

THE CHICAGO SCHOOL

Introduction

- The University of Chicago established the first department of sociology in 1892, and through the mid-twentieth century it was one of the dominant forces in American sociological thought.
- The diverse group of scholars associated with the department were collectively referred as the “Chicago School” of sociology and criminology
- Chicago School scholars believed that human behavior is developed and changed by the social and physical environment of the person rather than by genetic structure.
- They also considered the community to be a major influence on human behavior. In fact, they believed a city is a natural human environment,
- The methods by which the Chicago School studied individual and the city were in themselves contributions to sociology and criminology. (1) They developed an *Empirical Sociology*, where they studies individuals in the social environments. (2) *The Life History* provided a method of reaching deeply into the cumulative factors and events shaping the lives of individuals. (3) *The Ecological Study* technique included collection of social data that provided a better sense of the characteristics of large groups of people.
- Combined the information gathered from individual cases with population statistics, the Chicago school thereby constructed a framework that has been the basis for most of our criminological theories ever since.
- The Chicago school represents one of the earliest examples of balancing theorizing with scientific analysis and at the same time guiding important programs and policy implementations that still thrive today.

The Social Heritage of the Chicago School

- Experts have determined that 19th century Chicago was the fastest-growing city in U.S. history. Census data show the population went from about 5,000 in the early 1800s to more than 2 million by 1900.
- This massive rate of growth was due to the strategic geographical position of Chicago and to transportation advancements

- Chicago, as other big cities in the early to mid-1800s, did not have formal social agencies to handle problems of urbanization: No social workers, police officers, garbage collectors, etc.
- Consequently, communities were largely responsible for solving their own problems, including crime and delinquency.
- Additionally, Chicago was very multicultural at the time. In fact, the city was largely made up of people that did not speak the same language or share the same customs.
- All these factors resulted in the type of chaos and normlessness that Durkheim predicted would occur when urbanization and industrialization occurred too rapidly. Hence, Chicago was a living example of an anomic state, with children running loosely in the streets controlled by gangs.
- Modern sociology developed in Chicago because the city needed it the most to solve its social problems. As such, Chicago became a type of laboratory for the social researchers, and they developed a number of theoretical models of crime and other social ills that are still shown to be empirically valid today.

Methodological Contributions of the Chicago School

- *The use of Official Data* → Crime figures, census reports, housing and welfare records... This information was applied to geographical layouts of the city, indicating areas of high crime, truancy and poverty. Charts and graphic portraits of social phenomena were maintained over periods of time, and the figures displayed a stability that led to a revolutionary thought in crime causation: certain areas of the city remained crime prone even though various ethnic populations came and went.
- *The Life History* → W. I Thomas first studied this form of folk psychology in Germany and developed into **ethnography** at the University of Chicago. The life history or case study approach presented the social-psychological process of becoming a criminal or delinquent. Sociologists became research explorers: they met, talked with, ate with, and virtually lived with their subjects. As the everyday lives of addicts, hobos, and delinquent unfolded, the observers were invited to analyze the characters as they appeared in their natural environment, be it a slum, a street corner, or a rail road car.

Robert E. Park

- The first relevant model offered by sociologists at the University of Chicago was proposed by **Robert E. Park**, who claimed that much of human behavior, especially the way cities grow, follow the basic principles of ecology that had been documented and applied to wildlife for many years at this point.
- **Ecology** is the study of the dynamics and processes through which plants and animals interact with the environment.
- Park applied Darwin principles to posit that the growth of cities follows a natural pattern and evolution.
- Park claimed that cities represent a type of complex organism with a sense of unity composed of the interrelations among the citizens and groups in the city.
- Park applied the ecological principle of **sympiosis** to explain the dependency of various citizens and units on each other: Everyone is better off working together as a whole.
- Park claimed that all cities would contain identifiable clusters, which he called **natural areas**, where people from the same ethnic background live together.
- Park noted that some areas (or species) may invade and dominate adjacent areas (species). The dominated area or species can recede, migrate to another location, or die off.
- Park claimed that a similar process occurs in human cities as some areas invade other zones or areas, and the previous dominant area must relocate or die off (Modern urban sprawl or expansion).
- Park observed a trend of businesses and factories invading the traditional residential areas of Chicago, which caused major chaos and breakdown in stability in those areas. Such developments can devastate the informal controls such as neighborhood networks or family ties as a result of invasion by a highly transient group of consumers and residents who do not have strong ties to the area. This leads to a psychological indifference toward the neighborhood, in which no one cares about protecting the community any longer.

Ernest W. Burgess

- Ernest W. Burgess proposed a theory of city growth in which cities were seen as growing not simply in the ages but from the inside outward.
- Burgess claimed that the source of growth was in the center of the city. Growth in the inner city puts pressure on adjacent zones, which in turn begin to grow into the next adjacent zones, following the ecological principle of “**succession**” identified by Park. This type of development is referred to as radial growth, meaning on the inside and rippling outward
- Burgess proposed the concentric circles theory, where **Zone II** was identified as **the zone of transition**; the area more subjected to invasion, domination, recession, and succession where crime is widespread.

