Unit 2 Tutorials: Sociological Theories of Crime Causation

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Sociological Theories of Crime

by Sophia

1. Overview of Sociological Theories of Crime

Sociological theories of crime aim to understand the social factors that contribute to criminal behavior. They emphasize the impact of social structures, institutions, and interactions on an individual's likelihood of engaging in criminal activities.

Sociological theories of crime help us understand more about a variety of topics.

⇗ EXAMPLE They help us learn why some drug use is stigmatized while other use is not, why crime is over- or underrepresented across social groups, and what alternatives may exist to the individualistic punishment models that have dominated the criminal justice system since the 19th century.

Many of the theories we cover in this lesson hold Western assumptions about the nature of crime and punishment. Nevertheless, by exploring crime in relation to social dynamics, we open the door to new possibilities for dealing with crime in a diverse society.

Some of the primary sociological theories that you will learn about in more depth in this unit include social disorganization, strain, and social process theories.

1a. Social Norms

Social norms are shared expectations or rules about appropriate behavior in a specific social group or culture. These norms guide individuals in their interactions with others and help maintain social order.

Social norms can cover a wide range of behaviors:

- Manners

- Dress codes

- Language usage
- Other aspects of social conduct

Similarly, violating social norms involves behaving in a way that goes against the established expectations and rules of a particular society or group. People may engage in this behavior for various reasons, such as challenging societal norms, seeking attention, or expressing dissent. It is crucial to note that violating social norms is not necessarily criminal.

⤷ EXAMPLE Libraries are generally quiet spaces where people go to study or read in peace. Speaking loudly in such an environment would violate the social norm of maintaining silence in a library.

Sociological theories highlight the relationship between societal structures, individual experiences, and the development of deviant behavior. It is important to recognize that violating social norms, which we will discuss in the next lesson, is often associated with these sociological theories of crime, which seek to understand the root causes and consequences of deviant behavior.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Social Norms
> The shared expectations or rules about appropriate behavior in a specific social group or culture.

1b. Social Disorganization Theory

The first sociological theory of crime that we'll discuss is **social disorganization theory**. This theory is a sociological perspective that seeks to understand the relationship between the ecology of a community and its levels of crime and deviance. Developed primarily by sociologists Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay in the early 20th century in Chicago, this theory suggests that crime and delinquency are more likely to occur in socially disorganized communities.

This theory looks at neighborhood factors that contribute to social disorganization, such as the following:

- Poverty
- Residential instability
- Ethnic heterogeneity
- A lack of community organizations

Overall, social disorganization theory posits that crime and deviance are not solely a result of individual characteristics but are strongly influenced by the social and structural characteristics of the community in which individuals live. The theory has been influential in shaping policies aimed at addressing crime and social issues at the community level.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Social Disorganization Theory
> A sociological perspective that seeks to understand the relationship between the ecology of a community and its levels of crime and deviance.

1c. Strain Theories

You will also learn more about anomie and strain theories, which are concepts within the field of criminology that aim to explain deviant behavior and crime. **Anomie**, a term introduced by French sociologist Émile Durkheim, refers to a state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms. Anomie suggests that deviant behavior occurs when there is a disconnect between societal goals (i.e., society's expectations to become successful) and the legitimate means (i.e., working hard) available to achieve those goals (Siegel, 2018).

Strain theory, developed by Robert Merton, expands upon Durkheim's ideas about anomie and posits that deviance results from the strain individuals experience when they are unable to achieve societal goals through conventional means. When there is a disconnect between culturally prescribed goals and the means available, individuals may experience strain, leading to deviant behavior. Merton identified different responses to strain (e.g., conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion; Siegel, 2018), which you will learn about in a future lesson. Each adaptation represents a different way individuals cope with societal expectations.

General strain theory (GST) is a criminological theory developed by Robert Agnew in the early 1990s. It seeks to expand upon strain theory by examining criminal behavior and focusing on the role of strain in an individual's life (Siegel, 2018). According to GST, individuals are more likely to engage in criminal activities when they experience certain types of strain, and this strain results from the inability to achieve positively valued goals. We will discuss the different types of strain in an upcoming lesson.

