Thomas and Znaniecki attributed this to social disorganization, which they defined as the breakdown of effective social bonds, family and neighborhood associations, as well as social controls in the community. Their study influenced others to come.

Robert Park and Ernest Burgess introduced an ecological analysis of crime causation. Ecology is the study of animals and plants and how they relate to one another in their natural habitat. Park and Burgess then examined area characteristics instead of criminals for their explanations of high crime. They developed the idea of natural urban areas, which consisted of concentric zones which extended out from downtown central business district to the commuter zone at the fringes of the city. Each zone had its own

structure and organization, characteristics and unique inhabitants. This had been known Burgess' **Concentric Zone Theory**.

Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay were researchers at the Chicago's Institute for Juvenile Research and maintained a close relationship with Chicago's Sociology department. They were interested in Park and Burgess's conception of the "natural urban area" of Chicago and used this model to investigate the relationship between crime rates--mainly delinquency--and the various zones of Chicago. They found that the crime rate was distributed throughout the city, delinquency occurred in the areas nearest to the business district, that some areas suffered from high consistent delinquency rates no matter the makeup of the population, that high delinquency areas were characterized by a high percentage of immigrants, non-whites, lower income famines, and finally, and that high-delinquency areas had an acceptance of nonconventional norms, which competed with conventional ones. They collected their data from over 56,000 juvenile court records with covered a period of time from 1900-1933.

However, there were problems with the concept of social disorganization and these problems are what contributed to its decline. First, it confused cause and effect. That is, it described community factors related to crime and deviance, but it must be able to distinguish the consequences of crime from disorganization itself; it didn't. Many early social disorganization theorists were not careful in clarifying the concept of disorganization. Second, social disorganization was rather subjective and judgmental, all the while pretending to be objective. Observers failed to free themselves from biases and placed their own value judgments on behaviors. Third, it tried to explain crime as an almost entirely lower-class phenomena, and in no way included middle and upper-class deviance and crime rates. Thus, it was biased, in that it favored middle-class standards. Those in the lower strata were assumed to have higher levels of crime rates because their members lived in the most socially disorganized areas of the city. Fourth, social change was often confused with social disorganization, and little attention was paid to explain why some social changes were disorganized and why others were organized. Finally, what is disorganized? At some times, things may seem like disorganization but at other times, they may be highly organized systems of competing norms and values. The concept produces a bit of ambiguity.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Durkheim's Anomie

Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, introduced the concept of anomie in his book *The Division of Labor in Society*, published in 1893. He used anomie to describe a condition of deregulation that was occuring in society. This meant that rules on how people ought to behave with each other were breaking down and thus people did not know what to expect from one another. Anomie, simply defined, is a state where norms (expectations on behaviors) are confused, unclear or not present. It is normlessness, Durkheim felt, that led to deviant behavior. In 1897, Durkheim used the term again in his study on *Suicide*, referring to a morally deregulated condition. Durkheim was preoccupied with the effects of social change. He best illustrated his concept of anomie not in a discussion of crime but of suicide.

In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim proposed two concepts. First, that societies evolved from a simple, nonspecialized form, called mechanical, toward a highly complex, specialized form, called organic. In the former society people behave and think alike and more or less perfom the same work tasks and have the same group-oriented goals. When societies become more complex, or organic, work also becomes more complex. In this society, people are no longer tied to one another and social bonds are impersonal.

Anomie thus refers to a breakdown of social norms and it a condition where norms no longer control the activities of members in society. Individuals cannot find their place in society without clear rules to help guide them. Changing conditions as well as adjustment of life leads to dissatisfaction, conflict, and deviance. He observed that social periods of disruption (economic depression, for instance) brought about greater anomie and higher rates of crime, suicide, and deviance.

Durkheim felt that sudden change caused a state of anomie. The system breaks down, either during a great prosperity or a great depression, anomie is the same result.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Merton's Strain Theory

Robert K. Merton, an American sociologist, borrowed Durkheim's concept of anomie to form his own theory, called Strain Theory. It differs somewhat from Durkheim's in that Merton argued that the real problem is not created by a sudden social change, as Durkheim proposed, but rather by a social structure that holds out the same goals to all its members without giving them equal means to achieve them. It is this lack of integration between what the culture calls for and what the structure permits that causes deviant behavior. Deviance then is a symptom of the social structure. Merton borrowed Durkheim's notion of anomie to describe the breakdown of the normative system.

