

# Sociological Theories of Crime Causation

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Oct.2011 Lecture

# Major Sociological Theories

- **Strain Theories:** Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin, Merton
- **Subcultural Theories:** Wolfgang and Ferracutti, Miller
- **Control Theories:** Hirschi and Gottfredson, Reckless,
- **Social Disorganization Theories:** Shaw&McKay, Park&Burgess
- **Lifecourse Theory** :Sampson and Laub

# Strain Theories : Merton, Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin, Agnew

- Strain theories may focus on different aspects of criminal behavior (e.g. juvenile crime, gang formation, specific offender types) but
- they share one common assumption: some (otherwise moral) people are driven to crime out of the frustration( and illegitimate opportunity structure) associated with living in lower class communities.

# Robert Merton's Goals vs. Means Typology of Individual Adaptations

- Conformists: Accept societal goals and means
- Innovators: Accept societal goals but reject means
- Ritualists: Reject societal goals but accept means
- Retreatists: Reject societal goals and means
- Rebels: Redefine both goals and means

# Cloward and Ohlin's Theory of Differential Opportunity

- Individuals may have blocked access to both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structure, depending on neighborhood context.
- **Criminal Subculture**: in some neighborhoods, there is a stable, criminal organization that can be identified.
- **Conflict Subculture**: in other communities, there is no dominant criminal organization with several groups competing for control.
- **Retreatist Subculture**: individuals who can not gain entrance into either the criminal or conflict subculture tend to cluster here—these are double failures, who can not make it either legitimately or illegitimately.

# Albert Cohen's Theory of Delinquent Gangs

- Key terms: prior socialization, labeling, middle class measuring rods, reaction formation, college boys, corner boys, delinquent boys, anti-utilitarian delinquency.
- Theory: In school, kids from lower class areas are labeled as either bad or stupid.
- There are three possible responses to this initial label: (1) try harder, (2) accept it, or (3) reject it and redefine success.

# Cohen's Typology

- **College Boys:** these juveniles continue to strive for educational success.
- **Corner Boys:** these juveniles lower their expectations and engage in marginal forms of deviance( alcohol, drugs).
- **Delinquent Boys:** these juveniles reject the negative labels and redefine status in a manner where they can be successful, through a process of reaction formation.
- Today's delinquent boys are tomorrow's criminal offenders .

# Modern Strain theory: Robert Agnew

- Revised versions of strain theory attempt to explain middle class delinquency.
- Adolescents are more concerned with achievement of immediate goals, rather than the long term goals emphasized by classic strain theories: monetary success or job status.



# Immediate Goals of Adolescents

- Popularity with the opposite sex
- Good Grades
- Athletic Success
- Owning a car
- Getting along with parents
- Achievement of immediate goals is independent of social class

# Is Strain Theory Correct? A Review of the Evidence

- Proposition 1: The universal emphasis on success is internalized by significant numbers of people in all social classes.
- Several studies have found that the above proposition is not supported.
- Lower class individuals have lower levels of aspirations than do middle class individuals:
- They desire less education, less money, and less prestigious occupations than their middle class counterparts.
- However, relative to what they have, lower class individuals desire as much, if not more, success than do middle class individuals.

# A Review of the Evidence: Strain Theory

- Proposition 2: Relative to middle class individuals, lower class individuals are less able to achieve their goals through legitimate channels.
- The Evidence here is mixed

# A Review of the Evidence: Strain Theory

- Proposition 3: *Strained* individuals are more likely to engage in crime.
- The evidence here does not support the theory

# A Critique of Strain Theory

- The Class-crime connection is overstated.
- *Strain* should result in more crime; there is too much unexplained conformity in lower class areas.
- Research testing strain theory relies on official data sources, rather than self-report or NCVS data.

# Subcultural Theories

- Wolfgang's Subculture of Violence: Violence at home + Violence in community=situational use of violence by residents
- Miller's Theory of Lower Class : Focal Concerns of youth include:
  - Trouble, Toughness, Smartness, Autonomy, Fate

# Subcultural Theories today

- Byrne & Stowell: Culture in action (dynamic) vs. culture as values (static).
- Eminem: *I am whatever you say I am; if I wasn't then why would I say I am*
- Departed: *I don't want to be a product of my environment; I want my environment to be a product of me*
- Elijah Anderson's Code of the Street

# Traditional Control Theories

- Control Theory explains conformity
- Hirshi's 4 Bonds to Society: When these bonds are weak/broken, individuals are free to deviate
  - Attachment
  - Commitment
  - Involvement
  - Belief



# Lifecourse Theory

- Four Key Turning Points in the Life course:
  - Marriage
  - Employment
  - Military
  - Relocation