⭐ **BIG IDEA**

Anomie and strain theories focus on the relationship between societal goals, institutionalized means, and deviant behavior. Anomie emphasizes the breakdown of social norms, while strain theory emphasizes the strain individuals experience when societal goals are unattainable through legitimate means. These theories provide valuable insights into the root causes of deviance and crime in society.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Anomie
A state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms.

Strain Theory
A criminological theory that aims to explain the relationship between social structure, social values or goals, and crime.

General Strain Theory
A theory that posits that crime and delinquency are caused by the presence of negative emotions, resulting from an array of strains.

1d. Social Process Theories

Lastly, you will learn about another type of sociological theory: **Social process theories** focus on the social interactions and processes that lead individuals to engage in criminal behavior. These theories attempt to understand how socialization, peer influence, and societal factors contribute to the development of criminal conduct. There are several social process theories, including social learning theory, social control theory, and labeling theory.

Social learning theory posits that criminal behavior is learned through interactions with others. People acquire criminal attitudes, values, and techniques through communication with family, friends, and peers (Siegel, 2018). Essentially, this theory suggests that crime is a learned behavior, like many other behaviors that we learn.

Social control theory was developed by Travis Hirschi, and it focuses on the factors that prevent people from engaging in criminal behavior. This theory assumes that social bonds (e.g., attachment to others and involvement in conventional activities) and relationships play a crucial role in preventing individuals from breaking the law (Siegel, 2018). The stronger these bonds, the less likely an individual is to engage in criminal behavior.

Labeling theory is associated with sociologists Howard Becker and Edwin Lemert and argues that societal reactions to individuals can influence their behavior. When people are labeled as "deviant" or "criminal," they may internalize these labels and develop a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading them to engage in further criminal behavior. This label remains with them, and they continue to act as such.

> ⭐ **BIG IDEA**
>
> All these social process theories highlight the importance of social interactions, relationships, and societal influences in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors.

> 📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**
>
> **Social Process Theories**
> Theories that focus on the social interactions and processes that lead individuals to engage in criminal behavior.
>
> **Social Learning Theory**
> A theory proposing that new behaviors, including crime, can be acquired by observing and imitating others.
>
> **Social Control Theory**
> A theory proposing that the process of socialization and social learning builds self-control and reduces the inclination to indulge in behavior recognized as antisocial.
>
> **Labeling Theory**
> A theory suggesting that self-identity and the behavior of individuals may be determined or influenced by the terms used to describe or classify them.

> 📋 **SUMMARY**
>
> In this lesson, you received an **overview of sociological theories of crime**. Sociological theories of crime examine the social factors that play a role in criminal behavior. They look at the influence of social structures, institutions, and interactions on an individual's likelihood of engaging in criminal activities.
>
> First, you learned that **social norms** are shared expectations or rules about appropriate behavior in a specific social group or culture. Violating social norms involves behaving in a way that goes against the

established expectations and rules of a particular society or group and is often associated with sociological theories of crime. Next, you learned that there are several sociological theories of crime, which we will discuss in further depth throughout this course. **Social disorganization theory** is a sociological perspective that seeks to understand the relationship between the ecology of a community and its levels of crime and deviance.

You were then introduced to **strain theories**. Anomie is a state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms. It suggests that deviant behavior occurs when there is a disjunction between societal goals and the legitimate means available to achieve those goals. Strain theory suggests that deviance results from the strain individuals experience when they are unable to achieve societal goals through conventional means. When there is a disconnect between the goals and the means, people may experience strain, leading to deviant behavior. Furthermore, general strain theory expands upon strain theory by examining criminal behavior and focusing on the role of strain in an individual's life.

Finally, you were introduced to **social process theories**, which focus on the social interactions and processes that lead individuals to engage in criminal behavior. Social learning theory suggests that crime is a learned behavior, just like any other behavior people are taught. Social control theory suggests that people are naturally inclined to engage in crime, but if they have social bonds and attachments, they will be less likely to engage in criminal behavior. Labeling theory suggests that people who engage in deviance are labeled as such. They, then, begin to see themselves as this prescribed label, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby they continue to engage in deviance and crime.

