

# **What do you think is a) the principal strength and b) the principal weakness of subcultural theories?**

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## **- *Introduction***

Subcultural theories are theories which examine the behaviour and actions of various groups within society - groups which reject or depart from the traditional norms and views of the majority. These groups are referred to as subcultures, and subcultural theories attempt to explain why these groups - most are concerned with 'youth gangs' and gang delinquency - engage in deviant acts.

## **- *the subcultural theories***

Subcultural theories originated in America and, in particular, the University of Chicago Sociology department. Perhaps the most famous explanation to come from Chicago is that of Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay. Shaw and McKay studied juvenile crime rates in Chicago and they divided the city up into a series of concentric rings. They then calculated the delinquency rates in each ring finding that the areas with the highest crime rates were those in the centre of the city, with the rates diminishing outward from the centre. They noted that delinquency was lower in areas of high economic status while it was seen to be high in areas of low economic status. Their studies also found that these findings remained constant over time, notwithstanding "*successive changes in the nativity and nationality composition of the population*".

They therefore came to the conclusion that "*delinquency-producing factors are inherent in the community*"<sup>2</sup> and are culturally transmitted. They said that what is transmitted is 'social

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<sup>1</sup>Shaw and McKay, 'Social Disorganisation', in Radzinowicz and Wolfgang 'Crime and Justice Vol.1', p.415  
<sup>2</sup>ibid.

disorganisation'. This term referred to an inconsistency of values, attitudes and standards of behaviour. In areas of high economic status, ie. the middle class, there is consistency and uniformity of attitudes and morals, whereas in low economic status areas there is an absence of common values with competing attitudes and standards prevalent instead. Shaw and Mckay state that in the latter situation "*delinquency has developed as a powerful competing way of life*"<sup>3</sup>. There are, therefore, 'rival' values, conventional and non-conventional, and gang and juvenile delinquency is a symptom of this conflict.

Another theory to emerge from Chicago is Edwin Sutherland and Donald Cressey's differential association theory. Although not strictly a subcultural theory in the strict definition of the term this theory is so closely related so as to be worthy of consideration. Differential association says that criminal and deviant behaviour is learnt behaviour in the same sense as other behaviour is learnt. It tells us that a person is likely to become a criminal if they are exposed to "*an excess of definitions favourable to violation of the law over definitions unfavourable to violation of the law*"<sup>4</sup>. The effect which these associations have may vary in frequency, duration, priority and intensity. In this process of differential association, Sutherland and Cressey stress that the strongest part of the learning occurs within intimate personal groups and we can see that they are stressing the importance of the peer group, family and friends in the learning process. They also make the point that all the associations which one has in life could be quantified and a mathematical formula reached which would enable us to find out how a person will turn out. Sutherland and Cressey acknowledge however that such a 'weighing up' of associations would be "*extremely difficult*"<sup>5</sup>.

Albert Cohen's main interest lay in explaining juvenile delinquency, and his major work

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<sup>3</sup>ibid. p.411

<sup>4</sup>Sutherland and Cressey, 'Learning to be Deviant', in Rubington and Weinberg, 'The study of social problems', p.143

<sup>5</sup>ibid. p.144

'Delinquent Boys', published in 1955, claimed that a delinquent subculture exists which could explain crime amongst juveniles. He said that when we look at the delinquent subculture we see that it is "*non-utilitarian, malicious and negativistic*"<sup>6</sup>. This, he explains, is because the subculture takes its norms from the wider culture and turns them upside down. Therefore, what the delinquent does is right according to the standards of the subculture because it is wrong according to the standards of wider society. But why do juveniles form or join these subcultures in the first place? Cohen argued that certain sections of youth feel rejected by society and the reason for this is to be found in the "*great tension and strain in handling the paradoxical many-are-called-but-few-are-chosen nature of schooling*". Those who cannot handle the strain suffer 'status deprivation' and some will seek the collective delinquent subculture as the solution.

A theory of much the same model<sup>8</sup> as Cohens is put forward by Cloward and Ohlin. They accepted a similar model of delinquency causation as him but believed that he placed too much emphasis on the school. Cloward and Ohlin draw their theory in part from both Merton's anomie theory and from differential association. They say that crime occurs because of blocked and limited legitimate opportunities and that what type of criminal behaviour results depends on the individuals' peer group or gang. They concluded that three types of subculture can result: criminal, conflict or retreatist. Again the importance of the group is emphasised as Cloward and Ohlin use differential association to argue that criminal behaviour is learnt from group relationships.

### **- the principal strength of subcultural theories**

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<sup>6</sup>Cohen, Albert, 'The Delinquent Subculture', in Wolfgang, Savitz and Johnson, 'The Sociology of Crime and Delinquency', p.286

<sup>7</sup>Downes & Rock, 'Understanding Deviance', p.150

<sup>8</sup>as described by Downes & Rock, p.151

The principal strength of these various theories appears to be their superior explanation of juvenile delinquency and crime, such as vandalism, joy-riding and pointless theft, which mainly occurs within juvenile gangs or subcultures, . Much of the other criminological explanations of crime largely ignore this group reaction and concentrate solely on the individual. Merton's anomie theory is especially guilty of this and indeed Cohen criticised it for being inapplicable to both juvenile and group crime<sup>9</sup>. Similarly the biological positivists such as Eysenck look at the cause of crime as purely an individual matter without much concern for group crime.

