

SUBCULTURAL THEORIES OF DELINQUENCY AND CRIME

Lecturer Adriana Iuliana STANCU, PhD.
Faculty of Judicial, Social and Political Sciences,
“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati, Romania
adriana.tudorache@ugal.ro

Abstract

Strain theorists explain criminal behaviour as a result of the frustrations suffered by lower-class individuals deprived of legitimate means to reach their goals. Cultural deviance theorists assume that individuals become criminal by learning the criminal values of the groups to which they belong. In conforming to their own group standards, these people break the laws of the dominant culture. These two perspectives are the foundation for subcultural theory, which emerged in the mid-1950s and held criminologists attention for over a decade.

A subculture is a subdivision within the dominant culture that has its own norms, beliefs, and values. Subcultures typically emerge when people in similar circumstances find themselves isolated from the mainstream and band together for mutual support. Subcultures may form among members of racial and ethnic minorities, among prisoners, among occupational groups, among ghetto dwellers. Subcultures exist within a larger society, not apart from it. They therefore share some of its values. Nevertheless, the lifestyles of their members are significantly different from those of individuals in the dominant culture.

Keywords: *subcultural, delinquency, criminal, behaviour.*

Subcultural theories of delinquency and crime

Subcultural theories in criminology have been developed to account for delinquency among lower-class males, especially for one of its most important expressions - the teenage gang. According to subcultural theorists, delinquent subcultures, like all subcultures, emerge in response to special problems that members of the dominant culture do not face. Theories developed by Albert Cohen and by Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin are extensions of the strain, social disorganization, and differential association theories. They explain why delinquent subcultures emerge in the first place (strain), why they take a particular form (social disorganization), and how they are passed on from one generation to the next (differential association). [1]

The explanations of delinquency developed by Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti and by Walter Miller are somewhat different from those mentioned above. These

theorists do not suggest that delinquency begins with failure to reach middle-class goals. Their explanations are rooted in culture conflict theory. The subculture of violence thesis argues that the value systems of some subcultures demand the use of violence in certain social situations. This norm, which affects daily behaviour, conflicts with conventional middle-class norms. Along the same lines, Miller suggests that the characteristics of lower-class delinquency reflect the value system of the lower-class culture and that the lower-class values and norms conflict with those of the dominant culture. [2]

Although Millei contends that the lower-class culture as a whole - not a subculture within it - is responsible for criminal behaviour in urban slums, his theory is appropriate to our discussion because it demonstrates how the needs of young urban males are met by membership in a street gang. Miller's street gangs, like those of Cohen and of Cloward and Ohlin, condone violent criminal activity as one of the few means of attaining status in a slum. [3]

The middle-class measuring rod

Albert Cohen was a student of Robert Merton and of Edwin Sutherland, both of whom had made convincing arguments about the causes of delinquency. Sutherland persuaded Cohen that differential association and the cultural transmission of criminal norms led to criminal behaviour. From Merton he learned about structurally induced strain. Cohen combined and expanded these perspectives to explain how the delinquent subculture arises, where it is found within the social structure, and why it has the particular characteristics that it does. [4]

According to Cohen, delinquent subcultures emerge in the slum areas of larger American cities. They are rooted in class differentials in parental aspirations, child-rearing practices, and classroom standards. The relative position of a youngster's family in the social structure determines the problems the child will have to face throughout life.

Lower-class families who have never known a middle-class lifestyle, for example, cannot socialize their children in a way that prepares them to enter the middle class. The children grow up with poor communication skills, lack of commitment to education, and an inability to delay gratification. Schools present a particular problem. There, lower-class children are evaluated by middle-class teachers on the basis of a middleclass measuring

rod. The measures are based on such middle-class values as self-reliance, good manners, respect for property, and long-range planning. By such measures, lower-class children fall far short of the standards they must meet if they are to compete successfully with middleclass children. Cohen argues that they experience status frustration and strain, to which they respond by adopting one of three roles: corner boy, college boy, or delinquent boy.