In the next lesson, we will look deeper into social norms and violations of these norms.

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📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Anomie
   A state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms.

General Strain Theory
   A theory that posits that crime and delinquency are caused by the presence of negative emotions, resulting from an array of strains.

Labeling Theory

A theory suggesting that self-identity and the behavior of individuals may be determined or influenced by the terms used to describe or classify them.

Social Control Theory

A theory proposing that the process of socialization and social learning builds self-control and reduces the inclination to indulge in behavior recognized as antisocial.

Social Disorganization Theory

A sociological perspective that seeks to understand the relationship between the ecology of a community and its levels of crime and deviance.

Social Learning Theory

A theory proposing that new behaviors, including crime, can be acquired by observing and imitating others.

Social Norms

The shared expectations or rules about appropriate behavior in a specific social group or culture.

Social Process Theories

Theories that focus on the social interactions and processes that lead individuals to engage in criminal behavior.

Strain Theory

A criminological theory that aims to explain the relationship between social structure, social values or goals, and crime.

Definitions of Social Norms, Violations, and Codes

by Sophia

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about social norms, violations of these norms, and codes. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

1. **Social Norms**
2. **Violations of Social Norms**
3. **Codes**

1. Social Norms

One of the earliest scholars to explore the connection between social diversity and criminal justice systems was French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). Durkheim was critical of the explanation proposed by Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso and suspicious of the idea that crime was the result of an evolutionary condition (Durkheim, 1895/1982).

While crime is a normal part of society, it is not something that can ever be eliminated completely. For Durkheim, society determines what is criminal, not our biology or a universal moral standard. Crime is not desirable; it is only normalized because it establishes the moral boundaries of a community. **Morals** might differ from society to society, but morals are still important since people need unwritten and written rules to internalize the **norms** of the community and live a "good" life together. Durkheim's approach represents a consensus view of crime, which we introduced in an earlier lesson.

Durkheim's sociology is much broader than just the study of crime, but his work set the foundation for the future of criminological theory (Boyd, 2015). His book *Suicide* (1897) is particularly important and reflects how social relations are the source of well-being. Using statistics, Durkheim demonstrated that suicide rates differed across social groups and that this pattern was relatively stable over time:

- Suicide rates were higher among industrial and commercial professions than agricultural ones.
- The rates were higher among urban city dwellers than people who lived in small towns.
- The rates were higher among divorcees than married people.

His macro-level explanation for the differences in suicide rates was that people who had weaker social bonds were more likely to take their own lives. He called this state of deregulation and disorientation **anomie** (Durkheim, 1895/1982).

We can see this effect today in the increased use of drugs and alcohol in societies that have undergone rapid transformations that disrupted the previous norms of social life.

⤷ EXAMPLE During the collapse of the USSR, as countries radically transformed from state socialism to free-market capitalism, there was a sizable increase in substance abuse, which became a major factor in driving down life expectancy (McKee, 2002). A similar situation was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. As social life was disrupted and people became socially isolated, there was a spike in opioid overdose deaths (Azpiri, 2020).

Durkheim also helps us understand the tragic effects the residential school system has had on Indigenous communities in both the United States and Canada.

> **IN CONTEXT**
>
> Beginning in the 1800s, the Canadian and U.S. governments partnered with Christian church organizations, instituting a program of **genocide** with the aim of assimilating Indigenous persons into the European-derived settler culture. Children were stolen from their homes and placed in boarding schools, where they were prohibited from speaking their language or practicing their traditions. Many of the children suffered physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the teachers and clergy. The last residential schools closed in the 1990s, but many young Indigenous youth are still forced to attend schools far away from their home communities.

