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Sociological Theories Of Crime

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Abstract

The dominant sociological criminologies of crime are tried to be questioned critically in this essay by rigorous analysis of functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. This essay analyzes the relationship between social structure, economic institution, and culture to form criminality and develop it. Adapting Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie, this essay analyzes how fragmentation of society and bad social integration result in criminality. The Marxist theory, which has its roots in conflict theory, focuses on how social injustices and power imbalances in capitalist countries create a crime-permissive environment for oppressed groups. Symbolic interactionism, through theories like Differential Association and Labeling Theory, focuses on social interaction and labeling in the construction of criminality. Through critical examination of such frameworks, the paper examines the implications for policy making, criminal law reforms, and crime prevention policy. The paper asserts the necessity to synthesize varied individual and structural approaches to explanation in crime control and gives critical appraisals of sociological knowledge production in relation to criminality in contemporary society.

Keywords: Sociological theories, crime, functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, anomie, Marxism, social inequality, criminal activity, collapse of society, power relations, crime prevention, legal reform, policy-making, Differential Association, Labeling Theory, social structure.

Introduction

Sociologically, crime is not merely a personal act of deviance but one with close ties to the fabric of society. Crime is rather understood as a reaction to diverse structural and environmental forces affecting individuals and groups. Sociological accounts of crime seek to explain the etiology of criminality in terms of social norms, structures, inequalities, and interactions. They explain that crime is not a solitary event but rather something that is resultant from the society in which it is occurring.

Crime is defined through the lens of how aspects of society—stratification of class, cultural values, and institutions—create contexts within which criminality is more probable or even accepted. Several theories describe criminality, which sociologists have developed, and each presents distinct insights into social forces in operation.

The most widely known sociological theories of crime are functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. These theories are subsequently based on the contributions of prominent philosophers like Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Edwin Sutherland. Durkheim, within functionalism, explains that crime can be a consequence of social order breakdown and loss of norms in society, hence anomie or normlessness. Conflict theory, based primarily on the contributions of Marxist ideology, conceives crime as a direct consequence of social inequalities and the battle for power present in capitalist societies. Although symbolic interactionism has an interest in the place of social interactions within learning criminality, specifically under such theories as Differential Association and Labeling Theory.

This article strives to offer a critical analysis of these sociological theories, assess their contribution to crime understanding, and analyze how they have influenced the dominant approaches to crime prevention and policy. Sociological explanations of crime facilitate policymakers, criminologists, and sociologists to effectively counter the causative conditions of criminality and strive for the attainment of a fairer and more equitable society.

1. Functionalism

Functionalism is also one of the oldest of the sociological theories of crime, taken nearly in all respects from Emile Durkheim's. Functionalists agree that deviance and crime are not merely pathology or forces of disorganization in society but instead exist to serve some function required to maintaining stability and solidarity within a society. Functionalism accounts for society as a complex system whose members all work together in solidarity to make way for solidarity and stability. To this end, crime begins to be regarded as an inherent and even normative part of social existence.

Durkheim's Theory of Anomie:

Durkheim's original theory of anomie forms the foundation of functionalist theory of crime. Anomie is a state of breakdown or normlessness in the social values, traditionally felt during periods of social revolution or change. Durkheim posited that crime arises when society's frameworks or norms which help to manage the people's behaviors collapse. During such moments, individuals could feel disconnected between what they perceive society should require from them and the opportunities at hand for them to succeed. This isolation can lead to frustration and, ultimately, crime.

Durkheim also theorized that crime serves a functional role in society—crime is not a negative. Crime enables societies to react to change by transgressing established norms and values. An example is civil

disobedience and social movements to object to legal or social reform movements (e.g., gender equality movement or civil rights movement), as these are categorized as deviant behaviors culminating finally in a healthy social adjustment. Crime can therefore be employed to serve as a tool of keeping society in equilibrium through influencing social accommodation.

