Juvenile Justice

CJ 3650
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Chapter 5
Social Theories of Delinquency

- There are four major types of theories
  - Social structure
  - Social process
  - Life course
  - Social reaction
Social Structure Theory

- Focus on the economic and social conditions in which lower-class youth live.
- Examines why lower-class youth are more likely to commit crime than middle- and upper-class youth.
- There are three social structure theories:
  - Ecological
  - Strain
  - Subculture
Ecological Theory

- Seeks to explain delinquency based on *where* it occurs.
- Shaw and McKay’s social disorganization theory is the most prominent theory.
  - They argued that the ecological conditions in city/urban life influenced delinquency.
  - Developed the *Concentric Zone Theory*
Zone 1 – Factories, central business district.

Zone 2 – Oldest area of city, invaded by business as Z1 expands.

Zone 3 – Working people’s homes.

Zone 4 – Residential areas.

Zone 5 – Commuter zone, suburbs.

Zone 2 is the zone in transition and this zone consistently has the highest rates of delinquency.
Cultural Heterogeneity

- Shaw and McKay identified three characteristics of the zone in transition that may contribute to increases in delinquency
  - Cultural Heterogeneity
    - A lack of interaction between cultural groups. Can foster a lack of collective efficacy.
  - Mobility
    - When people progress economically there is the tendency to advance socially. Leads to high turnover in interstitial areas (where industry, commerce and residents coexist)
  - Poverty
    - The interstitial area maintains higher levels of people living at or near poverty levels. Delinquency is often higher in these areas.
Strain Theory

- Sees delinquency as a result of a lack of opportunity.
- Those who do not have equal opportunity are "strained" and consequently are more likely to commit delinquent acts.

- Morton’s Strain Theory – blocked opportunity theory
  - Merton identifies the cultural goal of American society as economic success. People who are blocked develop adaptations:
    - Conformity
    - Ritualism
    - Innovation
    - Retreatism
    - Rebellion
Merton’s Modes of Adaptation

- Conformity – accepts the cultural goal and means to achieve success
- Ritualism – rejects goal but accepts means
- Innovation – accepts goal but not the means
- Retreatism – rejects both goals and means
- Rebellion – rejects goals and means and substitutes new goals and means
Agnew’s General Strain Theory

- Focuses more on delinquency
  - Success for juveniles may be different than that of adults
- Crime and delinquency may be a response to negative affective states that are adverse emotions:
  - Anger
  - Frustration
  - Disappointment
  - Depression
  - Fear
A subculture is a set of values, norms, and beliefs that differ from those within the dominant culture.

Three subculture theories are:
- Delinquency & frustration
- Differential opportunity
- Lower-class focal concern
Delinquency and frustration

- Albert Cohen believed that people from the lower class had different values, norms, and beliefs than those in other classes.
  - He argued that the goal of lower class members is middle-class membership.
  - The primary means to achieve this goal is through education. However, these children are often evaluated using middle-class standards.
  - Ambition, responsibility, deferred gratification, courtesy, control aggression, respect for property.
Differential Opportunity

- Cloward and Ohlin’s focus was on serious delinquency committed by urban, male gang members.
- Saw two goals pursued by lower-class youth:
  - Economic success
  - Middle-class membership
    - The inability to rely on legitimate means to achieve these goals often results in the forming of delinquent subcultures.
Types of gangs

- The values, norms, and beliefs of the subculture and the neighborhood in which the group lives and the access to legitimate means often determines the type of gangs.

- Three types:
  - Criminal
  - Conflict
  - Retreatist
Lower-class focal concerns

- Walter Miller studied lower-class areas in Boston in the mid-1950s.
- Society is composed of various social groups, each with distinctive subcultures.
- Identified six focal concerns of lower-class subculture:
  - Trouble
  - Toughness
  - Smartness
  - Excitement
  - Fate
  - Autonomy
Social process theory

- Focuses on the relationship between socialization and delinquency
- Two primary branches:
  - Learning theory
  - Social control theory
Learning Theory

- Juveniles commit delinquent acts because they learn
  - Attitudes
  - Skills
  - Rationalizations
    - This learning takes place in interaction with
      - Parents
      - Peers
Differential Association

Edward Sutherland asserted that delinquency is a function of learning, not a function of economic success or location. Nine propositions:

- Behavior is learned
- Behavior is learned through interaction with others
- Learned criminal behavior occurs in intimate groups
- Learning includes techniques, motives, drives
- Learning is reinforced through favorable or unfavorable definitions
- An excess of unfavorable definitions increases the chance of differential association
- Differential association varies in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity
- Process of learning is same – good or bad
- Delinquency is an expression of general needs and values
Social Control Theory

- Assumes that people will violate the law.
  - Yet, not all people do.
  - Why?
  - The answer lies in the strength of a person’s ties to the foundation of
    - Family
    - Friends
    - School
- **Containment Theory**
  - Internal and external forces operate when juveniles make decisions to avoid or commit delinquency

- **Hirschi’s Social Control/Social Bonding**
  - People usually do not commit delinquent acts because this behavior can damage relationships

- **Gottfredson & Hirschi’s Self-Control Theory**
  - The tendency to commit crime and delinquency is found in the level of self-control.
Life Course Theory

- Focuses on the onset and termination of delinquency at different stages in life:
  - Childhood
  - Adolescence
  - Adulthood

- Draws on several theories
  - Biological
  - Psychological
  - Social
Social Reaction Theory

- Examine the role that social institutions play in perpetuating delinquent behavior.
  - Labeling theory
    - Emphasizes explanations of why certain laws are passed and enforced and why police and juvenile courts process some offenders but others do not.
      - Looks at the unanticipated and negative consequences of the label that is attached to certain offenders.
  - Conflict theory
    - Believe that delinquent behavior is due to conflict in society that arises from an unfair distribution of wealth and power.