

Theoretical Explanations of Deviance

Introduction

The structural account of the causes of deviance offered by Robert Merton left unanswered a number of questions:

- *Why do some people commit crime but not others?*
- *How can we theorise collective as opposed to individual deviance?*
- *How can we explain non-materialistic deviance?*

Urban ecology, as practised by Chicago sociologists, which originally stressed the lack of coherent values as a cause of deviance, came increasingly to stress not a lack of values, but **an alternative set of values**.

The questions left unanswered by Merton and the changing emphasis of the Chicago school provided the spur for the development of sub-cultural theory.

Developments in the Chicago school

Cultural transmission

According to cultural transmission theory, in the most socially disorganised and poorest zones of a city, certain forms of crime have become the cultural norm, transmitted from one generation to the next, as part of a **normal socialisation** pattern. Successful criminals provided role models for the young, demonstrating both the possibilities of success through crime, and its normality.

Differential association

In an effort to tighten up what were considered the vague theories of the Chicago school, **Sutherland** introduced his concept of differential association. This states that a person is likely to become a criminal if they receive an '**excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavourable to violations of law**'.

By this, Sutherland means that if people are surrounded by others who support law breaking, then they are likely to do so themselves.

Clearly, these approaches are working towards sub-cultural explanations of criminal/deviant activity. Chicago sociology directed attention towards the motivations which deviants have. It put forward the idea that there is nothing 'wrong' with deviants, but that they see the world in a different way. They are guided by a distinct set of values. Though this set of values still included the notion of the societal value placed on material success, it did offer some explanation as to why some people but not others become deviant and why some deviance is collective.

Sub-cultural theory

Status frustration

The first explicit use of the concept of sub-culture is found in the work of **Albert Cohen**, writing in the mid 1950s (*Delinquent Boys, The Culture of The Gang*). Cohen was puzzled by the fact

that most delinquent acts were not motivated by economic ends, for example, vandalism. His answer was that most delinquents are motivated by status frustration whereby they feel they are looked down upon by the rest of society and denied any status. They therefore develop a distinct set of values or a subculture, which provides them with an alternative means of gaining status, and this possibly leads them into delinquency.

According to Cohen, those most likely to commit deviant acts are generally found in the lower streams of schools, living in deprived areas and having the worst chances in the job market. Cohen argues that for adolescents the primary reward and punishment agency is the school. Aware of being branded failures by the school, the lower streams develop their own subculture, based on a reversal of school values. The subculture becomes a collective response to status denial.

For lower stream boys the subculture has two uses:

- It creates an alternative set of values so they can compete for status among their peers.
- It provides a means of hitting back at society. Petty theft or vandalism, for example, may have a measure of malice or revenge within them.

Cohen is therefore arguing that delinquents are no different from other adolescents in seeking status. Cohen thus addresses the second and third of the problems left unresolved by Merton:

- Explaining collective deviance.
- Explaining why some deviance is not economic.

Illegitimate/ Differential opportunity structure

Merton's third unanswered question - why some but not others are attracted to deviance - was tackled by **Cloward and Ohlin**. In an attempt to link Merton's concept of anomie, which argued that people turn to crime if they had few legal opportunities, these writers believed that Merton had ignored the existence of an illegitimate opportunity structure.

This opportunity structure had three levels:

Criminal subculture: Providing the opportunity for a career in crime. There needed to be a stable, cohesive working class community with contacts in both the mainstream and illegal communities, successful role models for the young, and a career structure for aspiring criminals.

1. **Conflict subculture:** Existing if the criminal subculture is absent. If no criminal career is available to young males they may turn their frustration at failure in both the legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures into violence.
2. **Retreatist subculture:** Being the one that takes the double failures, those who don't make it in crime or violence. The failures retreat into drugs and petty theft.

The approach has been criticised for making the same assumptions as Merton, that everyone seeks the same goal of financial success. A further problem is that there is no evidence to support the idea of subculture as described by Cloward and Ohlin.

