Criminal Behavior, Theories of
From "Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict"

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Glossary

Anomie
A social condition caused by the lack of integration between a society's goals and the institutionalized means to achieve those goals.

Atavism
A concept developed by Lombroso to refer to the evolutionary degeneracy of criminals.

Differential Association
The process by which an individual receives situational definitions favorable and unfavorable to law violation.

Differential Opportunity
The principle that illegitimate opportunities, like legitimate ones, are not equally accessible to all members of a society.

Ego
The component of the personality that tries to strike a balance between the impulses of the id and the constraints of the superego.

Multiple Personality Disorder
A mental illness that causes an individual's mind to fracture into a number of different selves.

Neurotransmitters
Chemical compounds found between nerve cells in the brain that send signals from one neuron to another, influencing mood, emotion, learning, memory, and behavior.

Personality
The set of behavioral and emotional characteristics that describe an individual and that individual's reactions to various situations or events.

Phrenology
An early biological/physiological theory of criminal behavior that maintained that the development of specific areas of the brain affect personality and behavior.

Psychopathy
A mental illness in which the afflicted may appear psychologically healthy, but are callous, selfish, irresponsible, impulsive, and unable to feel guilt or remorse.

Schizophrenia
A mental illness that causes those afflicted to be unfocused, withdrawn, apathetic, and delusional.

Somatotyping
The notion that one's physique or body build corresponds to a particular temperament that, in turn, affects behavior.
Biological/Physiological Theories of Crime

Biological/physiological theories of criminal behavior date to the ancient Greeks and Romans, who believed that a person's character could be determined through a physical examination. Physiognomists, as the practitioners of this approach were called, maintained that certain physical traits were the identifying marks of criminals. Beardless men and bearded women, for example, were untrustworthy, and people with the unusual combination of dark and pale skin were thought to be naturally violent.

Physiognomy obviously had no basis in scientific fact and finally fell into disfavor by the middle of the eighteenth century. Historians of criminology generally date the emergence of the scientific analysis of criminal behavior as the early nineteenth century with the development of the perspective known as phrenology. Phrenologists theorized that the brain is divided into 26 different areas or 'faculties', organized into three major regions: intellectual, moral, and base or animal faculties. These regions could be studied through surgery and dissection, but also through physical examination and measurement of the skull, since phrenologists believed that the skull conformed precisely to the size and shape of the brain. If certain faculties of the brain were overdeveloped, they would be seen in bumps on a person's head in the area where these faculties were located. It was the base or animal faculties that phrenologists maintained were overdeveloped in criminals. The faculty of destructiveness, for example, was thought to be located slightly over the ear and was associated with violent criminal behavior, including homicide. But phrenologists also believed that criminal behavior could be inhibited through educational programs and a wholesome social environment that promoted the development of the higher intellectual and moral faculties and simultaneously suppressed the lower animal faculties.

Phrenologists were displaced in the scientific community by Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) and his followers who, in the second half of the nineteenth century, popularized the theory known as atavism. More specifically, Lombroso theorized that the criminal was a biological degenerate or 'throwback' to an earlier stage of evolutionary development, more ape-like than human. He called this degeneracy atavism and maintained that it manifested itself in certain physical traits or stigmata, which included very large or, conversely, very small ears; premature and abundant skin wrinkles; insensitivity to pain; excessive tattooing; and in women, muscular strength and hypersexuality. In response to charges that the theory of atavism failed to take into account social and economic causes of crime, Lombroso and his followers developed a typology of criminal behavior that included not only atavists, but also the insane, epileptics, those who committed crimes of passion or self-defense, those influenced by opportunity or circumstance, and those who lacked a good education or parental training. Nevertheless, these theorists remained committed to the idea that criminal behavior is primarily caused by inborn biological factors.

More contemporary biological/physiological theories of criminal behavior include those that focus on body build, genetics, neurological factors, and brain structure and functioning.
EEGs are produced by high concentrations of toxins (e.g., lead, cadmium) in the body; such toxins have been associated with slow EEGs indicate immature brains, but there is no empirical evidence to support this position. Others have found that slow general population; incarcerated offenders usually have abnormally slow brain wave activity. Some researchers hypothesize that are called brain waves. Studies show a significantly higher rate of abnormal EEGs among incarcerated criminals versus the general population. In an attempt to distinguish young male offenders from nonoffenders.

**Genetics**

**Chromosomal abnormalities**

There are many different chromosomal abnormalities, but the one most frequently associated with criminal behavior, especially violence, has been XYY syndrome. Those with this syndrome are men who have an extra Y chromosome accompanying the chromosome pair that determines sex (XY in men, XX in women). XYY syndrome captured the attention of scientists and the public when it was reported that two mass murderers - Daniel Hugon in France and Richard Speck in the US - had an extra Y chromosome, although it was later discovered that Speck was chromosomally normal. It was originally thought that the extra Y chromosome produced abnormally high levels of the hormone testosterone, which has been associated with aggression. However, later research found that XYY men were less rather than more aggressive than XY males. Studies have shown that XYY men are disproportionately represented among institutional populations, but this may reflect biases against them in arrest, conviction, and sentencing because they look ‘dangerous’ and capable of violence. Nevertheless, very few convicted offenders have XYY Syndrome.