Shaw and Mckay's theory placed a great emphasis on juvenile crime and delinquency being a group activity - "*delinquency is essentially group behaviour*"<sup>10</sup> - and they attempt to explain why people become delinquent and join gangs. They say that in areas of low economic status delinquency is a powerful 'rival' way of life which "*derives its impelling force in the boys' life from the fact that it provides a means of securing economic gain, prestige, and other human satisfactions and is embodied in delinquent groups and criminal organizations, many of which have great influence, power and prestige*"<sup>11</sup>. Children are exposed to these values as they are transmitted and passed down from generation to generation as are the techniques for committing offences. In discussing this, Shaw and Mckay give examples of the types of offences whose techniques are passed down, such as jack-rolling and shoplifting - crimes which lack a purpose.

They strongly emphasise the role of the peer group and they say that in the context of this group crime is regarded as normal, as from the viewpoint of the delinquent's immediate social world (the subculture) and the norms associated with that world, he is not necessarily

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<sup>9</sup>as discussed in Jones, Stephen, 'Criminology', 1998, Butterworths, p.156

<sup>10</sup>Shaw & Mckay, p.413

<sup>11</sup>ibid. p.411

‘disorganised, maladjusted or antisocial’ but may be highly organized and well-adjusted<sup>12</sup>.

Cohen’s explanation of juveniles turning to crime centred upon their frustration at being unable to achieve ‘middle class’ success and, more specifically, success at school. He says that in the resulting delinquent subculture, delinquents respond as a group and that this response has been worked out by their group over many years. This response is to ‘invert’ the norms of wider society with the result that the subcultures’ activities are, as mentioned earlier, non-utilitarian, malicious and negativistic. Indeed, these descriptions of the groups’ activities explain crimes such as shoplifting (which is non-utilitarian) and vandalism (which is malicious) rather well. Cohen himself says that much gang stealing has no motivation and is in fact stealing ‘for the hell of it’ and is a “*valued activity to which attaches glory, prowess and profound satisfaction*”<sup>13</sup> rather than as an activity for gain and profit. Crime is committed because delinquent groups are out for ‘fun’ and short-term hedonism plays an important part in Cohen’s account of juvenile group crime. Again, like Shaw and Mckay, Cohen’s theory emphasises the point that from the perspective of the gang themselves, their conduct could be regarded as meaningful.

### **- the principal weakness of subcultural theories**

Although subcultural theories give a good explanation of juvenile delinquency and juvenile group crime, the fundamental weakness of these theories stems from precisely this: an overemphasis on the importance of a ‘gang response’ to crimes. It places far too much emphasis on a group response rather than on individual responses. Notwithstanding the fact that most juvenile crime such as joy-riding is conducted by ‘gangs’, these theories fail to explain why crimes such as rape and murder, which are very individualistic, occur.

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<sup>12</sup>ibid. p.416

<sup>13</sup>Cohen, p.287

Most of the subcultural theorists, including Shaw and Mckay, Cloward and Ohlin, and especially Sutherland and Cressey, stress the significance of the peer group and the associations which one has in life. Sutherland and Cressey say that the values which encourage people to commit crime are learnt along with the techniques to commit crime. But how can this theory explain the crime of passion in which the husband murders his wife when finding her in bed with another man? He may have had no criminal associations in the past, but merely 'snaps'. Compulsive crimes such as this are better explained by biological impulses rather by differential association or subcultural theories.

It was mentioned earlier that Sutherland and Cressey stated that all the associations which one has in life can be quantified in order to find out whether a person will become deviant or not. However, as with the example above, this does not account for the honest, hard working businessman who, when his business starts doing badly is forced to commit fraud and other crimes to try and save it. It could certainly be said that he has learnt the techniques through differential association, but where and how does he learn the deviant values and motives?

Stemming from this overemphasis on gang/group crime is the very closely related flaw that these theories are overly deterministic. Everyone is seen as being very heavily influenced by their peer group and little consideration is given to individual choice or free will. If, taking Shaw and Mckay's example, you fall within the centre circle of Chicago you are seen by them as having very little choice as to whether or not you end up in a delinquent gang.

The theory of David Matza addresses in part this weakness of subcultural theories. He pointed out that these theories predicted far too much crime and delinquency<sup>14</sup>. His main theme concerned 'drift' as he considered that delinquents drift in and out of delinquency without committing to either. He also emphasised freedom of choice and free will as

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<sup>14</sup>as discussed in Jones, p.167

important, and by doing so he answers many of the criticisms of the overly-deterministic theories of Cohen, Shaw and McKay et al. The role of the subculture or gang is still important as they may make such activity more likely by actively promoting it, but this does not make deviant behaviour mandatory. The individual still has freedom to choose whether to commit a crime or not and to do so for personal reasons rather than merely as a group requirement<sup>15</sup>.

### **- Conclusion**

It can be said that from the principal strength of subcultural theories stems its' main weakness. The main theories examined provide us with a thorough explanation of crimes largely ignored by anomie and biological theories - namely, juvenile crime. In their consideration of the causes of such juvenile crime, the role and influence of the gang and group were heavily emphasised. However, the importance placed upon the gang or group response render the application of these theories to explaining individualistic crimes, such as murder, irrelevant. Related to this is the fact that these theories also suffer from the flaw of being excessively deterministic. Nevertheless, as an account of why subcultures exist and why juveniles within these subcultures engage in deviant acts, the theories examined succeed in this objective.

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<sup>15</sup>Williams, Katherine, 'Textbook on Criminology', 1997, Blackstone Press Ltd, p.364