Merton's theory does not focus upon crime persay, but rather upon various acts of deviance, which may be understood to lead to criminal behavior. Merton notes that there are certain goals which are strongly emphasized by society. Society emphasizes certain means to reach those goals (such as education, hard work, etc.,) However, not everyone has the equal access to the legitimate means to attain those goals. The stage then is set for anomie/strain.

Merton presents five modes of adapting to strain caused by the restricted access to socially approved goals and means. He did not mean that everyone who was denied access to society's goals became deviant. Rather the response, or modes of adaptation, depend on the individual's attitudes toward cultural goals and the institutional means to attain them. The conformist is the most common mode of adaptation. Such individuals accept both the goals as well as the prescribed means for achieving the goal. Conformists will accept, though not always achieve, the goals of society and the means approved for achieving them. Innovators accept societal goals but have few legitimate means to achieve those goals, thus they innovate (design) their own means to get ahead. The means to get ahead may be through robbery, embezzlement or other such criminal acts. Ritualists, the third adaptation, abandon the goals they once believed to be within their reach and thus dedicate themselves to their current lifestyle. They play by the rules and have a daily, safe routine. Retreatists, the fourth fifth adaptation is given to those who give up not only the goals but also the means. They often retreat into the world of alcoholism and drug addiction. These individuals escape into a nonproductive, nonstriving lifestyle. The final adaptation, that of rebel, occurs when the cultural goals and the legitimate means are rejected. Individuals create their own goals and their own means, by protest or revolutionary activity.

Adaptation	**Means -- Goal**
Conformist	Accepts -- Accepts
Innovator	Rejects -- Accepts
Ritualist	Accepts -- Rejects
Retreatist	Rejects -- Rejects
Rebel	Revolts/Creates New

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Agnew's General Strain Theory

In the mid 70s, strain theory came under heavy attack after having dominated deviance research in the decade of the 60s, prompting that it become abandoned. However, since that time, strain theory has survived such attacks, but has left behind a diminished influence. In 1992, Robert Agnew proposed a general strain theory that focuses on at least three measures of strain. He argues that actual or anticipated failure to achieve postively valued goals, actual or anticipated removel of positively valued stimuli, and actual or anticipated presentation of negative stimuli all result in strain.

Agnew's strain theory focuses primarily on negative relationships with others, in that a person is not treated in a way that he or she expects or wants to be treated. He argues that people are pressured into criminal or deviant acts by negative affective states, such as anger, which results in negative relationships. Such a negative affect leads to pressure which then leads to illegitimate ways to attain a goal. Other strain theories explain strain in a way that relationships with others prevent one from reaching positively valued goals. They focus primarily on goal blockage, that which is often experienced by the middle or lower classes.

Agnew argues that strain theory is central in explaining crime and deviance, but that it needs more revision to play such a central role in sociology. His theory is written at a social-psychological level so that it focuses on an individual's immediate social environment. Much of the theory is focused toward adolescent criminality--delinquency, because so much of the data available for testing involves surveys of adolescents. He argues that his theory is capable of overcoming empirical and theoretical criticisms associated with previous versions of strain theory.

Agnew suggests that criminologists pay special attention to the magnitude, recency, duration, and clustering of such strainful events. He spells out that several cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adaptions to strain receive little or not attention. He proposes a series of factors that determine whether a person will cope with strain in a criminal or conforming manner, including temperament, intelligence, interpersonal skills, self-efficacy, association with criminal peers, and conventional social support.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Overview of Subculture Theories

In criminology, subcultures theories emerged as a way to account for delinquency rates among lower-class males, of these the infamous teenage gang. Subculture theories believe that the delinquent subcultures emerged in response to the special problems that the members of mainstream society do not face.