Corner boy, college boy, delinquent boy

Corner boys try to make the best of a bad situation. The corner boy hangs out in the neighbourhood with his peer group, spending the day in some group activity such as gambling or athletic competition. He receives support from his peers and is very loyal to them. Most lower-class boys become corner boys. Eventually they get menial jobs and live a conventional lifestyle.

There are very few *college boys*. These boys continually strive to live up to middle-class standards, but their chances for success are limited because of academic and social handicaps.

Delinquent boys band together to form a subculture in which they can define status in ways that to them seem attainable. Cohen claims that even though these lower-class youths set up their own norms, they have internalized the norms of the dominant class and they feel anxious when they go against these norms. To deal with this conflict, they resort to reaction formation, a mechanism that relieves anxiety through the process of rejecting with abnormal intensity what one wants but cannot obtain. These boys turn the middle-class norms upside down, thereby making conduct right in their subculture precisely because it is wrong by the norms of the larger culture.

Consequently, their delinquent acts serve no useful purpose. They do not steal things to eat them, wear them, or sell them. In fact, they often discard or destroy what they have stolen. They appear to delight in the discomfort of others and in breaking taboos. Their acts are directed against people and property at random, unlike the goal-oriented activities of many adult criminal groups. The subculture is typically characterized by short-run hedonism, pure pleasure-seeking, with no planning or deliberation about what to do, where, or when. The delinquents hang out on the street corner until someone

gets an idea; then they act impulsively, without considering the consequences. The group's autonomy is all- important. Its members are loyal to each other and resist any attempts on the part of family, school, or community to restrain their behaviour.

Tests of Cohen's theory

Criminological researchers generally agree that Cohen's theory is responsible for major advances in research on delinquency. [5] Among them are researchers who have found a relationship between delinquency and social status in our society. Much evidence also supports Cohen's assumption that lower-class children perform more poorly in school than middle-class children. [6] Teachers often expect them to perform less ably than their middle-class students, and this expectation is one of the components of poor performance.

Researchers have demonstrated that poor performance in school is related to delinquency. When Travis Hirschi studied more than 4000 California schoolchildren, he found that youths who were academically incompetent and performed poorly in school came to dislike school. Disliking it, they rejected its authority; rejecting its authority, they committed delinquent acts. [7] Delbert Elliott and Harwin Voss also investigated the relationship between school and delinquency. They analysed annual school performance and delinquency records of 2000 students in California from ninth grade to 1 year after the expected graduation date. Their findings indicated that those who dropped out of school had higher rates of delinquency than those who graduated. They also found that academic achievement and alienation from school were closely related to dropping out of school. [8]

From analysis of the dropout-delinquency relationship among over 5000 persons nationwide, G. Roger Jarjoura concluded that while dropouts were more likely to engage in delinquent acts than graduates, the reason was not always simply the fact that they had dropped out. Dropping out because of a dislike for school, poor grades, or financial reasons was related to future involvement in delinquency; dropping out because of problems at home was not. Dropping out for personal reasons such as marriage or pregnancy was significantly related to subsequent violent offending. [9] All these findings support Cohen's theory. Other findings, however, do not.

In a study of 12,524 students in Davidson County, Tennessee, Albert Reiss and Albert Rhodes found only a slight relationship between delinquency and status deprivation. [10] This conclusion was supported by the research of Marvin Krohn and his associates. [11] Furthermore, several criminologists have challenged Cohen's claim that delinquent behaviour is purposeless. They contend that much delinquent behaviour is serious and calculated, and often engaged in for profit. [12] John Kitsuse and David Dietrick have also questioned the consistency of the theory: Cohen argues that the behaviour of delinquent boys is a deliberate response to middle-class opinion, yet he also argues that the boys do not care about the opinions of middle-class people. [13]

Evaluation of Cohen's theory

Researchers have praised and criticized Cohen's work. Cohen's theory answers a number of questions left unresolved by the strain and cultural deviance theories. It explains the origin of delinquent behaviour and why some youths raised in the same neighbourhoods and attending the same schools do not become involved in delinquent subcultures. His concepts of status deprivation and the middle-class measuring rod have been useful to researchers. Yet his theory does not explain why most delinquents eventually become law-abiding even though their position in the class structure remains relatively fixed. Some criminologists also question whether youths are driven by some serious motivating force or whether they are simply out on the streets looking for fun. [14] Moreover, if delinquent subcultures result from the practice of measuring lower-class boys by a middle-class measuring rod, how do we account for the growing number of middleclass gangs?