**Genetics**

Early attempts to demonstrate a genetic cause for criminal behavior examined the criminal histories of members of individual families, but none of these studies successfully isolated genetic factors from environmental factors. More recent attempts focused on the behavior of twins and adoptees.

In studying twins, researchers typically compared the similarity in behavior of monozygotic (identical) twins with the behavior of dizygotic (fraternal) twins. They measure the probability that if one twin has a criminal record, the other twin does too. The rationale underlying this approach is that it allows for some control over environmental factors, since twins experience the same environment contemporaneously, both before birth and afterwards. However, because identical twins are more alike genetically than fraternal twins are, it is assumed that similarities or differences in their behavior are, therefore, attributable to genetics.

Twin studies conducted in the United States and Denmark showed remarkable similarity in the tendency toward criminal behavior, particularly violent crime, among identical twins as opposed to fraternal twins. Still, some scientists question the sampling techniques of these studies and the validity of the methods used to determine zygosity of the twins. Moreover, some reject the assumption of environmental equality for identical and fraternal twins, since research shows that identical twins are treated more alike by others and spend more time together than do fraternal twins. Thus, greater similarity in their behavior could be the result of these environmental influences, not genetics.

Adoption studies look at the behavior of individuals separated from their biological parents at an early age and raised by parents genetically unrelated to them. The logic of this method is that if crime is genetically caused, adoptees will behave less like their adoptive parents and more like biological parents, even though the latter did not raise them. Studies conducted in the United States and elsewhere do indicate that adoptees who have at least one biological parent with a criminal record are more likely to have criminal records themselves than adoptees whose biological parents do not have criminal records. However, these findings do not establish a causal connection between genetics and crime for several reasons. For instance, the research typically relies on the arrest or incarceration records of biological mothers, and these women have often been arrested or convicted of minor offenses, such as prostitution and lewdness as well as behavior that arguably is not criminal, such as adultery. In addition, the most convincing case for a genetic cause of crime would be made by those adoptees separated from their mothers at birth, but in the majority of these studies, as many as half the adoptees spent several months to more than a year with their biological mothers and many also lived in institutions before being adopted. Consequently, the trauma of parental-child separation and/or institutional living could have seriously influenced their later behavior.

Today, the emphasis in most genetic theories of crime is not on the inheritance of a specific behavior (i.e., criminality), but rather the inheritance of a predisposition to respond to certain cues in one’s environment in a specific way (e.g., the tendency to respond to perceived threat with aggression). In addition, some genetic theories posit an indirect relationship between inherited traits and criminal behavior. For instance, the learning and behavioral problems associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which is thought to be heritable, include rule-breaking and law violation.

**Neuroscientific Theories**

**Central nervous system disorders**

The central nervous system (CNS) is responsible for processing complex sensory information and controlling voluntary muscle movements. CNS functioning is typically examined using electroencephalography (EEGs), which measures what in the vernacular are called brain waves. Studies show a significantly higher rate of abnormal EEGs among incarcerated criminals versus the general population; incarcerated offenders usually have abnormally slow brain wave activity. Some researchers hypothesize that slow EEGs indicate immature brains, but there is no empirical evidence to support this position. Others have found that slow
EEGs are produced by high concentrations of toxins (e.g., lead, cadmium) in the body; such toxins have been associated with violence and other behavioral problems as well. One difficulty with CNS research, however, is that it relies heavily on samples of incarcerated offenders, who are not necessarily representative of all offenders.

**Autonomic nervous system disorders**

The autonomic nervous system (ANS) mediates physiological activity associated with emotions. ANS activity is often measured through galvanic skin conductance. Studies of serious criminal offenders, including violent offenders, typically show them as lacking in feelings of guilt or remorse. Furthermore, skin conductance studies with samples of these offenders show fairly consistently that they have low galvanic skin conductance indicative of weak ANS activity. But the precise relationship between ANS disorders and criminal behavior is still unclear; in other words, researchers are uncertain how weak ANS activity may contribute to criminal behavior. Some hypothesize that individuals with a weak ANS do not experience normal feelings of fear and, therefore, are more likely to engage in the risky behaviors that include law violation. Others hypothesize that these individuals seek out high-risk situations in order to get more ANS stimulation.