While the psychological trauma of the residential school system is an important factor, Durkheim reminds us that the destruction of culture contributes to high rates of anomic suicide and that the imposition of a colonial system of regulation gives rise to fatal incidences of self-destruction. Fortunately, Durkheim's work also suggests a path forward: Ensuring the transmission of cultural knowledge can restore the conditions necessary for human beings to flourish and is a right guaranteed by the United Nations (United Nations General Assembly, 2007).

Durkheim's work also points to a way of thinking about criminal justice that is less focused on **retribution**, or the infliction of punishment, and more focused on **restitution**, or repayment. He argued that complex societies—those composed of diverse people with different values and goals—produce legal structures that aim to foster social integration and cohesion. While banishment or public hangings may have been characteristic of smaller, more homogeneous societies in the past, to live in a diverse world, the law must work more toward restitution or the restoration of society to its normal state.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Morals
  A person's standards of behavior or beliefs concerning what is and is not acceptable for them to do.

Norms

The standard patterns of behaviors typical for a given group.

Anomie

A state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms.

Genocide

Acts committed with the intent of destroying (in whole or in part) a group of people with a shared identity, such as a racial, ethnic, national, or religious group.

Retribution

The infliction of punishment on an offender.

Restitution

An offender's repayment to a victim for the financial losses the victim has incurred as a result of a crime.

2. Violations of Social Norms

By now, you should understand what social norms in a community entail. Violations of these social norms refer to behaviors or actions that deviate from the commonly accepted rules and expectations within a particular society or culture. People may violate social norms for many reasons, such as challenging societal norms, seeking attention, or expressing dissent. These violations can range from mild to severe, and the consequence is usually just being looked down upon by other members of society. However, it is important to note that most of these violations are not criminal in nature—they are just frowned upon in society.

The following are examples of violations of social norms:

- Standing too close to someone during a conversation or invading their personal space in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable
- Wearing inappropriate clothing for a particular setting, such as casual attire in a formal business environment or vice versa
- Cutting ahead in a long line

⊘ **DID YOU KNOW**

Social norms can vary across cultures and societies, and what may be considered a norm violation in one context may be acceptable in another.

Violations of social norms typically lead to disapproval in society, and people are discouraged from violating them but are rarely subject to formal sanctions.

3. Codes

The social norms that we just discussed are typically unwritten rules about how people should behave. However, **codes** are formalized rules that govern behavior within a society. These codes are often organized

into written documents, such as laws, so that people know exactly which acts are against the law and what the punishment is for being convicted of one of those acts.

🚩 **HINT**

In the United States, our laws are typically found in the U.S. Constitution, state constitutions, statutes passed by Congress, case law created by the U.S. Supreme Court or state supreme courts, or regulatory bodies such as the Food and Drug Administration (Gaines & Miller, 2015).

These laws are designed to provide a systematic and comprehensive framework for regulating behavior and ensuring order within a society. As opposed to breaking social norms, codes can be enforced through formal mechanisms (i.e., court systems or regulatory bodies). Violations of codes may result in legal consequences or other formal sanctions. People can be arrested, tried in a court of law, or convicted of actions that violate legal codes.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Codes
    The formalized sets of rules or laws that govern behavior within a society.

📋 **SUMMARY**

In this lesson, you learned about **social norms**, which are the standard patterns of behavior typical for a given society. People are expected to adhere to these norms to establish rules about how people can successfully live together in society.

However, according to Émile Durkheim, when there is a breakdown in social norms, anomie (normlessness) can result. Durkheim also discussed the importance of criminal justice that focused less on retribution and more on restitution. He argued that complex societies produced legal structures that aimed to foster social integration and cohesion.

You also learned about **violations of social norms**: While they are looked down upon by members of society, these violations are rarely criminalized. Aside from social norms, we also have **codes**, or formal sets of rules or laws that govern behavior within a society. Violating codes differs from violating social norms because people can be given a formal sanction or punishment for code violations.

You now have a thorough understanding of what social norms and codes are, as well as what happens when people violate them. Violating social norms is often associated with these sociological theories of crime, so you will be able to apply the knowledge you learned here about social norms to the upcoming sociological theories. In the next lesson, we will go into further detail about the Chicago school and social disorganization theory.