Other questions concern the difficulty of trying to test the concepts of reaction formation, internalization of middle-class values, and status deprivation, among others. To answer some of his critics, Cohen, with his colleague James Short, expanded the idea of delinquent subcultures to include not only lower-class delinquent behaviour but also such variants as middle-class delinquent subcultures and female delinquents. [15] Cohen took Merton's strain theory a step further by elaborating on the development of delinquent behaviour. He described how strain actually creates frustration and status deprivation, which in turn foster the development of an alternative set of values that give lower-class

boys a chance to achieve recognition. Since the mid-1950s Cohen's theory has stimulated not only research but the formulation of new theories.

Delinquency and opportunity

Like Cohen's theory, the theory of differential opportunity developed by Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin combines strain, differential association, and social disorganization concepts. [16] Both theories begin with the assumption that conventional means to conventional success are not equally distributed among the socioeconomic classes, that lack of means causes frustration for lower-class youths, and that criminal behaviour is learned and culturally transmitted. Both theories also agree that the common solution to shared problems leads to the formation of delinquent subcultures. They disagree, however, on the content of these subcultures. As we have noted, norms in Cohen's delinquent subcultures are right precisely because they are wrong in the dominant culture. Delinquent acts are negative and nonutilitarian. Cloward and Ohlin disagree; they suggest that lower-class delinquents remain goal-oriented. The kind of delinquent behaviour they engage in depends on the illegitimate opportunities available to them.

According to Cloward and Ohlin's differential opportunity theory, delinquent subcultures flourish in lower-class areas and take the particular forms they do because opportunities for illegitimate success are no more equitably distributed than those for conventional success. Just as means – opportunities - are unequally distributed in the conventional world, opportunities to reach one's goals are unequally distributed in the criminal world. A person cannot simply decide to join a theft-oriented gang or, for that matter, a violence-oriented one. Cloward and Ohlin maintain that the types of subcultures and of the juvenile gangs that flourish within them depend on the types of neighbourhoods in which they develop.

In areas where conventional and illegitimate values and behaviour are integrated by a close connection of illegitimate and legitimate businesses, *criminal gangs* emerge. Older criminals serve as role models. They teach youngsters whom to exploit, the necessary criminal skills, the importance of loyal relationships with criminal associates, and how to make the right connections with shady lawyers, bail bondsmen, crooked

politicians, and corrupt police officers. Adolescent members of criminal gangs, like adult criminals in the neighbourhood, are involved in extortion, fraud, theft, and other activities that yield illegal income.

This type of neighbourhood was described by one of its members in a classic work published in 1930:

Stealing in the neighbourhood was a common practice among the children and approved by the parents. Whenever the boys got together, they talked about robbing and made more plans for stealing. I hardly knew any boys who did not go robbing. The little fellows went in for petty stealing, breaking into freight cars, and stealing junk. The older guys did big jobs like stick-ups, burglary, and stealing autos. The little fellows admired the "big shots" and longed for the day when they could get into the big racket. Fellows who had "done time" were the big shots and looked up to and gave the little fellows tips on how to get by and pull off big jobs. [17]

Neighbourhoods characterized by transience and instability, Cloward and Ohlin argue, offer few opportunities to get ahead in organized criminal activities. This world gives rise to *conflict gangs*, whose goal is to gain a reputation for toughness and destructive violence. Thus "one particular biker would catch a bird and then bite off its head, allowing the blood to trickle from his mouth as he yelled 'all right!' " [18] It is the world of the warrior: fight, show courage against all odds, defend and maintain the honour of the group. Above all, never show fear.

