



SUBCULTURAL THEORY OF CRIME CAUSATION: A CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to find linkages between crime causation due to subcultures by tracing the development of various theories in the light of their circumstantial background, and critically analyses their efficacy by scrutinizing empirical data. Finally, the article concludes by applying the theories to some of the contemporary subcultures, to point out some of the pragmatic ambiguities in them.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Subcultural Theory Development: A Brief Sketch

The term “subculture” although interestingly has been used to denote a variety of meanings today, it was first used generically, with reference to a number of cultural beliefs.¹ It was also employed with reference to organic-physical factors underlying cultural products¹ and by the British psychologists to refer to any group of people that were considered harmful to the society.¹

The genesis of the subcultural theories can be traced to the comparison of the ‘dominant’ cultures and deviant subcultures. These subcultures were conceived as a solution to the moral dilemmas. The Chicago school professed that cultures of the criminal area were distinct from the mainstream values, and such values were

transmitted by cultural transmission. Later writers as Cohen emphasised on the internalisation of middle-class values and the reaction formation that occurred as a result of the rejection by middle-class society.

In the later theories, the idea of social disorganisation was replaced by focus on dissensus and conflict. American Structural-functional wave in 1950-60 and British Marxist in the 1970s were the two effective and dominant waves in the subcultural theory.¹

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

A. Chicago School Theories

Arguably, the first in a series of developments were the Chicago School theories, the chain of works at the University of Chicago since the 1890’s that emerged at a time when the city was experiencing rapid social changes and problems related to housing, poverty and strains on institutions.¹

1. Burgess’ Zonal Hypothesis

In the mid-1920s Ernest Burgess introduced the idea of concentric circles as a basis for understanding the social disorganisation of the city.

As per his theory, the innermost circle (Zone I) in those concentric circles represented the business district, a zone that had high propensity and a small residential population. Outside this was the *Zone of Transition*¹(Zone II), an area with a transient population living in poor conditions. Zone III was a zone of relatively modest residential homes occupied by people who have escaped Zone II. Zone IV had even



more affluent residences and Zone V consisted of the suburbs.¹

Burgess asserted that there was a tendency of each inner zone to extend its area by invasion of the next outer zone, and termed this aspect as *succession*. There were copious examples of deviant behaviour and social problems, disproportionately concentrated, in the zone of Transition.¹ Conclusively, a geographical expression was converted into a locality with traditions and history of its own.¹

2. Cultural Transmission: Shaw and Mckay

Shaw and Mckay utilised the juvenile court records to test the zonal hypothesis and concluded that different parts of the city were characterised by different value systems. The areas of low economic status had a high delinquency rate and the children in such communities were exposed to a variety of contradictory standards and forms of behaviour.¹

Their research was built on the premises of *Social disorganisation* thesis¹ and supported the Zonal thesis. They conceived the concept of *cultural transmission*, which stated that values are transmitted from generation to generation, and it is through such processes that areas become established as delinquent areas despite the turnover of the people in the area.¹

However, the idea of cultural transmission which although is persuasive does not clearly explain how particular cultural formations and subcultures come into being.¹

3. Differential Association

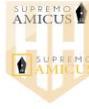
Shaw and Mckay's ideas were then taken up and modified by Edwin Sutherland while conceiving the idea of differential association which may be defined as the notion that if an individual is exposed to more ideas that promote law breaking than those that demote it, than criminal conduct becomes highly likely. The learning covers 'the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes'.¹

4. Differential Reinforcements

Ronald A. Akers and Burgess, in 1960s, expanded on Sutherland's differential association theory using behaviourism. They developed the theory of *Differential reinforcement* which relates to the anticipated consequences of particular actions. An individual tends to do things that result in less punishment, and in doing so, is influenced by the *imitation*. Consequently, the initial delinquent activity results due to a combination of differential association and imitation. This initial participation may be wither positively or negatively reinforced.¹

This theory was a great influence and acted as a bridge between the early work of the Chicago School and the subcultural theory.¹ The elements of this theory rely heavily on structural determinism and does not give importance to individual decision making.¹ Arguably, the theories of differential association and cultural transmission fail to explain all the forms of crime. E.g. The impulsive or emotive offences where the offenders had little contact with deviant values or ideas.¹

5. Evaluating the works of the Chicago School



Critics have asserted the work of the Chicago sociologists as being overly descriptive and lacking clear, theoretically tested hypothesis.¹ Much of the work is criticised for the uncritical use of the measures of the crime for understanding different parts of the city.

Although the works of the later subcultural theorists were different from the approach taken by the Chicago School, they were heavily influenced by this school.