The Role of Crime in Social Integration

Crime, according to Durkheim, plays the primary function of reasserting social solidarity and cohesion. By means of social reaction to crime—social condemnation and legal punishment—societies reassert shared values and moral codes. Social condemnation by the public such as trials and criminal punishment is an assertion of community moral order and thus strengthening of social solidarity. The notion emanates from Durkheim's discovery of two types of societies:

- **Mechanical Solidarity:** Crime is not as well endured in pre-industrial societies, where there is shared culture and consciousness, but is executed so that the society is made solidary.
- **Organic Solidarity:** With highly advanced societies of modern times and increased heterogeneity of values and norms, crime is accepted because it reflects the heterogeneity of society. Penal system and law are more advanced in such societies with more focus on re-establishing social balance than punishing the offenders.

Functions of Crime:

Crime was described by Durkheim as fulfilling some essential functions in society:

- **Boundary Setting:** Crime defines the limits of acceptable behavior. By punishing criminals, society acknowledges to people what is legal and accepted and reasserts its social values and collective norms.
- **Social Change:** Crime may be an impelling force for social change by shattering hegemonic norms. As society's values change, formerly forbidden is made conventional and thus leads to development.
- **Social Cohesion:** Morality of society is grounded and shared values and norms of society are reinforced by the same response to crime: legal penalty or moral outrage.

While Durkheim's functionalism is a keen analysis of the function of crime in maintaining social order, it is open to criticism. One such criticism is that functionalism pays no heed to inequalities and power relations that can be exercised against crime. It requires crime to arise from a dissolution of norms to operate but fails to very precisely explain how exactly those norms come into being or who benefits from them. On this

interpretation, functionalism is to be faulted for idealizing social order and downplaying the importance of conflict and relations of power.

Second, the critics argue that functionalism cannot fully explain the phenomenon that some individuals, located within the parameters of a society's norms, continue to show criminality, particularly in the context of widespread social disintegration or structural deprivation.

Functionalism's crime strategy does offer a distinctive model of how crime operates to reproduce social order. It highlights the functional uses of crime and how it maintains social cohesion, change, and stability. But the functionalist view is lacking in the manner it accounts for the power and inequality associated with the committing of crime. It remains a building block theory applied to account for the wider social world in which crime takes place and functions, yet it needs supplementing by additional theories such as conflict theory and symbolic interactionism to form an extended explanation of criminality.

2. Conflict Theory

Conflict theory, based on the writings of Karl Marx, provides a critical explanation of crime, highlighting the use of power, inequality, and social class in the production and reproduction of criminality. In contrast to functionalism, which views crime as a natural phenomenon and indeed a beneficial force for society, conflict theory contends that crime arises directly from social inequalities and power struggles of capitalist societies.

Karl Marx and Conflict Theory Origin:

The knowledge Karl Marx possesses regarding society comes from the understanding of class conflict under which society is split into two broad strata: bourgeoisie (capitalists) and proletariat (working class). Crime, based on such knowledge, traces its origin in the unequal allocation of wealth and power in society. The capitalist system generates structural imbalances that keep the lower classes out of meeting their needs and desires through appropriate avenues. The bourgeoisie, the owners of political power and means of production, employ the legal system and other social structures to impose control and consolidate their interests against the working class.

Marxist theory of conflict supposes that the legislation is aimed at protecting the interests of the ruling, and the criminal justice apparatus is meant to criminalize behavior that would upset the status quo or imperil the authority of the ruling class. Capitalist laws are written to protect property and the social order that protects the interests of the rich. Thus, crime is not a moral failing that dwells in the individual but a product of reaction towards the inherent social and economic injustices of the capitalist order. Criminalization of the Working Class:

One of the latent postulates of conflict theory is that the criminal justice system disproportionately targets the working class and underclass.