The strain theorists explained crime as a result of frustrations suffered by lower-class individuals deprived of legitimate means to reach their goals. Cultural deviance theories assumed that people became deviant by learning the criminal values of the group to which they belonged to. This laid down the foundation for subculture theories during the 1950s.

A subculture is defined as a subdivision within the dominant culture that has its own norms, values and belief system. These subcultures emerge when individuals in similar circumstances find themselves virtually isolated or neglected by mainstream society. Thus they group together for mutual support. Subcultures exist within the larger society, not apart from it. The members of the subculture are different from the dominant culture.

The subculture theories we will look at are extensions of strain, social disorganization and differential association theories. Subculture theories help to explain why subcultures emerge (extension of strain), why they take a particular shape (extension of social disorganization), and why they continue from one generation to another (extension of differential association).

For instance, Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti's Subculture of Violence thesis argues that the value system of some subcultures not only demands but also expects violence in certain social situations. It is this norm which affects daily behavior that is in conflict with the conventional society. Here we will explain the subculture theories proposed by Albert Cohen, (Subculture of Delinquency), Richard Cloward & Lloyd Ohlin (Differential Opportunity), Walter Miller (Lower-Class Focal Concerns) and Marvin Wolfgang & Franco Ferracuti (Subculture of Violence).

To better understand and appreciate subculture theories one must first probe into the historical time period of the 1950s. The values of the middle class were dominant and anything else was not considered normal.

Peaking urbanization produced more and more deteriorated cities in America. The suburbs of the middle class were emerging. Delinquency was mainly perceived as a problem of the lower class. The middle class "we-they" separation led to seeing itself as the far superior class.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Cohen's Subculture of Delinquency Theory

In 1955 Albert K. Cohen wrote Delinquent Boys. He attempted to look at how such a subculture began. Cohen found that delinquency among youths was more prevalent among lower class males and the most common form of this was the juvenile gang. Cohen, a student of Sutherland and Merton, learned from Sutherland that differential association and cultural transmission of criminal norms led to criminal behavior, while Merton taught him about structurally induced strain.

Delinquent subcultures, according to Cohen, have values that are in opposition to those of the dominant culture. These subcultures emerge in the slums of some of the nation's largest cities. Often, they are rooted in class differentials, parental aspirations and school standards. Cohen notes that the position of one's family in the social structure determines the problems the child will later face in life. Thus, they will experience status frustration and strain and adapt into either a corner boy, college boy, or a delinquent boy.

Corner boys lead a conventional lifestyle, making the best of a bad situation. They spend most of their time with peers and receive peer support in group activities. These boys are far and few between. Their chances for success are limited. Cohen argues that their academic and social handicaps prevent them from living up to middle-class standards.

Delinquent boys, on the other hand, band together to define status. Their delinquent acts serve no real purpose. They often discard or destroy what they have stolen. Their acts are random and are directed at people and property. They are a short-run hedonistic subculture with no planning. They often act on impulse, often without consideration for the future. Members are loyal to one another and allow no one to restrain their behavior.

Stealing, in the delinquent gang, serves as a form of achieving peer status within the group, with no other motive. Cohen declared that all children seek social status, but not everyone can compete for it in the same way. Reaction-formation, a Freudian defense mechanism, serves to overcome anxiety, as a hostile overreaction to middle class values can occur. A delinquent subculture is created to resolve problems of lower-class status.

Much of Cohen's work has been both praised and criticized. It helps to answer questions that remain unresolved by strain and cultural deviance theories. His notion of status deprivation and the middle-class measuring rod has been very useful to researchers. His theory, however, fails to explain why some delinquent subcultures eventually become law-abiding, even when this social class position is fixed. Later, he expanded his theory to include not only lower-class delinquents but also variants of middle-class delinquents and female delinquent subcultures. Cohen's theory stimulated later formations of new theories.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Cloward & Ohlin's Differential Opportunity Theory

In 1959, Richard Cloward noted that Merton's anomie theory specified only one structure of opportunity. He, however, argued for two and not one. He thus proposed that there are also illegitimate avenues of structure, in addition to legitimate ones. In 1960 he and Lloyd Ohlin worked together and proposed a theory of delinquent gngs known as Differential Opportunity Theory. This theory, like Cohen's theory, combines the strain, differential association as well as the social disorganization perspectives.