Delinquency as normal - social class differences

Both Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin suggest that crime results from a distinctive youth sub-culture, which provides alternative guidelines to the mainstream culture. **Miller**, in *Lower Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency*, suggests a different approach. He argues that there are six focal concerns of working class culture, which can lead working class males into crime. He is suggesting that crime is simply an extension of normal working class values, not a distinctive set of alternative values.

Unlike previous theorists, there is no assumption made that all people within a society share a consensus as to what their life goals should be, that is there is a rejection of the functionalist view that society is founded on consensus.

Marxist subcultural theory

The 'new criminology'

This approach attempts a synthesis of the structural approach of traditional Marxism with the insights of labelling theory. The approach originated in the work of **Taylor, Walton** and **Young** in *The New Criminology* and from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University.

In this approach, much greater emphasis is placed on the perceptions of the deviants, on those who directly confront the deviant and on the specific context in which the deviant act occurs. The focus of concern is not that of traditional Marxism - how powerful groups create law, but more to do with law enforcement, patterns of law breaking and the motives of crime.

The approach stresses two factors:

- The contents of youth culture.
- Differences produced by class background.

Hegemony

Marxists picture capitalist society as characterised by class conflict - attempts at domination by the ruling class and resistance by the working class. One of the more important ways in which the ruling class attempts to control people is to use the cultural values of society for their own benefit. The imposition of ruling class ideas on the rest of society is known as hegemony.

Youth

The hegemony of the ruling class is greatly aided by the fact that most adults in the UK get locked into the system. They have mortgages, credit cards, family commitments. They may not like things the way they are, but will also be nervous about potentially damaging changes in it. The relative security of capitalism is better than the feared unknown. Youth, however, are not yet locked into the system, and are relatively free of long-term commitment or responsibility. Youth are therefore the group with the most freedom to resist the structure of hegemony.

Resistance: Building blocks of youth culture

Each generation faces the prospect of gaining employment or adapting to unemployment, but in different circumstances. The 1950s had a very different economic climate to the 1980s. It is argued that youth develop a cultural style as a means of coping with their particular circumstances. However, it is not just about coping, but also about showing contempt for the dominant values of society - resistance to dominant values. This is a vision of working class youth as the standard bearers of class struggle.

Youth cannot, in fact, do much to change society, but they can convince themselves that things are better than they are by magically making things easier to bear. **Brake** suggests that the solutions that youth come up with do not alter much other than the subjective satisfaction it provides for the youths concerned. Youth culture does nothing to alter the economic and power differences in society.

A key element in this approach is style, the clothes, haircuts, music and language of the different youth cultures. It is argued that these styles are not meaningless, but are deeply layered in meaning. Much analysis in this perspective has been interested in decoding the meaning of particular styles.

An example of this approach employed in research is provided by **Phil Cohen (1972)**. He studied the youth of East London in the early 1970s. He examined:

- The immediate context.
- The wider context.

He analysed the way that two different youth subcultures reacted to the changes occurring in their community. Cohen argued that the youth cultures developed to cope with the loss of community in East London, but also they reflected the divisions within society. He suggests that **the mod** reaction was to the new ideology of affluence, they wanted to show they had money and knew how to spend it. In contrast **skinheads** looked back to the more traditional working class community.

Criticism

Women and minorities are ignored. The focus is exclusively white working class youth.

S. Cohen criticises the approach for giving the impression that sociologists have special insight into decoding style.

Delinquency as ordinary behaviour

Subcultural theory, by its very name, suggests the existence of distinct sets of values and that these values determine behaviour. However, research in the UK has found evidence of such subcultures hard to find. Indeed, the usual result is to illustrate how ordinary most delinquents are.

David Matza, *Delinquency and Drift*, rejects the idea of a distinct subculture and that this subculture determines behaviour. He claims that delinquents are similar to everyone else in their values and indeed display similar feelings of outrage about crime as the majority of the population.