Laws are drawn up in a way that the poor will inevitably break them, while the rich turn to crime as a last resort because of their might, influence, and means. White-collar crime, environmental crime, and financial crime, for example, corporate crime, are not investigated as vigorously as street crime by the poor, although the latter impacts society in the long term. Conflict theory examines how the behavior hazardous to the interests of the ruling class, i.e., protests or strikes, is criminalized, whereas the machinery of law enables the ruling class to avoid responsibility. The machinery of law thereby reinforces the status quo and supports the interests of the affluent, increasing social inequality and class divisions.

Social Inequality and Crime

One of the strongest things about conflict theory is its focus on social inequality as a root cause of crime.

Individuals with lower socio-economic status will ensure that they only have limited access to commodities, information, and opportunities, and this could potentially make criminality more likely. Poverty, unemployment, and failure to move up the socio-economic ladder can contribute to frustration, alienation, and desperation that drive one to crime as a survival strategy or as a means of expressing resistance to the system. Conflict theory also presumes that social institutions such as the family, schools, and the media do have the role of sustaining the power relations in society.

The institutions affirm values and norms that are created to benefit the powerful and marginalize the voice and interests of marginalized individuals. In this context, social and economically marginalized persons are likely to be criminalized even if the action is potentially a response to the injustice faced by them.

The Ideological Function in Crime:

Conflict theory identifies the ideological function in establishing society's definition of crime. The ruling class seeks to utilize ideology—via the mass media, politics, and stories—to define what is crime and to designate as crime particular practices. For example, underclass or working-class crimes are rationalized by the media as a threat to social order or as a moral failing, while elite crime is rationalized as an aberration or suppressed. Ideological manipulation accomplishes this to aid in the maintenance of social order by focusing on the behavioral aspect rather than on the structural origin of crime.

The criminal justice system is then utilized as a tool of social control to promote the ruling class's interests, criminalizing conduct threatening the social, political, or economic order. Crime, according to conflict theory, isn't a matter of sickness in the offender but instead reflects symptoms of disparities in society itself.

Criticisms of Conflict Theory

Although conflict theory is a critical revolution of the capitalist society and its role to generate inequality and crime, it is not flawless. One of the primary criticisms leveled against conflict theory is that it addresses economic causation and does not focus on other social forces behind generating crime, for example, cultural values, psychological factors, or education. Critics would say that conflict theory overstates class conflict at times and overlooks the complexity of crime elsewhere.

Moreover, the focus of conflict theory on class conflict also overlooks human agency in decision-making to offend. It presumptively assumes that crime will always be a mode of overcoming social inequality but neglects other influences like peer pressure and individual psychological characteristics towards criminality.

Conflict theory is a pessimistic perspective on understanding crime and its emphasis is placed on the manner in which power, class conflict, social inequality, and class struggle all play a role in leading to criminality. Conflict theory suggests crime as the product of structural inequalities inherent in capitalist society, in that laws and the criminal justice system are utilized in order to serve the interests of the powerful and wealthy. Although the theory is a good contribution to understanding the social structure and crime relationship, the theory must be combined with theories such as functionalism and symbolic interactionism in order to have insight into the whole of crime and deviance in society.

3. Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory grounded on the significance of interaction in the development of self-concept and behavior. In its application in criminological studies, the theory revolves around learning crime as a result of interaction with other people and assigning meanings to individuals. The theory induces that crime is not biological but acquired through deviant behavior from social settings.

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Differential Association Theory:

One of the best of the symbolic interactionist theory is Edwin Sutherland's Differential Association Theory. Differential Association Theory holds that crime is learned with others accepting deviant value. Sutherland posits that crime is learned in social contact with other persons accepting belief in crime, particularly if such

exposure is more intense than to other persons accepting legality. This theory is based on the idea that frequency, duration, intensity, and priority of the associations will either lead to a person accepting criminality or not.

Sutherland's Differential Association Theory assumes that criminality is learned the same as any other behavior—is through socialization. Individuals are not only instructed to offend, but also the rationalizations and excuses which allow them to view their behavior as necessary or justified. For example, an individual who is raised in a society where drug use is prevalent will be socialized to hold the belief that drug use is the norm or even a required way of coping with the stress of society and thus adopt the behavior.