Delinquent subcultures, according to Cloward and Ohlin, flourish in the lower-classes and take particular forms so that the means for illegitimate success are no more equally distributed than the means for legitimate success.

They argue that the types of criminal subcultures that flourish depend on the area in which they develop. They propose three types of delinquent gangs. The first, the criminal gang, emerge in areas where conventional as well as non conventional values of behavior are integrated by a close connection of illegitimate and legitimate businesses. This type of gang is stable than the ones to follow. Older criminals serve as role models and they teach necessary criminal skills to the youngsters. The second type, the conflict or violent gang, is non stable and non integrated, where there is an absence of criminal organization resulting in instability. This gang aims to find a reputation for toughness and destructive violence. The third and final type, the retreatist gang, is equally unsuccessful in legitimate as well as illegitimate means. They are known as double failures, thus retreating into a world of sex, drugs, and alcohol. Cloward and Ohlin further state that the varying form of delinquent subcultures depended upon the degree of integration that was present in the community.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Miller's Lower-Class Focal Concerns

Walter Miller didn't see juvenile delinquency as being rooted in the rejection of the middle-class value system, as did other subculture theorists, but in the value system of the lower class. It is this value system that generates delinquent acts. This value system emerged as a response to living in the slums.

Miller was an anthropologist who was familiar with enthnography. Having closely studied the lower class areas in Boston, in 1955, he came up with his own conclusions, and thus his Lower-Class Focal Concerns theory. He saw society as composed of different social groups. Each group had its own subculture. He used the concept of focal concerns, and not value, to further describe things that were important to the subculture. These "focal concerns" are important aspects in the subculture and require constant attention and care.

Miller identified six focal concerns to which the lower class give attention to. The concern over trouble is a major feature of the lower class. Getting into trobule and staying out of trouble are very important daily preoccupations. Trouble can either mean prestige or landing in jail. Toughness, another concern, further represents a commitment to law-violation and being a problem to others. Machismo and being daring is stressed. The third focal concern is that of smartness. It is the ability to gain something by outsmarting or conning another. Prestige is often the reward for those demonstrating such skills. Another focal concern is excitement. Living on the edge for thrills and doing dangerous things as well as taking risks is a crucial concern. Another focal concern is that of fate. It is a crucial concern to the lower class. many believe that their lives are subject to forces outside of their control. The last focal concern focuses upon automony. This signifies being independant, not relying on others and rejecting authority.

Miller further observed that an absence of a father in a young boy's life posed a problem for learning appropriate male behavior. This served as a device for gangs to accomodate the problem faced by young males who had no presence of a father figure. Miller's theory has however received mixed reviews. Many say that he disregarded the fact that many lower class people actually do conform to societal norms.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Overview of Labeling Theories

A group of labeling theorists began exploring how and why certain acts were defined as criminal or deviant and why other such acts were not. They questioned how and why certain people thus became defined as criminal or deviant. Such theorists viewed crimnals not as evil persons who engaged in wrong acts but as individuals who had a criminal status placed upon them by both the criminal justice system and the community at large. From this point of view, criminal acts thus themselves are not significant, it is the social reaction to them that are. Deviance and its control then involves a process of social definition which involves the response from others to an individual's behavior which is key to how an individual views himself. To make this point, let's briefly examine a crucial point made by sociologist Howard S. Becker, in 1963.

> "Deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label."