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📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Anomie

A state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms.

Codes

The formalized sets of rules or laws that govern behavior within a society.

Genocide

Acts committed with the intent of destroying (in whole or in part) a group of people with a shared identity, such as a racial, ethnic, national, or religious group.

Morals

A person's standards of behavior or beliefs concerning what is and is not acceptable for them to do.

Norms

The standard patterns of behaviors typical for a given group.

Restitution

An offender's repayment to a victim for the financial losses the victim has incurred as a result of a crime.

Retribution

The infliction of punishment on an offender.

👤 PEOPLE TO KNOW

Émile Durkheim

A French sociologist who established anomie.

The Chicago School and Social Disorganization Theory

by Sophia

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how the Chicago school contributed to social disorganization theory and other related concepts in the field of criminology. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

1. **The Chicago School**
2. **Concentric Zones**
3. **Social Disorganization Theory**
4. **Collective Efficacy**

1. The Chicago School

In the late 1800s, few cities in North America were as diverse as Chicago. The population of the city was rapidly expanding thanks to successive waves of immigration from Europe. In 1870, the city had a population of 299,000, which grew to 1,698,600 by 1900, making it the fastest-growing city in the world at the time (Cumbler, 2005). The city provided a model for a new way of thinking about crime and society that came to be known as the Chicago school. The Chicago school had a distinctly macro-level **ecological approach** to studying crime.

We will now turn our attention to some of the most salient ideas to come out of the Chicago school, such as Robert Park and Ernest Burgess's concentric zones, as well as Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay's social disorganization theory. We will also discuss the role of collective efficacy in social disorganization theory.

> 🗎 **TERM TO KNOW**
>
> **Ecological Approach**
> The study of crime in terms of its environmental influences.

2. Concentric Zones

Under the influence of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, generations of researchers were trained to go out into the city and learn about the dynamics of delinquency firsthand. In their book, *The City*, they observed that crime

was not evenly distributed throughout Chicago but was concentrated in particular neighborhoods. The model they proposed for understanding the geographic distribution of crime was akin to the rings on a tree, with each concentric circle representing a different urban zone.

