Sociological Theories of Crime Causation

Professor Byrne
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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