Labeling theory focuses on the reaction of other people and the subsequent effects of those reactions which create deviance. When it becomes known that a person has engaged in deviant acts, she or he is then segregated from society and thus labeled, "whore," theif," "abuser," "junkie," and the like. Becker noted that this process of segregation creates "outsiders", who are outcast from society, and then begin to associate with other individuals who have also been cast out. When more and more people begin to think of these individuals as deviants, they respond to them as such; thus the deviant reacts to such a response by continuing to engage in the behavior society now expects from them.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Howard Becker's Developmental Career Model

Howard Becker's developmental career model is a social-process approach. Becker argues that deviance exists in the eye of the beholder, much like beauty. He stresses that no act is intrinsically deviant, but must be defined as such. Becker's notion of a developmental process is that it precedes the attainment of a deviant identity or career. He uses the process of becoming a marijuana user as an unfolding sequence of steps that lead one to a commitment and participation in a deviant career. He argues that such an identity occurs over time, having both a historical and longitudinal course. In his example, for instance, the person must have access to the drug; must experiment with the drug; the person must continue to use the drug. Each of these steps involves some subtle changes in the person's attitude and perspective, as well as their behavior, he argues. "The circumstances that determine movement along a particular path includes properties of both the person and of the situation," he states.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Overview of Social Control Theories

Theories of social control focus on the strategies and techniques which help regulate human behavior and thus lead to conformity and compliance of the rules of society, including the influences of family, school, morals, values, beliefs, etc.,

Does existence of rules guarantee peaceful existence of the group? Who is to ensure compliance with such rules? Social control theorists are out to study such questions. They are interested in learning why people conform to norms, they ask why people conform in the face of so much temptation, peer pressure, and inducement. Juveniles and adults conform to the law in response to certain controlling forces which are present in their lives. Thus, they are likely to become criminal when the controlling forces in their lives are defective or absent.

Social control theorists argue that the more involved and committed a person is to conventional activities, the greater the attachment to others (such as family and friends), the less likely that a person is to violate the rules of society.

Social control has its roots in the early part of this century in the work of sociologist E.A. Ross. Ross believed that belief systems, not specific laws, guide what individuals do and this serves to control behavior, no matter the forms that beliefs may take.

Social control is often seen as all-encompassing, practically representing any phenomenon leading to conformity, which leads to norms. Others see social control as a broad representation of regulated mechanisms placed upon society's members. In other words, social control regards what is to be considered deviant, violations of the law, right or wrong. Social control mechanisms can be adopted as laws, norms, mores, ethics, etiquette, and customs, which all control and thus define behavior.

Social control theory is viewed from two perspectives. The macrosocial perspective explores formal control systems for the control of groups, including the legal system such as laws, law enforcement, powerful groups in society (who can help influence laws and norms) and economic and social directives of government or private organizations. Such controls can serve to be either positive or negative.

On the other hand, the microsocial perspective focuses on informal control systems, which help to explain why individuals conform. It also considers the source of control to be external, that is, outside of the person.

We will focus on microsocial views of social control while examining the theories of Travis Hirshi (Social Bonds) and Gresham Sykes and David Matza's Techniques of Neutralization (Drift Theory). Walter Reckless' Containment Theory is also included here are a theory of social control, although we can also consider it a self-concept approach.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Walter Reckless' Containment Theory

In 1961 sociologist Walter C. Reckless proposed Containment Theory, which explains delinquency as the interplay between two forms of control known as inner (internal) and outer (external) containments. Containment theory assumes that for every individual a containing external structure as well as a protective internal structure exist. Both buffer, protect, and insulate an individual against delinquency. Reckless wanted his theory to explain not only delinquency, but also conformity.

Containment theory shows that society produces a series of pulls and pushes toward the phenomenon of delinquency. It suggests that these inner and outer containments help to buffer against one's potential deviation from legal and social norms and work to insulate a youth from the pressures, pulls, and pushes of deviant influences.

Of the two, Reckless suggested that inner containments are more important. It is these inner containments, he argued, that form one's support system. The stronger one's inner containments, the least likely one would commit crime; the weaker one's inner containments, the more prone to crime one would become.

Inner containments, simply put, are "self" components. They are the inner strength of one's personality. These include a good self-concept, strong ego, well developed conscience, high sense of responsibility, and high frustration tolerance. Outer containments refer to one's social environment. These are normative constraints in which society and groups use to control its members. Outer containments include belonging (identification with the group), effective supervision, cohesion among group members (togetherness), opportunities for achievement, reasonable limits and responsibilities, alternative ways and means of satisfaction (if one more more ways are closed), reinforcement of goals, norms values, and discipline.