This is the peer criminal influence theory, which is among children. Peer friends with positive orientations for criminal acceptance or criminal encouragement increase one's likelihood of becoming criminal by a considerable extent.

Labeling Theory

Labeling Theory is another basic concept of symbolic interactionism that explains how the impact of labels assigned by society to an individual on his or her self-concept and resultant behavior works. Labeling Theory was brought forward by Howard Becker, who was of the opinion that when individuals are labeled "criminals" or "deviants," they are discovered to be embracing these labels, and it gives rise to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This labeling process tends to begin when one has done a deviant act and has then been labeled by society as a violation of social norms. Once labeled as a "criminal," he or she is stigmatized and treated differently by others such as law enforcement officials, family, and peers. Ultimately, the individual will embrace the label and make it part of his or her identity, and he or she will commit more crime and reconfirm the label and go on to build more criminality.

Becker's theory is significant also because it describes the manner in which society's power structure decides who becomes labeled deviant. It is mainly the powerful—politicians, the media, and police officers—who decide which behavior is criminalised and thus reproduce current social inequalities in most cases. Labeling Theory is suspicious of the tendency of the criminal justice system to over-target certain categories of people, e.g., racial minorities and economically disadvantaged groups, and holds the view that the system has a tendency to create criminality by stigmatizing labelling. One of the best of the symbolic interactionist theory is Edwin Sutherland's Differential Association Theory. Differential Association Theory holds that crime is learned with others accepting deviant value. Sutherland posits that crime is learned in social contact with other persons accepting belief in crime, particularly if such exposure is more intense than to other

persons accepting legality. This theory is based on the idea that frequency, duration, intensity, and priority of the associations will either lead to a person accepting criminality or not.

Sutherland's Differential Association Theory assumes criminality is learned like any other behavior—is socialized. It is not so much taught, but the excuses and justifications that allow them to think their behavior is necessary or justified. For instance, an individual brought up in a society where drug abuse is common will learn to view drug abuse as the norm or required to deal with the stressfulness of society and therefore develop the behavior.

This is the peer criminal influence theory, just as in children. Oriented towards something positive, a peer peers one to criminal acceptance or criminal encouragement, raising the probability of being criminal by rather a great percentage.

Labeling Theory

Labeling Theory is also a basic assumption of symbolic interactionism that accounts for the operation of the impact of labels attached by society to an individual upon his or her self-concept and resulting behavior. Labeling Theory was first developed by Howard Becker, who supposed that when individuals were stigmatized as "criminals" or "deviants," they were found to be embracing such labels, and it proved to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This process of labeling usually comes in after a person has done a deviant activity and so therefore has already been labeled as nonconformity by society. Having already once been labeled a "criminal," he or she is marked in some negative sense and treated otherwise by such people as the police, relations, and peers. Finally, the person will internalize the label and make it one's own and integrate it as part of self, and he or she will recidivate and revalidate the label again and keep adding to the offense.

Becker's theory is significant also because it explains by whom and through whom society gives its deviant labels, determining who it should label as deviant. It is largely the powerful—politicians, police, and the media—who are able to determine what type of behavior is criminalized and thereby re-establish already existing social inequalities in most instances. Labeling Theory is also cautious about the criminal justice system's tendency towards over-targeting certain groups of individuals, i.e., racial minorities and economically disadvantaged groups, and assumes the system has a leaning towards creating criminality through stigmatizing labeling.

Critics of Symbolic Interactionism

Although symbolic interactionism is useful in understanding the social process to crime, it has its critics too. In line with the critics, the theory is too focused on the social interaction to crime and fails to consider broad structural factors like economic disparities that lead to crime. Furthermore, the emphasis of the theory on the subjective nature of criminal labeling ignores the material consequences of criminality, i.e., imprisonment and deprivation of opportunity.

Despite these criticisms, nonetheless, symbolic interactionism remains a good model for describing how social interaction and the process of labeling construct criminality and deviance.