**Brain damage, brain abnormalities, and neurotransmitters**

The development of new technology, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), positron emission tomography (PET), and single photon emission tomography has allowed scientists to study brain structure and functioning in real time and greater detail than ever before. This research has generated hypotheses about the relationship of brain damage and dysfunction to criminal behavior. For example, the area of the brain known as the prefrontal cortex is considered the brain’s ‘supervisory management system’, regulating impulsivity, guilt, moral reasoning, and empathy. Studies have shown that individuals with damage or impairment to this part of the brain tend to be more impulsive, feel less guilt, and to be less empathic in their responses to others. This does not mean that they will necessarily become criminals, but rather that they may be at greater risk of committing a crime.

Also implicated in criminal behavior is the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. In a stressful or threatening situation, the hypothalamus, located at the base of the brain, secretes a substance that stimulates the pituitary gland to release a hormone that, in turn, triggers the adrenal glands to release the stress hormone cortisol as well epinephrine, both of which prepare the body and the brain for fighting or fleeing. A malfunctioning or impaired HPA has been associated with a variety of psychological and behavioral problems, including impulsive aggression, depression, and cognitive problems that have also been linked to criminal offending.

Similarly, neurotransmitters - that is, chemical compounds found between nerve cells that send signals from one brain cell (or neuron) to another - have also been studied in terms of their potential relationship to criminal offending because they are known to affect mood, emotion, learning, memory, and behavior. The body produces many different neurotransmitters, but three in particular - serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine - have a hypothesized relationship to criminal behavior because they are thought to be regulators of aggression, impulsivity, risk-taking, irritability, and excitability. Studies of various types of offenders, including impulsive arsonists and habitually violent offenders, indicate that they tend to produce low levels of these neurotransmitters, leading researchers to theorize that the impulsive and compulsive behaviors of these individuals are a means to stimulate the brain to produce more of the deficient chemicals. Still, research with human subjects is sparse and considerably more is needed to tease out the effects of these and other neurotransmitters, as well as the role of brain functioning, on specific human behaviors.

**Biological/Physiological Factors**

**Hormones**

As noted previously, aggression has been associated with the secretion of the hormone, testosterone, also known as the male sex hormone. Studies of samples of incarcerated violent offenders show them to have higher testosterone levels than nonviolent offenders and/or nonoffenders, although in most cases testosterone levels were still within the normal range. Attempts to treat violent offenders with drugs that lower testosterone have had mixed results; the drugs appear to be successful in inhibiting violent sexual offending but not in inhibiting nonsexual violent offending. Moreover, research indicates that testosterone levels change in response to environmental stimuli and may actually be elevated by aggression.

In women, fluctuations in the female sex hormones, estrogen and progesterone, have been associated with violent behavior. Particularly severe cases of the conditions known as premenstrual syndrome and postpartum depression syndrome, both of which are thought to be caused by hormonal fluctuations, have been found by some researchers to prompt violent outbursts in women. Both syndromes have been considered mitigating factors in trials of women charged with violent crimes. However, like testosterone, the precise ways in which hormonal fluctuations in women contribute to violent behavior is as yet unclear and, with respect to premenstrual syndrome in particular, studies purporting to measure personality and behavioral changes associated with the menstrual cycle have produced methodologically flawed and inconsistent findings.

**Diet**

The production and efficient use of neurotransmitters by the body is largely dependent on diet. Serotonin, for example, is
produced from tryptophan, an amino acid found in high protein foods. Consequently, some theorists suggest that various behavior problems, including some violent crimes, may be caused by low serotonin production that can be corrected with a high-protein diet.

Another hypothesized relationship between diet and criminal behavior focuses on refined carbohydrates, dominant in sweets and most ‘junk’ foods, such as cake, candy, and soft drinks. The ingestion of large quantities of refined carbohydrates causes an excessive level of glucose to enter the bloodstream, triggering a rapid release of insulin which, in turn, causes a sharp drop in blood sugar. When blood sugar falls to subnormal levels, the brain begins releasing hormones, including adrenalin, increases in which are associated with irritability, anxiety, and destructive outbursts. While provocative, however, scientific research has not demonstrated a clear relationship between blood sugar levels and crime.

Other suggested ways that diet may affect criminality have to do with food allergies or sensitivities, toxicity of specific minerals in food, reactions to dyes and food additives, and vitamin deficiencies. However, the research testing these relationships has been extensively criticized for methodological problems, such as the use of very small, nonrandom samples, and the findings from the research have been inconsistent and sometimes contradictory.

Psychological/Psychiatric Theories of Crime

Explanations of criminal behavior as a product of mental illness or abnormality can be found in the writings of the ancient Greeks and continue to be popular today. Rather than searching for the causes of crime in physical abnormalities, these theories see crime as a product of a mental or emotional deficiency or disorder.