B. The Gang

An early study of the groups in Chicago by Frederick Thrasher was done in 1927. He defined Gangs as an interstitial, having a collective behaviour which resulted in the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachments to a local territory'.¹

C. Albert Cohen

Albert Cohen worked on Merton's strain theory and in his model he viewed gang delinquency faced by many young men, as an upshot of their failure within the educational system. He asserted that a delinquent boy faces problems of adjustment, shame and status frustration. To search for a solution, the boy will join others in a similar position. This process arguably, provides a more realistic basis than strain theory.¹

Cohen's use of reaction formation assumes that the delinquent boy is strongly ambivalent about status in the middle-class system which might not always be true.¹ Moreover, his description of the *delinquent*

subculture stresses only upon the negative aspects that have not been factually explained.¹

D. Cloward and Ohlin

Influenced by the differential association and strain theory, they argued for the existence of greater specification than suggested by Cohen, and utilising Sutherland's ideas, identified the following types of delinquent subculture:

- 1) Criminal - In which the gangs worked largely for financial gains through robbery, theft and burglary. Established offenders acted as role models for the younger generation.
- 2) Conflict - where the primary form of delinquency was violence; such subcultures were more likely to arise in disorganized areas where access to criminal role models was restricted.
- 3) Retreatist - Dominant activities involved drug use, arising out of the failure to achieve success through legitimate or illegitimate means.¹

It has been claimed that Cloward and Ohlin failed to acknowledge that their theory could only account for some kinds of delinquency and not all.¹

E. Sykes and Matza

Gresham Sykes and David Matza departed from the assumptions that delinquent values should necessarily be understood as oppositional to the mainstream values. They maintain that the constraints of the dominant value system are merely loosened. Delinquent values merely enable some distance to be created from the dominant values through the adoption of 'subterranean values'.



Delinquent activity is itself justified through the *techniques of neutralisation*, which are effectively rationalisations or justifications that individuals give themselves, in order to continue with the decision to break the law. They include the following:

- 1) Denial of Responsibility
- 2) Denial of Injury
- 3) Denial of the Victim
- 4) Condemnation of the condemners
- 5) Appeal of higher loyalties¹

Matza underplayed offending behaviour and over-corrected his own theory to the point at which his own theory under-predicts both its scale and, in particular, more violent forms.

F. Collective Efficacy

Robert J. Sampson explained the concept as the ability of members of a community to control the behaviour of individuals and groups in the community. He claimed that spatial dynamics coupled with neighbourhood inequalities in social and economic capacity consequently explain the urban violence.¹

G. American Subcultural Theory

Thorsten Sellin's in 1938, building on the Chicago School work, focussed on the way in which normative systems come into conflict with more general social normative systems, as expressed in law. An extension of the ideas was proposed by Wolfgang and Ferracuti in 1967, focussing on the expressive or emotional forms of violence, conducted in the heat of the moment.

Elijah Anderson argued that competition and limited job opportunities for the poor led to the development of a sense of alienation, and this in turn generated a code of the street

which was a set of rules governing public behaviour.¹

It has been contended that these theories are based on a stereotyped view of the working-class cultures.

H. British Subcultural theory

John Barron May in the 1960s, reasoned that delinquent values were learned by the relatively deprived young men seeking to cope with their restricted circumstances. Willmott's study of the adolescent boys in East London also explored youthful delinquency. He opposed the idea of status frustration and asserted that the more serious offending behaviours were partly at least a product of group values and solidarity.

In David Downes's view delinquency was not at heart rebellious, but conformist, and saw delinquency as a solution to some of the structural problems faced by young men. In the late 1970s due to increasing unemployment and poverty, the educated and adult population started forming their own subcultures for drug use and other illicit activities, and consequently, the concept of youth subculture became questionable.¹

Five major criticisms aimed at these theories are:

- 1) Determinism – The theories overemphasize the influence of structural and cultural constraints, underplaying the conscious choices made by the individuals.
- 2) Selectivity – British Subcultural theory tends to focus more on the unusual subcultures while ignoring



the more mundane, and arguably, conforming youth styles.

- 3) Conformity –As pointed out by Matza, there is over-prediction. Even in the poorest of the communities, crime is not present in all lives.
- 4) Gender- The theories were gender-biased.
- 5) Anomie – The theory emphasises on the supposedly anomic circumstances of the delinquent lives, however the delinquent youth share much of the value system of the mainstream adult and middle-class world.¹

I. ASSESSING THE PRAGMATIC EFFICACIES OF THE THEORIES: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Although, arguably the studies made in this sector may be scattered and variable to arrive at specific conclusions to falsify or authenticate a theory, yet some of the important meta-analysis have been studied to give a broad view of the general traits and features of the subcultural theories.

Travis C. Pratt and Francis T. Cullen, in their Meta-Analysis of the theories of crime in relation to the subcultures, reviewed the existing quantitative criminological research

TABLE 1

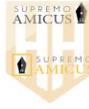
Rank-Ordered Effect Size Estimates of Macro-Level Predictors of Crime

| Rank | Macro-Level Predictor | Rank | Macro-Level Predictor |
|------|--------------------------------------|------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Strength of noneconomic institutions | 17 | Residential mobility |
| 2 | Unemployment (length considered) | 18 | Unemployment (with age restriction) |
| 3 | Firearms ownership | 19 | Age effects |
| 4 | Percent nonwhite | 20 | Southern effect |
| 5 | Incarceration effect | 21 | Unemployment (no length considered) |
| 6 | Collective efficacy | 22 | Socioeconomic status |
| 7 | Percent black | 23 | Arrest ratio |
| 8 | Religion effect | 24 | Unemployment (no age restriction) |
| 9 | Family disruption | 25 | Sex ratio |
| 10 | Poverty | 26 | Structural density |
| 11 | Unsupervised local peer groups | 27 | Police expenditures |
| 12 | Household activity ratio | 28 | Get-tough policy |
| 13 | Social support/altruism | 29 | Education effects |
| 14 | Inequality | 30 | Police per capita |
| 15 | Racial heterogeneity index | 31 | Police size |
| 16 | Urbanism | | |

NOTE.—Rank ordering is based on the independence-adjusted mean effect size

The above table displays the rank order of the mean effect size estimates from the thirty-different macro-level predictors of crime across all studies, models and sizes.

