

SUBCULTURAL THEORIES

Introduction

- 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 (Demelo, 2000).
- 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 (Demelo, 2000).
- 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 (Demelo,2000).
- Subcultures exist within the larger society, not apart from it. The members of the subculture are different from the dominant culture (Demelo, 2000).
- 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) (Demelo, 2000).
- 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 (Demelo, 2000).
- 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 (Demelo, 2000).

Cohen's Subculture of Delinquency

- Albert K. Cohen's book, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (1955), was the first attempt at solving the problem of how a delinquent subculture could begin
- Cohen integrated several theoretical perspectives : Shaw and McKay, Sutherland and Robert Merton
- After an examination of the research on juvenile delinquency, Cohen noted that delinquent behavior is most often found among lower-class males and that gang delinquency is the most common form
- Gang subculture's behavior is **nonutilitarian**, **malicious**, and **negativistic**.
- Cohen declared that all children seek social status. However, not all children can compete equally for status.
- By the virtue of their position in the social structure, lower-class children tend to lack both material and symbolic advantages.
- When lower-class kids compete for social status with middle-class kids, they always fall short.
- The first major status problems facing lower-class children are found in the school system.
- Not only do these children have to compete with middle-class children, but they are evaluated by adults (usually teachers) who use a "**middle-class measuring rod.**"
- These standards include sharing, delaying gratification, setting long-term goals, and respecting other properties → These are standards used by the middle-class.
- None of these standards are necessary self-evident to the parents of lower-class children, and they cannot be expected to lie to their children
- In this competitive framework, then, lower-class children lose ground in the search for status, among both fellow students and teachers
- Those who most strongly feel the loss (of the competition for status) suffer **status-frustration**.
- Employing the Freudian mechanism of **reaction-formation** (a defensive mechanism to overcome anxiety) as an explanation, Cohen speculated a hostile overreaction to middle-class values occur.
- Because many lower-class children are trapped in this status-frustration, various adaptations to the middle class take place. For some, adjustment to the middle-class measuring rod results in a **collective solution** to the problem of status.

- This solution, Cohen suggested, also requires a change in the way the status is attained. This is accomplished by jointly establishing “new norms, new criteria of status which define as meritorious the characteristics they do possess, the kinds of conduct of which they are capable (Cohen, 1955, p. 66).
- Thus, a new cultural form, a **delinquent subculture** (i.e. gang), is created to resolve problems of lower-class status.
- Abandoning and inverting the middle-class value system, gang members can achieve status simply by doing those things they do well, such as showing toughness or standing up for themselves
- As long as the need for status exists, the delinquent subculture will exist as an available solution for the lower-class, male youths.
- The delinquent subculture is passed on through the transmission of values from youth to youth and generation to generation, fostering an ongoing delinquent subculture that provides status for behavior that is negativistic, malicious, and nonutilitarian.

Cloward and Ohlin’s Differential Opportunity Theory

- Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin proposed the “differential opportunity theory” in their book, *Delinquency and Opportunity: A theory of Delinquent Gangs* (1960).
- According to Cloward and Ohlin, more than one way exists for juveniles to reach their aspirations
- Thus, position in society dictates the ability to participate in both conventional and criminal avenues of success.
- In Cloward and Ohlin’s view, Merton’s anomie/strain theory incorrectly assumed that lower class persons, who are denied access to legitimate opportunities, automatically have access to illegitimate opportunities.
- Their theory combines anomie, differential association, and social disorganization by proposing that deviant adaptations are explained by location in both the legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures. That is, in those urban, lower-class areas where very few legitimate opportunities are available, one can find opportunities of a different kind – Illegal opportunities.
- Cloward and Ohlin argue that motivation and the aspiration to succeed by themselves do not count for either conforming or deviant behavior.
- The individual must be in deviant or conforming “learning environments.”

- Illegal opportunities are just as well established and access is just as limited as the legitimated ones. Indeed, just because legitimate opportunities are blocked does not necessarily mean that illegitimate opportunities are freely available. In fact, there is unequal access to illegitimate roles and opportunities.
 - Among adolescent boys, it is clear that deprivation of legitimate means produces a strain toward delinquency. As such, boys from racial and ethnic minorities, especially those living on lower-class neighborhoods, are most likely to be deprived of legitimate educational and occupational opportunities. Therefore, high rates of delinquency are expected among them.
 - The kind of subculture or gang delinquency they adopt depends on the nature of the illegitimate opportunities available to them.
 - These opportunities are determined by the social organization of the neighborhoods or the areas of the city where they are raised.
 - Cloward and Ohlin proposed there would be three types of delinquent gang subcultures – “specialized subcultures.”
- (1) **Criminal Subculture:** 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. Their primary focus would be on profit-making activities, and violence would be minimal.
 - (2) **Conflict Subculture:** This type of 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.
 - (3) **Retreatist Subculture:** This 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.

Miller's Lower-Class Focal Concerns

- Walter Miller did not 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.
- In Miller's view, the value system of the lower class generates delinquent acts.
- This value system emerged as a response to living in the slums.

- Delinquency is one way of achieving or gaining acceptance according to the expectations of the lower class culture
- Lower class youth learn and act according to the central values or **focal concerns** of lower class adults, but the delinquent adolescents express and carry out these values in an exaggerated way
- Focal concerns
 - (1) Trouble is a major feature of the lower class. Getting into trouble and staying out of trouble are very important daily preoccupations. Trouble can either mean prestige or landing in jail.
 - (2) Toughness represents a commitment to law-violation and being a problem to others. Machismo and being daring is stressed
 - (3) Smartness is the ability to gain something by outsmarting or conning another. Prestige is often the reward for those demonstrating such skills
 - (4) Excitement – Living on the edge for thrills and doing dangerous things as well as taking risks is a crucial concern.
 - (5) Fate – It is a crucial concern to the lower class as many believe that their lives are subject to forces outside of their control.
 - (6) Autonomy—This signifies being independent, not relying on others and rejecting authority.

Sources

http://www.umsl.edu/~keelr/200/Diane_Demelo/diane.pdf

Williams, F. P., & McShane, M. D. (2010). *Criminological theory*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson

Akers, R. L., & Sellers, C. S. *Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application*.

New York: Oxford University Press