There were five zones, and certain zones were marked by greater degrees of **social disorganization** due to the transitional nature of these areas as new immigrant communities moved in and older ones moved out. Crime was a characteristic of this transitional state, and while unwanted, it represented the normal dynamic of a developing city, with disorganization leading to reorganization over time (Park et al., 1925/1967).
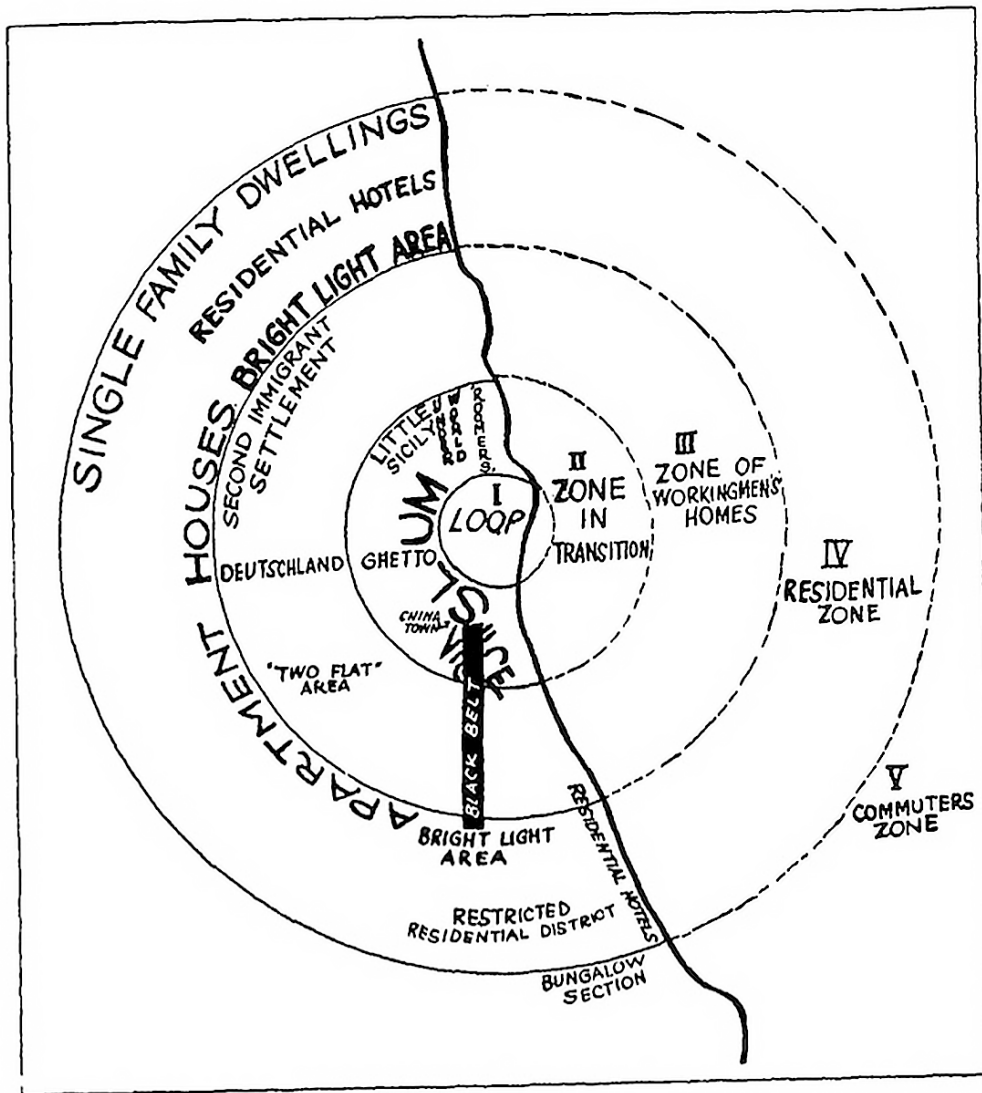

CHART II. Urban Areas

Zone Number	Area	Description
Zone I	The Central Business District	This zone was at the core of the city, where economic activities and businesses were concentrated. It was typically characterized by commercial and office buildings.

Zone II	The Zone in Transition	This zone often had a mix of land uses, including residential, commercial, and industrial. This area also often experienced significant social and economic changes and was considered the zone with the greatest crime.
Zone III	The Working-Class Homes	Moving away from the city, this zone was primarily residential and inhabited by working-class families who owned their own homes. Residents may have had lower incomes than those in zones even further from the city.
Zone IV	The Residential Zone	Even further away from the city center, this zone contained middle-class homes and represented an improvement in housing quality compared to the working-class zone. The residents in this area generally had higher incomes.
Zone V	The Commuter Zone	This was the outermost zone, which was characterized by suburban areas where people lived and commuted to the city for work. This zone had more spacious housing, lower population density, and a higher standard of living. This zone was considered the safest of the zones.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Social Disorganization
An approach that links crime and delinquency to the disordered ecological characteristics of a neighborhood.

3. Social Disorganization Theory

Perhaps the most famous example of the ecological perspective on crime to emerge from this period is Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay's (1942) book *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*. Their ideas led to the creation of **social disorganization theory**. Shaw and McKay (1942) argued that the key variable that led to crime was the social disorganization that characterized certain cities. Expanding upon Park and Burgess's ideas, Shaw and McKay found that zones of transition were characterized by higher levels of residential mobility (i.e., people moving in and out of the city), ethnic heterogeneity (i.e., people made up of different cultures), and lower socioeconomic status (Sampson & Groves, 1989). According to Shaw and McKay's theory, these characteristics of neighborhoods allowed for the breakdown of society and the inability to prevent crime in these areas.

Drawing upon decades of court records, Shaw and McKay showed that it did not matter which ethnic group lived in the area—it was the zone itself that was **criminogenic**. As groups moved to other zones, their crime rates correspondingly dropped (Lilly et al., 2019). The theory stressed ecology, emphasizing the importance of the physical and social environment in shaping behavior.