Internal pushes are personal factors which include restlessness, discontent, rebellion, anxiety, and hostility. External pulls include deviant peers, membership in a deviant/criminal gang, and pornography. Finally, external pressures refer to the adverse living conditions which give rise to crime. These include relative deprivation, poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and inequality.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Travis Hirschi's Social Bond Theory

Travis Hirschi took his theory to a different approach. He didn't attempt to explain why individuals engage in criminal acts, but rather why individuals choose to conform to conventional norms. It is, in a strict sense, not a theory of crime causation, but rather a theory of prosocial behavior used so often by sociologists and criminologists to better explain deviance and criminality.

In 1969 Travis Hirschi presented four social bonds which promote socialization and conformity. These include attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. He claimed that the stronger these four bonds, the least likely one would become delinquent. Hirschi first assumes that everyone has potential to become delinquent and criminal and it is social controls, not moral values, that maintain law and order. Without controls, he argues, one is free to commit criminal acts.

Hirschi further assumes that a consistent value system exists and all of society is thus exposed to such a system. Moral codes are then defied by delinquents because their attachment to society is weak. While Sykes and Matza believe that delinquents share the same values and attitudes as non delinquents, Hirschi views delinquents as rejecting such social norms and beliefs.

The first bond, attachment, refers to one's interest in others. One's acceptance of social norms and the development of social conscious depend on attachment for other human beings. Hirschi views parents, schools, and peers as important social institutions for a person. Attachment takes three forms--attachment to parents, to school, and to peers. While examining attachment to parents Hirschi found that juveniles refrain from delinquency due to the consequences that the act would most likely produce, therefore putting such a relationship between parent and child in jeopardy. In some respect, can argue that this acts as a primary deterrent to engaging in delinquency. Strength, however, in such a deterrent would largely depend on the depth and quality of the parent-child interaction. The amount of time child and parent spend together are equally important, including intimacy in conversation and identification that may exist between parent and child. While examining the bond with school, Hirschi found that an inability to do well in school is linked with delinquency, through a series of chain events. He argued that academic incompetence leads to poor school performance, which leads to a dislike of school, which leads to rejection of teachers and authority, which results in acts of delinquency. He argued that one's attachment to school depends on how one appreciates the institution and how he/she is received by fellow peers and teachers. Hirschi also noted that he found that one's attachment to parents and school overshadows the bond formed with one's peers.

The second bond is that of commitment and it involves time, energy, and effort placed on conventional lines of action. In other words, the support of and equal partaking in social activities tie an individual to the moral and ethical code of society. Hirschi's control theory holds that people who build an investment in life, property, and reputation are less likely to engage in criminal acts which will jeopardize their social position. A lack of commitment to such conventional values will cause an individual to partake in delinquent or criminal acts.

The third bond is involvement. This addresses a preoccupation in activites which stress the conventional interests of society. Hirschi argues that an individual's heavy involvement in conventional activities doesn't leave time to engage in delinquent or criminal acts. He believes that involvement in school,

family, recreation, etc., insulates a juvenile from potential delinquent behavior that may be a result of idleness.

The final bond is that of belief and it deals with assents to society's value system--which entails respect for laws, and the people and institutions which enforce such laws. Hirschi argued that people who live in common social settings share similar human values. If such beliefs are weakened, or absent, one is more likely to engage in antisocial acts. Also, if people believe that laws are unfair, this bond to society weakens and the likelihood of committing delinquent acts rises.

Even with its weaknesses, Hirschi's theory held a position of importance in criminology for several decades. More than anything, social control theorists want to explain delinquency, not adult crime persay. However, since the characteristics of the theory are found present in adolsecents, they are also present in postadolescent behavior, argues one critic. Hirschi's theory remains silent on this analysis. Many other critics have faulted Hirschi's work because he used too few questionnaire items to measure social bonds. He failed to describe the chain of events that result in inadequate social bonds. There was also a creation of an artifical division of socialized verses unsocialized youths. Finally, Hirschi's theory explains no more than 50 percent of delinquent behavior and only a 1-2 percent difference in future delinquency, while it is supposed to explain why delinquency occurs.