Violence is the means used to gain status in the conflict gangs. Conventional society's recognition of the "worst" gangs becomes a mark of prestige, perpetuating the high standards of their members. Conflict gangs emerge in lower-class areas where neither criminal nor conventional adult role models exercise much control over youngsters.

A third subcultural response to differential opportunities is the formation of *retreatist gangs*. Cloward and Ohlin describe members of retreatist gangs as double failures because they have not been successful in the legitimate world and have been equally unsuccessful in the illegitimate worlds of organized criminal activity and violence-oriented gangs. This subculture is characterized by a continuous search for getting high through alcohol, atypical sexual experiences, marijuana, hard drugs, or a combination of these.

The retreatist hides in a world of sensual adventure, borrowing, begging, or stealing to support his habit, whatever it may be. He may peddle drugs or work as a pimp or look for some other deviant income-producing activity. But the income is not a primary concern; he is interested only in the next high. Belonging to a retreatist gang offers a sense of superiority and well-being that is otherwise beyond the reach of these least successful dropouts.

Not all lower-class youngsters who are unable to reach society's goals become members of criminal, conflict, or retreatist gangs. Many choose to accept their situation and to live within its constraints. These law-abiding youngsters are Cohen's corner boys.

Tests of opportunity theory

Cloward and Ohlin's differential opportunity theory presented many new ideas, and a variety of studies emerged to test it empirically.

The first of Cloward and Ohlin's assumptions - that blocked opportunities are related to delinquency - has mixed support. Travis Hirschi, for example, demonstrated that "the greater one's acceptance of conventional (or even quasi-conventional) success goals, the less likely one is to be delinquent, regardless of the likelihood these goals will someday be attained." [19] Delbert Elliott and Harwin Voss, too, have found no relationship between actual or anticipated failure to reach occupational success and self-reported delinquency. In other words, the youngsters who stick to hard work and education to get ahead in society are the least likely to become delinquent, no matter what their real chances of reaching their goals.

Judson Landis and Frank Scarpitti disagree. When they compared a group of incarcerated youths and a high school control group, they found that the delinquent boys perceived opportunities to be much more limited than the nondelinquent boys did. There is also evidence that both gang and nongang boys believe the middleclass values of hard work and scholastic achievement to be important. Gang boys, however, are more ready to approve of a wide range of behaviours, including aggressive acts and drug use. [20]

The second assumption of differential opportunity theory - the type of lower-class gang depends on the type of neighbourhood in which it emerges - has also drawn the attention of criminologists. Empirical evidence suggests that gang behaviour is more

versatile and involves a wider range of criminal and noncriminal acts than the patterns outlined by Cloward and Ohlin. Kolin Chin's research on New York gangs in 1993 demonstrates that Chinese gangs are engaged in extortion, alien smuggling, heroin trafficking, and the running of gambling establishments and houses of prostitution. [21] A recent report from the Denver Youth Survey showed that while the most frequent form of illegal activity is fighting with other gangs, gang members are also involved in robberies, joyriding, assaults, stealing, and drug sales. Similarly, Alan Lizotte and James Tesoriero found that among 675 students in the Rochester Youth Development Study, large numbers of boys owned illegal guns, were members of gangs, committed gun crime, and used or sold drugs. [22]

The new subculture that emerged in the 1980s combined violence, which had become much more vicious than in earlier years, with big business in cocaine and crack trafficking. Rival gangs killed for more than simply turf. In cities around the world teenagers began to drive BMWs with UZI submachine guns concealed under the driver's seat and thousands of dollars in their pockets so that they could make bail at any moment.

Evaluation: differential opportunity theory

For three decades criminologists have reviewed, examined, and revised the work of Cloward and Ohlin. One of the main criticisms is that their theory is class-oriented. If, as Cloward and Ohlin claim, delinquency is a response to blocked opportunities, how can we explain middle-class delinquency? Another question arises from contradictory statements. How can delinquent groups be nonutilitarian, negativistic, and malicious (Cohen) - and also goal-oriented and utilitarian? Despite its shortcomings, however, differential opportunity theory has identified some of the reasons why lower-class youngsters may become alienated. Cloward and Ohlin's work has also challenged researchers to study the nature of the subcultures in our society. Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti have concentrated on one of them - the subculture of violence.