4. Other Theories

Besides the popular sociological crime theories, there are a number that aim to explain the etiology of criminality. They include Strain Theory, Social Control Theory, and others that explore the relationship between society norms, personal desires, and crime.

Strain Theory

Strain Theory, also known as identified by Robert Merton, assumes that crime follows as a result of imbalance between desired social goals and available means to achieve them. Financial prosperity and success in reaching the "American Dream" or any other desired social goals always take the top priority in modern societies. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have an equal opportunity at the available legitimate means (e.g., education, job) to achieve them.

Five different adaptations to strain were termed by Merton:

- Conformity: Members who agree with the ends of society and with the accepted means of achieving them (e.g., attending school and having stable jobs).
- Innovation: Members who agree with the ends of society but not the accepted means of achieving them (e.g., engaging in crime like theft or swindling as a means of achieving wealth).
- Ritualism: Those who abandon pursuit of societal means but cling to commitment to approved means (e.g., a bureaucrat who takes rules literally regardless of success).

- **Retreatism:** Those who abandon both societal means and goals, usually withdrawing into alcohol or drug addiction or withdrawal.
- **Rebellion:** People who abandon the social ends and means and try to replace them with their own set of values, usually through extremism or revolution.

Strain Theory points out the factor that crime can be a consequence of pressures faced by an individual when he/she cannot fulfill societal needs in the right way. Strain Theory is used directly to describe why lower-class individuals commit more crimes.

Social Control Theory

Social Control Theory, advanced by Travis Hirschi, focuses on the position of social bonds in crime avoidance. Under Social Control Theory, individuals are not likely to offend if they have strong social bonds. Travis Hirschi identified four fundamental features of social bonds that are preventers of crime:

- **Attachment:** The affective bond with other people, ranging from family members and peers to community.
- **Investment:** Commitment to mainstream activity, i.e., work, family, and school.
- **Involvement:** Level of offender participation in mainstream activity, with fewer hours to commit to crime.
- **Belief:** Belief in social norms and laws, and that they ought to be followed.

As Hirschi suggests, those who are weakly attached to society are most likely to commit offense insofar as they are less bound by the values and norms of society. For instance, those with little or no family or neighborhood ties will find themselves more open to peer influence and crime.

Critical Issues with Social Control Theory

The Social Control Theory critics maintain that the theory focuses too much on social bonds and overlooks structural inequality to crime. The theory is also unable to account for why it would be foreseeing highly bonded individuals to family and society in poor neighborhoods to commit a crime.

Conclusion

Sociological criminologies add to our knowledge of the social processes of crime. Drawing on a number of sociological paradigms—i.e., Functionalism, Conflict Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, Strain Theory, and Social Control Theory—we now have a complete understanding of how social structures, norms, relations, and individual choices shape deviance.

Functionalism understands the significance of crime to reinforce social norms and values in perpetuating social order. It does, however, accept that there can be too much deviance for social order. Conflict Theory sets the focus on power, inequality, and exploitation with justification of the fact that the criminal justice system has greater interest in margin populations and in protecting the interest of dominant individuals. Symbolic Interactionism, in the form of Differential Association Theory and Labeling Theory, emphasizes the learning of crime through social interaction and how society's labels can influence one's identity and his or her future actions to continue deviance.

Strain Theory reveals how societal pressures and the imbalance between society's wants and available resources may generate crime, specifically by the underclass. Alternatively, Social Control Theory asserts that strong social bonds and commitment to societal norms discourage offending, and offending is less likely where relations with society and a shared morality exist.

They not only inform us about why people offend, but also provide good models to follow and control crime. Policy interventions based on these theories can be developed to build social bonds, reduce inequality, ease pressures on society, and provide support networks in a way that does not push people towards crime.

Briefly, sociological criminologies focus on the importance of social context to the creation of criminal behavior. They posit that crime is not merely an individual moral deficiency but actually a product of more pervasive social, economic, and political conditions. If these root causes are addressed, society can attempt to reduce crime and build a more equitable and just social order.