The Concentric Zone Model:

1. Central Business District

2. Transitional Zone

- ***Recent Immigrant Groups*
- Deteriorated Housing
- Factories
- Abandoned Buildings

3. Working Class Zone

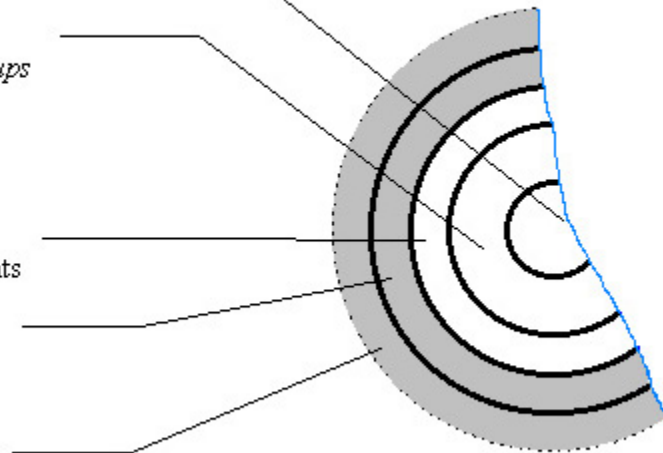
- Single Family Tenements

4. Residential Zone

- Single Family Homes
- Yards/Garages

5. Commuter Zone

- Suburbs



The Social Disorganization Theory

- During the first three decades of the twenty-first century, sociologists at the University of Chicago were interested in the effects of rapid industrialization on cities and its inhabitants.
- **William I. Thomas** and **Florian Znanieck** studied the response of immigrants to rapid social and economic changes in the city, specifically Polish immigrants. Thomas and Znaniecki described social disorganization as a reduction of the influence of behavioral norms in society upon individuals included in that social group. Thus, social disorganization seemed to be a process that is conducive to an increase in the violation of established norms that affect the entire community.
- **Robert E. Park** expanded on Thomas and Znaniecki's original notion of social disorganization. Park asserted that social change is the main cause of the erosion of the established norms. These norms are the foundation of social institutions, which are directly affected by a normlessness social environment.
- Park suggested that the presence of high crime rates in certain neighborhoods is clear evidence that social institutions have lost their capacity to control the behavior of the community members.
- In sum, Park highlighted the importance of the breakdown of formal social control institutions as part of the process of social disorganization, and delinquency as a measure of how disorganized a society is.
- **Clifford R. Shaw** and **Henry D. McKay** applied Burgess's concentric zone theory to different cities in the United States. Their main goal was to study the link between the geographic distribution of juvenile delinquency rates and social and economic features of certain areas within those cities.
- After selecting the areas to be studied in each city, they compared five variables with the delinquency rates for each of the areas within the city: school truancy rates, tuberculosis rates, mental disorder rates, juvenile delinquency rates, and infant mortality rates.
- Shaw and McKay were specifically focused on the effects of four structural variables regarding delinquency rates in these areas: Residential mobility, low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity and family disruption. Their hypothesis was based on the theory that the more prevalent these four conditions were in a community, the more socially disorganized that community would be.
- Shaw and McKay suggested that communities with high social disorganization have lost their ability to self-regulate through informal

social controls. In addition, social disorganization diminishes a community's capacity to preserve conventional norms and values as disorganization would lead to the acceptance of a different set of norms and values that are not common to all members of the community.

- Shaw and McKay believed that the conflicting values among the members of communities with high rates of mobility, high poverty, high racial/ethnic heterogeneity and high percentages of family disruption would clash and no one would be willing to intervene to reinforce conventional values. Consequently, delinquency is more frequent in these areas. As delinquency increases, a criminal value system would prevail undermining conventional norms and values and resulting in physical and social decadence of the neighborhood.
- Furthermore, Shaw and McKay explained that in order to understand how social disorganization and delinquency exist in some areas rather than others, we must study the process by which a city grows and changes, specifically how industry and commerce relates to social and economic characteristics of the city's residents.

The Cultural Transmission Theory

- Another contribution made by **Clifford R. Shaw** and **Henry D. McKay** was their explanation of the process by which social disorganization affects juveniles and leads to delinquency, commonly referred as cultural transmission theory.
- According to this theory, juveniles who live in social disorganized areas have greater opportunities for exposure to delinquent behaviors and criminal values. Indeed, one of the primary characteristics of those areas is that a delinquent tradition has developed.
- The social disorganization perspective was especially attractive to African American sociologists studying crime.
- **Monroe Work** (1866-1945) was one of the first African Americans that graduated with a Master's degree from the University of Chicago. HE explained that during the period following slavery, African Americans experienced a disorientation with societal norms. Thus, changed social conditions during the emancipation and reconstruction resulted in social disorganization among African Americans.
- **E. Franklin Frazier** (1894-1962) suggested that black adolescent boys learn criminality from older peers or family members and begin patterns of delinquent behavior around eleven or twelve years of age. While he

argued that a lack of collective environmental controls in urban lower-class neighborhoods was at the root of this delinquency, he also blamed absentee fathers, separated parents, and a lack of parental control for creating high-risk environments.

- **Earl R. Moses** used case studies of young males and noted that while the population of African Americans in Chicago grew, the rates of delinquency grew disproportionately faster. According to Moses, delinquency appeared to be related not to race but to mobility which he characterized as the frequent movement of delinquency-prone families within dilapidated housing areas that were more deteriorated as disorganized than those of surrounding zones.

Sources

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