David S. Kirk and John H. Laub, have reviewed the relationship between neighbourhood change and criminal outcomes, and summarized the research in relation to the association between



population loss, gentrification, public housing, development and demolition, home ownership and foreclosure, and immigration.¹

David Weisburd and Alex R. Piquero tried to find out the descriptive validity of the theories of crime using empirical tests.¹ Subsequently, in another research David claims that there are micro geographic hotspots where the crime is concentrated and it the data suggests that the law of crime concentration is of universal validity.¹

A. Key findings

After analysing the mentioned empirical researches, it may be inferred that:

- 1) Social Disorganization Theory – The key variables tested by Travis C. Pratt and Francis T. Cullen in their analysis were include socioeconomic status, urbanism, racial heterogeneity, residential mobility, family disruption, unsupervised local peer groups, and collective efficacy. The support of this theory was strongly evidenced across multiple tests.¹
- 2) Anomie/Strain theory – The degree to which this theory may be supported is not accurately known owing to the lack of empirical research.
- 3) Routine Activity theory – Although, not all the factors required, for this theory have been empirically tested, the opportunity to commit crimes serves as a major factor. This has also been corroborated by David Weisburd in his *Criminology of place*.

- 4) Support theory- The empirical support for this theory is promising.
- 5) Subcultural theory–the urban and southern regime, have not been substantially endorsed by the meta-analysis

III. CONSEQUENTIAL DEVELOPMENTS

A. Chicago Area Project

This program was one of the first community-based delinquency prevention program initiated by Clifford Shaw in the 1930s. It attempted to solve local problems such as gang violence, substance abuse and delinquency.¹ The project has proven to be a successful alternative to prosecution and has been highly effective in reducing recidivism among participants.¹

B. Young people and street crime: Inner city Dublin community

Jonathan Ilan, focusses on the specific areas in Dublin, and the surveys undertaken in these areas indicated that the areas around Northstreet had more crime rates. These areas also had low income and less educated people.¹

IV. CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

A. Bandit Organisation

The case study elucidates the factors responsible for the organisational legitimacy of modern bandits and gangs, by evaluating the case of Christopher Coke. These illicit subcultures are legally and politically sanctioned by their political context, pointing out the deficiencies in the State and International Organisations.¹



It is asserted that this subculture portrays the *differential association* and *techniques of neutralisation*.

B. The Israeli BDSM Community

As Per the studies conducted, the people involved in the community were well aware of the illegality of the Act in Israel and also, of the social Stigma attached to it, however continued to join the community due to a personal desire and wished to hide their identity.¹ This example refutes the traditional subcultural theories and instead shifts the focus on the ability of an individual to make personal decisions.

C. Taxi Dancers to Contemporary Lap Dancers

The case study compares the subcultures of Taxi-Hall Dancers, demonstrated by Cressey in 1932, to the modern ethnography of lap dancing, to hold that the Chicago School theories do not precisely fit in the present Scenario, while at the same time it is essential to study the same to understand and appreciate the post-subcultural position.¹

D. STREET YOUTHS

In a rather intriguing Survey conducted amongst 125 homeless male youths in the Mid-western Canadian cities, it was found out that the youths living under adverse economic conditions may acquire attitudes that support violence. Youths with violent peers and those with peer support for violent performances reported values towards violence. The research concluded that the males with subcultural values that support violence are more likely to perceive harm,

become upset than those who do not adhere to these subcultural values.¹

E. INDIA: HONOUR KILLINGS

The Crime of Honour killings in the country could be correlated to the subcultural theory wherein a member of the family of is murdered by the other members of the family or social group, due to the belief that such person has brought dishonour or disrepute upon the particular family, cast or community.¹ Although, they have been condemned time and again by the Supreme Court¹ and International Conventions¹, these killings continue to be considered by certain members of the society as morally acceptable.

V. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

After looking at the development trajectory of the subcultural theories of crime causation in their contextual backdrop and scrutinising the supportive empirical data, it has been argued that the Chicago School theories although do not hold much pragmatic relevance in the existing setup, they were quite influential in the development of the subcultural and post-subcultural theories.

Manifestly, the meta-analysis show a direct linkage between the theories and Crime causation. However, there is yet not enough empirical data, to conclusively support the validity of most of the theories.

Moreover, the contemporary illustrations of the Israeli BDSM community and the Lap Dancers reveal that these theories at the same time are not bereft of loopholes, including but not limited to determinism and selectivity.



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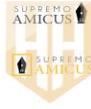
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