Subterranean values

Matza argues that we all hold **two levels of values**. The values that guide us most of the time are respectable and conventional. But at times, underlying values of sexuality, greed and aggressiveness emerge. These values are generally held under control - all of us hold them back - but occasionally, all of us get taken over by them. For example, looting, if given the opportunity.

Matza argues that delinquents are simply more likely to behave according to subterranean values in 'inappropriate' situations.

Matza suggests that delinquents use a number of techniques of neutralisation to explain why their delinquent act is an exception. Yes. What I did was wrong but... something made me do it (denial of responsibility); they deserved it (denial of victim); there is no harm done (denial of injury); doesn't everybody (condemn the condemners); I had to do it (appeal to a higher loyalty).

Drift

Matza uses the concept of drift to explain why only some young people commit crime.

Matza suggests that youth is a period of limbo. Youths feel they lack control over their lives and they want to gain some control over their destiny. Matza argues that during this period of drift, the constraining bonds of society are loosened, and so adolescents become more susceptible to suggestions of deviant acts by the peer group. Committing a delinquent act may then represent an attempt to demonstrate control over their lives, to exercise choice.

However, there is no suggestion of a deviant career, the youths are not committed to a life of crime, they can drift in, and perhaps out when they get a job. However, Matza provides no wider framework of structural and economic circumstances that might explain why it is working class males who seem driven to higher levels of delinquency than anyone else.

Willmott, *Adolescent Boys in East London*, could find little evidence to substantiate the existence of a delinquent subculture. He suggested rather that two elements explain the delinquency of working class boys:

1. **Boredom and uninteresting jobs:** In order to compensate, the boys would look for fun and excitement. This sometimes led to lawbreaking but this was not planned, nor motivated by economic reward.
2. **Visibility:** Small homes and lack of space meant a lot of 'hanging around'. This brought them to the attention of others. They were more likely to be caught because they were more likely to be observed.
3. **Downes** also conducted a study of East End adolescents. He found no evidence to support the existence of status frustration, or the illegitimate opportunity structure. He did find support for Matza's ideas. The lack of satisfaction these youths had in work led them to stress what Downes called '**leisure values**', which bear resemblance to Matza's subterranean values.

Deviance and middle class youth

It would seem from the proceeding studies, that deviance and delinquency are working class male phenomena. Attempts were made to explain what it was about working class youth that made them deviant; stressing the rejection of, or replacement of middle class cultural norms usually achieved this. However, studies have been carried out into middle class deviance and it is hard to explain why middle class youth should reject goals and lifestyles associated with their own class location.

While it is true that some middle class deviance can be read off as '**cultural criticism**' for example, criticism of institutions such as the family and marriage, the same cannot be said of some of the activities uncovered by **Shanley (1966)** in his investigation into middle class deviance.

Shanley documented evidence of widespread deviance among sections of middle class American youth. His informants' involvement in forgery, breaking and entering, property destruction and arson, equalled - and on some occasions exceeded - that of comparable groups of working class youth. Such findings clearly cannot be interpreted in terms of status frustration or a simple rejection of middle class norms.

Likewise, **H and B Myerhoff's (1964)** studies of middle class gangs in a suburb of LA revealed the regular theft of tyres, car radios, record players and televisions. There was also the social use of large quantities of alcohol and marijuana. The Myerhoffs concluded that it might be more useful to look for similarities between groups considered deviant and those seen as non-deviants, rather than to continually look for differences.

In a study carried out in Bath among middle class youth, **Aggleton, Rebels Without a Cause?** (1987) found considerable support for the above findings. Studying a group of middle class students at a college of F. E. he found widespread evidence of deviant behaviour. Poor attendance in class, work rarely completed on time, and students turning up for class drunk or clearly under the influence of other drugs, was a commonplace.

Generally, however, British studies have failed to identify a distinctive delinquent subculture.