The approach taken by the Chicago school remains influential today, but there are nevertheless some important limitations to their findings. While the concentric zone model may have worked for Chicago, it is not characteristic of all cities. The idea of disorganization has also been criticized: While such neighborhoods may look disorganized to outsiders, there is a definite order made up of informal associations and networks for those who live within them (Cohen, 1955).

Social Disorganization Theory

A theoretical perspective that explains ecological differences in levels of crime based on structural and cultural factors shaping the nature of the social order across communities.

Criminogenic

The production or tendency to produce crime or criminals.

4. Collective Efficacy

Sampson and Groves (1989) expanded upon social disorganization theory by introducing the concept of **collective efficacy**. As you learned, social disorganization theory suggests that high crime rates are associated with the breakdown of social structures in neighborhoods and the inability of these neighborhoods to regulate crime. Collective efficacy refers to the ability of disorganized communities to work together to achieve common goals and solve problems, particularly in the context of maintaining order and preventing crime.

Collective efficacy involves the capacity of community members to control the behavior of individuals and groups within the community. This control is exerted through informal social mechanisms, such as the presence of social networks, shared values, and the willingness of community members to intervene in situations that might lead to crime or disorder.

Furthermore, collective efficacy is associated with levels of trust and social cohesion within a community. When individuals trust and feel connected to their neighbors, they are more likely to work together to address common problems and maintain a safe environment. Residents are more likely to assist each other in times of need and collaborate on initiatives to improve the community. From the perspective of social disorganization theory, communities with low levels of collective efficacy are more vulnerable to crime because they lack the ability to regulate behavior and address problems effectively.

	TERM TO KNOW

Collective Efficacy

The ability of the members of a community to control the behavior of individuals and groups in the community.

	SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the contributions that the **Chicago school** made to the field of criminology. In the late 19th century, the population of Chicago was rapidly expanding as a result of immigrants moving there from Europe. The Chicago school provided a new model to examine crime using an ecological approach.

Park and Burgess were seminal figures of the Chicago school. They proposed a model to understand

the distribution of crime by looking at different parts of the city as **concentric zones**. According to Park and Burgess, certain zones of the city had higher levels of social disorganization as immigrants moved into and away from the zones.

You then learned about Shaw and McKay's **social disorganization theory**, which also took an ecological approach to studying crime. This theory suggested that certain areas of the city, specifically zones of transition, were characterized by higher levels of residential mobility, ethnic heterogeneity, and lower socioeconomic status.

Finally, **collective efficacy** involves the capacity of community members to control the behavior of people within the community through informal social mechanisms. Communities with lower levels of collective efficacy lack the ability to regulate behavior and are more likely to exhibit crime.

In the next lesson, you will get the opportunity to examine a case study on how social disorganization theory can be applied to gang activity.

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> **🔖 ATTRIBUTIONS**
>
> - **Concentric Zones** | **Author:** Park, R., Burgess, E. & McKenzie, R. | **License:** Concentric Zones © Park, R., Burgess, E. & McKenzie, R. The city. University of Chicago Press, 1967 p. 55 is licensed under a Public Domain license

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Collective Efficacy

The ability of members of a community to control the behavior of individuals and groups in the community.

Criminogenic

The production or tendency to produce crime or criminals.

Ecological Approach

The study of crime in terms of its environmental influences.

Social Disorganization

An approach that links crime and delinquency to the disordered ecological characteristics of a neighborhood.

Social Disorganization Theory

A theoretical perspective that explains ecological differences in levels of crime based on structural and cultural factors shaping the nature of the social order across communities.

👤 PEOPLE TO KNOW

Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay

Researchers from the Chicago school who developed social disorganization theory.

Robert Park and Ernest Burgess

Researchers from the Chicago school who developed the concentric zone model.

Robert Sampson and Bryon Groves

Criminologists known for contributing the element of collective efficacy to social disorganization theory.