Personality Disorders

Personality may be defined as the set of behavioral and emotional characteristics that describe an individual and that individual’s reactions to various situations or events. One well-known theory that postulates a relationship between personality disorder and crime is psychoanalytic theory. In addition, many researchers have attempted to identify personality differences between offenders and nonoffenders.

Psychoanalytic theory

Originating in the work of Austrian physician, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), psychoanalytic theory sees criminal behavior as typically caused by a malfunctioning superego or ego.

The superego may be described as one’s conscience. It is the internalization of society's values and norms transmitted through the process of socialization. The superego produces feelings of guilt when a norm is violated. Criminal behavior, therefore, may be symptomatic of an underdeveloped superego. That is, offenders are individuals who, because of parental neglect, did not adequately internalize society's values and norms. However, criminal behavior may also be symptomatic of an overdeveloped superego that produces constant and intense feelings of guilt. An individual with an overdeveloped superego engages in crime because of his/her intense need to be punished to allay the guilt. Consequently, this type of offender usually (and unconsciously) leaves a trail of clues that ensure apprehension.

The ego is the part of the personality that tries to strike a balance between the superego and another element of the personality, the id, which is composed of powerful, unconscious drives and instincts. Either excessively strict or overly indulgent parents may inhibit the maturation of the ego, making it unable to regulate id impulses, with crime as a potential consequence. The ego also uses various defense mechanisms in regulating the id. Psychoanalytic theory postulates that sometimes criminal behavior is a defense mechanism against very threatening id impulses that produce extreme anxiety. For example, the defense mechanism known as displacement may take the form of criminal behavior. In displacement, the anxiety produced by a particular impulse is neutralized when a substitute target or act replaces an especially threatening target or act (e.g., a man rapes and murders a woman who rejected his sexual advances to unconsciously punish his seductive, but rejecting mother).

It is left to the psychoanalyst to determine which personality disorder is responsible for producing criminal behavior in a specific individual, and herein lies the chief weakness of psychoanalytic theory; its validity is empirically unverifiable. We must rely on the psychoanalyst's interpretations of an offender's words, recollections, and behavior - a highly subjective process at best and one fraught with disagreements among psychoanalysts.

Personality traits of offenders versus nonoffenders

Numerous attempts have been made to identify particular personality traits that distinguish criminals from noncriminals. Usually this is done by administering one of various personality inventories, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the California Psychological Inventory (CPI). These inventories are composed of scales designed to identify clusters of specific personality traits, such as social introversion, self-control, and dominance. In the vast majority of recent studies assessing the personalities of criminals and noncriminals, strong differences emerged.

In studies using the MMPI, for example, criminals differ from noncriminals in that they tend to have deficient attachment to
others and to social norms, exhibit more bizarre thinking and are more alienated, and engage in more unproductive hyperactivity. However, MMPI scales have been criticized for their low reliability across samples. In studies using the 18 scales that make up the CPI, only three distinguish criminals and noncriminals: the former tend to score lower than the latter on the socialization, responsibility, and self-control scales. But the CPI, too, has been criticized, primarily because the items that make up the individual scales are redundant and interdependent.

Additional research has shown criminals to be more impulsive than noncriminals and less able to delay gratification. It has also been argued that criminals are more extroverted than noncriminals. Other studies, however, fail to support these observations, showing no differences in ability to delay gratification and greater introversion on the part of criminals.

Mental Illness

There is a widespread belief that individuals with diagnosable mental illnesses (e.g., psychopathy, schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder) are at high risk of committing crimes, especially violent offenses, and that their dangerousness stems from the fact that their behavior is unpredictable and their selection of victims often random. Research only partially supports this belief. Most people who exhibit symptoms of mental illness are not more likely to be involved in serious offending, but there are serious mental illnesses associated with criminal behavior.

One psychiatric diagnosis frequently applied to violent offenders, especially if their crimes were bizarre or heinous, is psychopathy. Psychopaths may give the impression of mental health, but they are selfish, callous, irresponsible, impulsive, emotionally cold and detached, and incapable of feeling guilt or remorse. Nevertheless, while criminality may accompany psychopathy, one does not necessarily follow from the other; most offenders are not psychopathic.

Schizophrenia, considered to be one of the most debilitating mental illnesses, is a form of psychosis. There are several types of schizophrenia, but in general, schizophrenics are unfocused, withdrawn, and apathetic. However, schizophrenics typically suffer hallucinations and delusions, which, some believe, may lead them to commit crimes. Schizophrenics have been convicted of a range of crimes, from minor to serious, but very few are ever arrested for committing violent offenses.

Multiple personality disorder (which is frequently confused with schizophrenia) is a very rare mental illness. The mind of a person with multiple personality disorder fractures into a number of different selves, each of which may be a different age and some even the opposite sex. Some of those with multiple personality disorder have committed serious violent offenses, but the rarity of the condition means that it can explain only a tiny fraction of all crime, including violent crime.