Conclusions

In the decade between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, criminologists began to theorize about the development and content of youth subcultures and the gangs that

flourish within them. Some suggested that lower-class males, frustrated by their inability to meet middle-class standards, set up their own norms by which they could gain status. Often these norms clashed with those of the dominant culture. Other investigators have refuted the idea that delinquent behaviour stems from a rejection of middle-class values. They claim that lower-class values are separate and distinct from middle-class values and that it is the lower-class value system that generates delinquent behaviour.

Explanations of female delinquent subcultures and middle-class delinquency are an extension of subcultural explanations of lower-class delinquency. While the theories of reaction formation, the subculture of violence, and differential opportunity differ in some respects, they all share one basic assumption - that delinquent and criminal behaviours are linked to the values and norms of the areas where youngsters grow up.

References:

1. *Ingrassia Michele*, *Amin Peter*, *Archer Nina*, *Biddle Miller Susan*, "Life Mens Nothing", *Newsweek*, July 19, 1993
2. *Kantrowitz Barbara*, "Wild in the Streets", *Newsweek*, Aug. 2, 1993
3. *Cloward A. Richard* and *Ohlin E. Lloyd*, *Delinquency and Opportunity*, Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1960
4. *Cohen K. Albert*, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*, Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1955
5. *James G. E.*, *Short F. Jr.*, and *Strodtbeck L. Fred*, *Group Process and Gang Delinquency*, 24, 1978
6. *Liazos Alexander*, "School, Alienation, and Delinquency," *Crime and Delinquency*, 1978
7. *Hirschi Travis*, *Causes of Delinquency*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969
8. *Elliott S. Delbert* and *Voss L. Harwin*, *Delinquency and Dropout*, Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1974
9. *Jarjoura G. Roger*, "Dropping Out of School Enhances Delinquent Involvement? Results from a Large-Scale National Probability Sample," *Criminology*, 1993 see also *Shelden G. Randall*, *Ted Snodgrass*, and *Pam Snodgrass*, "Comparing Gang and Non-Gang Offenders: Some Tentative Findings," *Gang Journal*, 1992
10. *Reiss J. Albert* and *Rhodes L. Albert*, "Deprivation and Delinquent Behavior," *Sociological Quarterly*, 1963
11. *Krohn Marvin*, *Akers R. L.*, *Radosevich M. J.*, and *Lanza-Kaduce L.*, "Social Status and Deviance," *Criminology*, 1980
12. *Greenberg F. David*, "Delinquency and the Age Structure of Society," *Contemporary Crisis*, 1977
13. *Kitsuse I. John*, *Dietrick C. David*, "Delinquent Boys: A Critique", *American Sociological Review*, 24, 1959
14. *Bordua J. David*, "Delinquent Subcultures: Sociological Interpretations of Gang Delinquency," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1961
15. *Short F. James Jr.*, and *Strodtbeck L. Fred*, *Group Process and Gang Delinquency*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965
16. *Cohen K. Albert* and *Short F. James Jr.*, "Research in Delinquent Subcultures," *Journal of Social Issues*, 14, 1958
17. *Shaw R. Clifford*, *The Jack-Roller*, Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1930
18. *David R. James*, *Street Gangs*, Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1982
19. *Hirschi Travis*, *Causes of Delinquency*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969
20. *Landis Judson* and *Scarpitti Frank*, "Perceptions Regarding Value Orientation and Legitimate Opportunity: Delinquency and Non-Delinquents," *Social Forces*, 1965
21. *Esbensen Finn* – *Aage and Huisinga David*, "Gangs, Drugs, and Delinquency in a Survey of Urban Youth", *Criminology*, 1993.
22. *Agnew Robert*, "Goal Achievement and Delinquency", *Sociology and Social Research*, 1984.