Criminological Theory Main Page.

Sykes and Matza's Techniques of Neutralization

In the 1960s David Matza, and his associate Gresham Sykes, developed a different perspective on social control which explains why some delinquents drift in and out of delinquency. Neutralization Theory, or Drift theory as it is often called, proposed that juveniles sense a moral obligation to be bound by the law. Such a bind between a person and the law remains in place most of the time, they argue. When it is not in place, delinquents will drift.

According to Sykes and Matza, delinquents hold values, beliefs, and attitudes very similar to those of law-abiding citizens. In fact, they feel obligated to be bound by law. Then, if bound by law, how can they justify their delinquent activities? The answer is that they learn "techniques" which enable them to "neutralize" such values and attitudes temporarily and thus drift back and forth between legitimate and illegitimate behaviors. They maintain that at times delinquents participate in conventional activities and shun such activity while engaging in criminal acts. Such a theory proposes that delinquents disregard controlling influences of rules and values and use these techniques of neutralization to "weaken" the hold society places over them. In other words, these techniques act as defense mechanisms that release the delinquent from the constraints associated with moral order.

In Delinquency and Drift (1964), David Matza suggested that people live their lives on a continuum somewhere between total freedom and total restraint. The process by which a person moves from one extreme of behavior to another extreme is called drift, and this is the very foundation of his theory.

Along with Sykes, Matza rejected the notion that subcultures of delinquency maintain an independent set of values than the dominant culture. They hold that delinquents actually do appreciate culturally held goals and expectations of the middle-class, but feel that engaging in such behavior would be frowned upon by their peers. Such beliefs remain almost unconscious, or subterranean, because delinquents fear expressing such beliefs to peers.

Techniques of Neutralization suggest that delinquents develop a special set of justifications for their behavior when such behavior violates social norms. Such techniques allow delinquents to neutralize and temporarily suspend their commitment to societal values, providing them with the freedom to commit delinquent acts.

Sykes and Matza's theoretical model is based on the following four observations.

1. Delinquents express guilt over their illegal acts.
2. Delinquents frequently respect and admire honest, law-abiding individuals.
3. A line is drawn between those whom they can victimize and those they cannot.

4. Delinquents are not immune to the demands of conformity.

Thus, Sykes and Matza propose the five Techniques of Neutralization.

Denial of responsibility. Delinquent will propose that he/she is a victim of circumstance and that he/she is pushed or pulled into situations beyond his/her control. ("It wasn't my fault!")

Denial of injury. Delinquent supposes that his/her acts really do not cause any harm, or that the victim can afford the loss or damage. ("Why is everyone making a big deal about it; they have money!")

Denial of the victim. Delinquent views the act as not being wrong, that the victim deserves the injury, or that there is no real victim. ("They had it coming to them!")

Condemnation of the condemners. Condemners are seen as hypocrites, or are reacting out of personal spite, thus they shift the blame to others, being able to repress the feeling that their acts are wrong. ("They probably did worse things in their day!")

Appeal to higher loyalties. The rules of society often take a back seat to the demands and loyalty to important others. ("My friends depended on me, what was I going to do?!")

Sykes and Matza further argued that these neutralizations are available not just to delinquents but they can be found throughout society.

Attempts have been made over the years to verify the assumptions made by Neutralization Theory, and the results have, thus far, been inconclusive. Studies have indicated that delinquents approve of social values, while others do not. Other studies indicate that delinquents approve of criminal behavior, while others seem to oppose it. Neutralization Theory, however, remains an important contribution to the field of crime and delinquency. Social bond theorist, Travis Hirschi, asked an important question: do delinquents neutralize law-violating behavior before or after they commit an act? Neutralization theory loses its credibility as a theory which explains the cause of delinquency if juveniles use techniques of neutralization before the commission of a delinquent deed and therefore becomes a theory which simply describes reactions that juveniles incur due to their misdeeds. The theory does fail on the account that it doesn't clearly distinguish why some youths drift into delinquency and others do not. The theory remains too abstract and vauge to be of any practical use unless we understand why drift occurs, critics have argued.

Criminological Theory Main Page.