Sociological Theories of Crime

There are numerous sociological theories of criminal behavior, but every one identifies the causes of crime as factors external to individual offenders, and it is this focus that distinguishes sociological theories from biological/physiological and psychological/psychiatric theories. Among the major sociological theories of criminal behavior are: strain theory, subcultural theories, differential association theory, control theory, labeling theory, conflict or structural theories, and feminist theories.

Strain Theory

One of the best-known strain theorists is Robert Merton, who began with the observation that every society has a set of culturally defined goals that embody what the members of the society value and strive to achieve. At the same time, every society has a social structure composed of institutions that provide the means for achieving these goals. Under ideal conditions, these two societal elements are integrated; everyone knows and accepts the goals and also has available the means to achieve them. This does not mean that everyone will be successful in achieving the goals, but rather that the competition is fair and satisfying. But, Merton observed, in most contemporary societies these two elements are not well-integrated. In the United States, for example, where the most important goal is material success, the institutionalized means to achieve this success are not equally available to all. Members of some groups, in fact, find their access to the institutionalized means systematically blocked because of their race/ethnicity or social class.

Merton called the imbalance between a society's goals and the institutionalized means to achieve them anomie, a condition that produces strain in those who experience it. Those who experience anomie develop various coping mechanisms or adaptations to neutralize the strain. The most common adaptation is simply conformity. Conformists accept the goals and try to achieve them through legitimate means, no matter how difficult that may be. Ritualism is another adaptation that involves accepting the institutionalized means to achieve society's goals, but ritualists scale down the goals, satisfying themselves with very modest achievements. Other adaptations, however, are associated with criminal behavior. Innovation involves accepting societal goals, but upon finding institutionalized means blocked, innovators use illegitimate means to achieve the goals. Retreatism, a less common adaptation, is utilized by those who have accepted both the goals and the means to achieve them but, frustrated by their failure to succeed, simply drop out of the game. And a fifth adaptation, rebellion, involves a rejection of both the goals and the means, but an effort to replace them with different goals and means.

Merton's strain theory is considered one of the most influential sociological theories of criminal behavior, although it is not without critics. Some question whether conformity is actually the most common adaptation to anomie, since self-report studies
indicate that very few people - even those who are financially successful and so should experience minimal strain - are total conformists. Other critics question the notion of a single, uniform set of societal goals, arguing that most societies today are culturally diverse.

Several contemporary theorists have revised strain theory in light of these criticisms. Robert Agnew, for example, has developed general strain theory, which expands on Merton's theory by adding two additional types of strain. Besides strain induced by the blocked ability to achieve a desired goal, there is also strain caused by the removal or loss of something an individual values (e.g., an object, person, or privilege) and strain caused by being exposed to adversity or unpleasant situations (e.g., being abused, harassed, or bullied). In all three of these conditions, crime may be an adaptive response. Typically, the greater the strain and individual experiences, the greater the likelihood he or she will engage in criminal behavior in response. However, other factors may mitigate this adaptation; for instance, strong social support from loved ones or friends may prevent a strained individual from turning to crime, while having friends who engage in crime themselves may encourage the strained individual to behave similarly.

Subcultural Theories

A subculture is a group within the dominant culture of a society that shares some aspects of the dominant culture, but also develops unique cultural traits of its own. Subcultural theorists maintain that groups who have difficulty achieving success within the dominant culture develop independent value structures that reflect their everyday experiences and provide them with better opportunities to succeed. Three Subcultural theories that have enjoyed considerable popularity are Cohen's theory of status frustration, Miller's theory of the lower-class subculture, and Cloward and Ohlin's differential opportunity theory.

Cohen's theory of status frustration

Sociologist Albert Cohen developed a theory to explain the criminal behavior of male street gangs in poor and working-class neighborhoods. According to Cohen, the dominant culture of US and similar Western societies is middle class and consists of such values as delayed gratification, self-control, academic and occupational success, and good manners. Middle-class parents socialize their children to accept these values, but because lower-class parents are more relaxed in their socialization practices, their children do not develop as much self-restraint and, therefore, have difficulty succeeding in school. Their families' limited financial resources further contribute to a sense of failure. In short, they experience status frustration, and to cope they form gangs that develop their own values against which they can be judged successful by their peers. The central values of the delinquent gang subculture that Cohen identified included nonutilitarianism (crimes are committed not as a means to an end, but for the intrinsic satisfaction derived from criminal behavior); maliciousness (the purpose of much gang activity is to create problems for people, to make them unhappy or uncomfortable); negativism (the goal of gang members is not just to develop values that are different from the dominant culture but that are the opposite of the dominant culture); short-run hedonism (immediate gratification); and group autonomy (defying authority and resisting attempts by others to control their behavior).

Miller's theory of the lower-class subculture

Walter B Miller also studied male street gangs, but unlike Cohen, Miller argued that it is not just lower-class boys who develop distinct values, but all members of the lower class. According to Miller, there are six core values or, as he called them, focal concerns that comprise the lower-class subculture: trouble (getting into and staying out of trouble are preoccupations of lower-class people); toughness (physical prowess and bravery in the face of physical threat); smartness (the ability to avoid being duped, outwitted, or conned as well as the ability to dupe, outwit, or con others); excitement (the search for thrills and risktaking); fate (the idea that one's life is controlled by 'luck', or forces beyond one's control); and autonomy (resistance to others' attempts to control one's life).

Cloward and Ohlin's differential opportunity theory

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin agreed with Merton that while US culture values material success, the legitimate means to achieve success are not equally available to everyone. They also agreed that those deprived of legitimate opportunities, especially the poor, may use illegitimate means to achieve success. But they observed that even among those for whom legitimate opportunities are blocked, most do not commit crimes, and they sought to explain this. Their theory posited that it is not enough to simply be motivated to commit a crime, one must also know how to commit particular types of crimes, and have the chance to commit the crime. In other words, not everyone who finds legitimate opportunities to success blocked has access to illegitimate opportunities. Moreover, Cloward and Ohlin argued that different social environments encourage the emergence of different subcultures. In unstable neighborhoods, with rapidly changing populations, a conflict subculture is likely to develop as men and boys use violence to build a reputation and claim 'turf. In more stable neighborhoods, where people know one another and role models are plentiful, a criminal subculture may develop because young men can rely on the contacts and experience of older men to teach them criminal techniques.

Cloward and Ohlin's theory, as well as the other subcultural theories, were developed during the 1950s and early 1960s to explain a specific type of crime - street crime, especially by youth gangs - which official statistics showed was predominant in poor and working-class communities with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities. However, subcultural theories have been criticized for portraying crime as a problem only of these groups, while overlooking crimes committed by wealthy, powerful
members of society. Critics argue that criminal subcultures exist among all social groups, although the types of crime in which they engage reflect their life circumstances and available opportunities. The wealthy may not engage in street crime, but they may engage in white-collar crimes including tax evasion, insider stock trading, false advertising, and price fixing.

**Differential Association Theory**

One theory that can account for crime among all social groups was developed in the 1940s by sociologist Edwin H Sutherland. Sutherland’s theory, differential association theory, maintains that criminal behavior is learned, and it is learned the same way any other behavior is learned: through interpersonal communication and social interaction in small, intimate groups. What is learned through this socialization process is not only the techniques for committing specific types of crimes, but also the attitudes and motivations that justify and encourage criminal offending. However, simple exposure to criminal techniques, attitudes, and motives is not enough to cause an individual to commit crime. Rather, crime results when an individual receives an excess of situational definitions favorable to law violation over definitions unfavorable to law violation. The process of social interaction by which these definitions are acquired Sutherland called ‘differential association’.

The term ‘differential association’ underlines Sutherland’s point that individuals receive both kinds of definitions, but not all interactions through which the definitions are received are equal; some carry greater weight and, therefore, have more influence on a person. According to Sutherland, associations vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. Associations that occur often (frequency) and are long-lasting (duration) have a greater impact than those that are infrequent and brief. Associations that occur early in a person’s life have a greater impact than those that occur later in life (priority), and associations with people one respects or admires have a greater impact than those with people for whom one has little regard (intensity).

Differential association theory is generally considered one of the most influential theories of criminal behavior of the twentieth century. It accounts for various types of criminal activity by members of various social groups, even those who are financially successful. However, critics of differential association theory argue that it is essentially untestable, since there is no way to validly measure associations, much less determine frequency, duration, priority, and intensity, while controlling for other intervening variables. Nevertheless, the idea that criminal behavior is learned in much the same way other behavior is learned remains a central principle of sociological theories of crime, and many contemporary theorists have revised and expanded Sutherland’s original theory. Ronald Akers, for example, has developed social learning theory, in which he elaborates how people learn to be criminals. He identifies different types of definitions, such as those that justify or excuse crime, in addition to those favorable or unfavorable to crime. He also maintains that individuals learn to be criminal not only by learning these definitions, but also by imitating others’behavior and by receiving positive reinforcements rather than punishments when they offend. The more ‘rewards’or positive reinforcements an individual receives from engaging in crime, the more likely he or she will persist in offending.

**Control Theory**

In 1969, criminologist Travis Hirschi developed control theory. Hirschi began with the assumption that everybody is equally motivated to commit crimes because fulfilling one’s desires usually can be done most effectively, efficiently, and pleasurably in ways that are disapproved of or prohibited. Given this, Hirschi asks, why would anyone be law-abiding? His answer is that people’s social ties or bonds to conventional institutions, such as family, school, or employer inhibit them from acting on criminal motivations, even if they have the opportunity to do so.

Central to control theory, then, is the notion of the social bond, which has four interrelated elements: attachment (sensitivity to others’feelings, so that one avoids crime so as not to hurt or offend those one is emotionally attached to); commitment (the more people have invested in terms of time, money, energy, and emotions in pursuing a specific activity, such as getting an education or building a career, the more they have to lose by committing a crime); involvement (people who are active in conventional pursuits, such as studying, working, or playing a sport, do not have time to commit crimes); and belief (the extent to which a person believes that a rule should be obeyed).

Control theory has common-sense appeal and also receives empirical support from some studies of juvenile delinquency. But other studies indicate that the relationship between the social bond and criminal behavior may be the opposite of that postulated by Hirschi: it is criminal behavior that affects the social bond rather than vice versa. So, for example, rather than attachment to school inhibiting criminality, criminality weakens attachment to school. Similarly, attachment to friends, especially if they engage in criminal behavior, may promote rather than inhibit criminality. Other contemporary theorists, such as John Hagan and Charles Tittle, have reconceptualized the notions of ‘control’ and the ‘social bond’ to better account for their multidimensional nature and how they may inhibit criminality in some circumstances, but promote it in others.

**Rational Choice Theory**

Rational choice theory takes as its starting point the principle that humans are rational beings who exercise free will in deciding on a course of action. It is based on the classic notion that people will try to achieve the greatest benefits for themselves at the least cost. For the rational choice theorist, even crimes that at first glance appear purely impulsive or pathological are influenced by rational elements, such as the limits of time and personal abilities or skills as well as the availability of relevant information and victims. Each offender has specific individual needs and skills which intersect with situational factors to affect the decision
to commit a crime. To prevent crime, then, societies must make the costs outweigh the benefits; that is, the punishment for the crime must be severe enough to deter the potential criminal (an idea known as the deterrence principle).

Rational choice theory has enjoyed considerable popularity, especially among those who believe that the criminal justice system is too lenient with offenders. Critics, however, maintain that rational choice theorists overestimate the extent to which offenders calculate the relative costs and benefits of committing a particular crime. Moreover, critics point out that while committing a crime may be a rational decision under certain circumstances, it does not necessarily follow that severe punishment will deter such criminality. If, for example, an unemployed person decides that it makes more sense to sell drugs than work full-time at a fast-food restaurant for the minimum wage, then the solution is not to impose severe punishment for drug selling, but rather to increase employment opportunities with wages that raise workers above the poverty line. Indeed, most research on the deterrence principle indicates that the decision to commit a crime is not significantly affected by the perceived severity of punishment by the legal system, but rather by peer and parental sanctions.

**Routine Activities Theory**

Another theory that incorporates the principle that the commission of a crime is a rational choice is routine activities theory, originally formulated by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson in 1979. Routine activities theory postulates that crime is the product of a convergence of three types of variables: motivated offenders, suitable targets (i.e., potential crime victims), and capable guardians (i.e., individuals, including the police, witnesses, and even potential crime victims, who can act to prevent or foil a crime against person or property). In short, the risk of crime increases when you have in the same place at the same time a person or persons motivated to commit a crime along with a person or persons who are viable targets, but an absence of ‘guardians’. Cohen and Felson maintain that since World War II, people’s routine activities (i.e., their daily work, school, or leisure activities) have increasingly taken them away from home and into the public sphere, thus increasing their chances of victimization.

Routine activities theory focuses primarily on victims rather than offenders, assuming simply that motivated offenders always exist. While such an assumption is likely true, it is nonetheless important to understand criminal motivation in order to explain criminal behavior. Routine activities theory also implies that the more a person stays at home, the lower that person's chances of becoming a crime victim. While this assumption has some commonsense appeal, it may be true only for males. Females are more likely to be victimized by people they know in their own homes than by strangers in public places.

**Labeling Theory**

Labeling theory, also called social reaction theory, was developed to explain behavior considered deviant, which, of course, includes criminal behavior. Labeling theory represented a bold new approach to explaining crime, and it is not surprising that it gained a following during the 1960s and 1970s, when questioning authority and the status quo was commonplace. Labeling theorists focus on how certain behaviors come to be defined as criminal and on the consequences of these definitions for people found to be engaged in such activities.

Whereas most theories hold an absolutist view of crime, defining it as behavior that violates the law, labeling theorists emphasize the relativity of crime and deviance. As Howard Becker, a prominent labeling theorist, pointed out, no act is inherently criminal; it becomes criminal only when defined as such by observers. Whether or not a behavior gets defined as criminal depends on several factors, including the situational and historical contexts in which the behavior occurs, the characteristics of the individual engaged in the behavior, and the characteristics of the definers. In particular, labeling theorists point out that members of some groups - those who are socially and economically powerful - have an advantage in the labeling process. They are more likely to escape being defined or labeled as criminals, and are better able to attach that label to others.

But labeling theorists are especially interested in the consequences of the labeling process. They maintain that being labeled criminal, especially if the labeling is formal, public, and official (e.g., a trial), produces a fundamental change in the labeled individual's identity. Edwin Lemert, another important labeling theorist, argued that labeling closes off legitimate opportunities and associations with noncriminals, and also destroys an individual's public image and character, thereby forcing him or her to embark on a criminal career. In other words, social reaction actually produces more crime.

Despite its popularity, empirical tests of labeling theory have failed to demonstrate that being labeled necessarily leads to a negative self-image. In some cases, in fact, the deviant or criminal label is valued, even sought after. Moreover, such labels are not indelible, and those labeled often join together to successfully reject the criminal or deviant label.

**Conflict, Structural, and Critical Theories**

Conflict or structural theorists, like labeling theorists, maintain that crime is relative. Nothing is inherently criminal; rather, it is criminal because it is defined criminal by some members of the society. However, conflict theorists, who have their theoretical roots in Marxist sociology, extend this position by focusing on how particular structural conditions generate crime. An underlying assumption of conflict theory is that an individual's position in the social hierarchy affects his/her life chances and opportunities. Thus, conflict theorists observe that crime occurs among all social groups, but its visibility and the forms it takes vary from group to group. For example, while the poor may steal by muggings and break-ins, the rich may steal by price-fixing and insider stock trades. But while the type of crime reflects the opportunities and life chances of members of these groups, the crimes committed
by the poor are more visible and receive greater attention than the crimes committed by the rich. Conflict theorists, such as Richard Quinney and William Chambliss, maintain, therefore, that crime is not only relative, it is a product of the inequalities inherent in a particular society.

Conflict theorists have devoted much of their research to the study of crime in capitalist societies, which is the primary source of criticism of this perspective. Critics maintain that conflict theorists largely overlook crime in socialist and other noncapitalist societies. In addition, critics argue that although conflict theory does a good job of explaining economic or property crimes, it is less successful in explaining violent crime. One surprising source of criticism of this perspective has come from some conflict theorists themselves who have argued that conflict theory has been too “idealist” by portraying much crime as a rebellion against capitalism, as an effort to redistribute private property, or as a survival response to poverty. Identifying as “left realists,” these critical theorists, such as Jock Young, point out that most criminals, while poor, commit crimes to get “luxuries” not necessities, and typically victimize other poor people. Left realists emphasize the negative impact of crime on poor people and their communities and advocate for economic development in disadvantaged neighborhoods as well as community-based crime prevention strategies instead of more police surveillance and prisons to reduce criminal offending.

Feminist Theory

There are several feminist theories of criminal behavior, but they share a number of ideas in common. First, feminist theories begin with the observation that women have been largely overlooked by theorists attempting to explain criminal behavior and have been excluded from many studies of crime. By excluding women, traditional theories have failed to consider how criminal behavior is gendered. Gender, for example, influences criminal opportunities as well as social reactions to criminal behavior. Thus, feminist theorists argue that an understanding of criminal behavior must place it squarely in the context of the gender stratification that characterizes a society.

However, feminist theorists recognize that gender stratification intersects with other forms of inequality - social class inequality, racism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism - to produce qualitatively different life experiences and opportunities for various groups of women and men. Consequently, feminist theorists maintain that understanding criminal behavior requires researchers to examine the simultaneous effects of these multiple and intersecting oppressions. Moreover, feminist theorists recognize that gender, as well as other social locating factors, is not static; men and women ‘do’ gender in various situations, making choices - albeit choices constrained by structural conditions and normative expectations - of how they will establish and express their masculinity and femininity. Thus, gender changes over time and from situation to situation. Drawing on this principle, some feminist theorists argue that crime is a way to accomplish gender in certain contexts. For example, as feminist criminologist Jody Miller points out, violent crime may be a way for young, urban, poor, and working-class males to construct or defend a particular type of masculinity.

Feminist theorists also study the different pathways that lead men and women to crime. For instance, feminist theorists such as Meda Chesney-Lind have identified a strong connection between females'violent victimization, especially during childhood, and their subsequent involvement in various forms of criminal behavior. This relationship has not been found to be as strong for men.

Feminist theories of criminal behavior are relatively new, but within the short span of just 30 years, research on the gendered nature of crime and criminal-processing has mushroomed. Feminist social scientists will likely have a significant impact on theorizing criminal behavior in the twenty-first century.

See also: Aggression, Psychology of; Criminology, Overview; Gangs; Punishment of Criminals

Further Reading

- An empirical test of general strain theory
  . Criminology 30, 475-499.

Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activities approach

Lower class culture as a generating milieu of gang delinquency


Relevant Websites


CLAIRE M RENZETTI
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