Case Analysis: Gangs

by Sophia

1. Rolling Hills PD Explores a Gang Crime

We have looked at many social factors that influence criminal behavior. As we saw in the last lesson, the Chicago school sought to create a link between the neighborhood in which the person lives, the social disorganization that occurs there, and the amount of crime that takes place as a result. They had a distinctly macro-level ecological approach.

Click on the plus sign to review the components of social disorganization theory: **+**

Social disorganization theory explains that the key variable that leads to crime is the social disorganization that characterizes certain cities. Zones of transition were characterized by higher levels of residential mobility (i.e., people moving in and out of the city), ethnic heterogeneity (i.e., people made up of different cultures), and lower socioeconomic status. These characteristics of neighborhoods allowed for the breakdown of society and the inability to prevent crime in these areas. The theory stressed ecology, emphasizing the importance of the physical and social environment in shaping behavior.

Click on the plus sign to review the components of concentric zones: **+**

Zone Number	Area	Description

Zone I	The Central Business District	This zone was at the core of the city, where economic activities and businesses were concentrated. It was typically characterized by commercial and office buildings.
Zone II	The Zone in Transition	This zone often had a mix of land uses, including residential, commercial, and industrial. This area also often experienced significant social and economic changes and was considered the zone to have the greatest crime.
Zone III	The Working-Class Homes	Moving away from the city, this zone was primarily residential and inhabited by working-class families who owned their own homes. Residents may have had lower incomes than those in zones even further from the city.
Zone IV	The Residential Zone	Even further away from the city center, this zone contained middle-class homes and represented an improvement in housing quality compared to the working-class zone. The residents in this area generally had higher incomes.
Zone V	The Commuter Zone	This was the outermost zone, which was characterized by suburban areas where people lived and commuted to the city for work. This zone had more spacious housing, lower population density, and a higher standard of living. This zone was considered the safest of the zones.

Click on the plus sign to review the components of collective efficacy: +

Collective efficacy involves the ability of disorganized communities to work together to achieve common goals and solve problems, particularly in the context of maintaining order and preventing crime. It is also associated with levels of trust and social cohesion within a community. When individuals trust and feel connected to their neighbors, they are more likely to work together to address common problems and maintain a safe environment.

How can a breakdown of social norms in a community explain gang initiation?

CONVERSATION BETWEEN COWORKERS

"Do you know how drug lords like the Silhouette recruit people?"
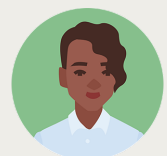
"It depends on a lot of factors, mostly having to do with vulnerable populations. People like the Silhouette provide protection, safety, and status to people who didn't have much of it growing up."

"I can see how that would be appealing to someone who might be neglected by their own family."
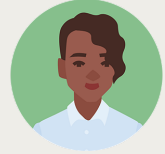
Looking around his desk and upending some stacks of documents, "Ah, here it is."

As he grabs the file, "I have just the case for you."

1a. Case of the New King

Watch and listen as Detective Henson and Professor Joon look into the case of the new King:
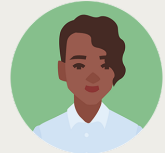
▶ WATCH

1b. The Debrief

Let's look at why Detective Henson and Professor Joon think this story illustrates how social disorganization theory can explain gang crimes.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN COWORKERS

"I just can't believe Luis decided to kill a person for no reason other than to belong to the Kings. But in these neighborhoods, people are more likely to join gangs."

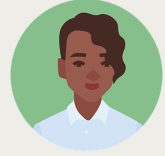"Do you think that's it? Or does it come from the instability that he had at home?"

"Gangs are a norm in that neighborhood. Gang rivalries and fighting over turf definitely would cause someone to seek protection and safety from the things that they see on the street."
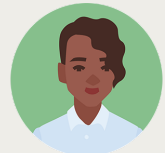
"Lead them right into the mouth of the lion?"

"For survival? Absolutely."

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you saw how the **Rolling Hills PD explored a gang crime**. Using social disorganization theory to explain the **case of the new King**, you found that the socioeconomic status of Luis's family led to a breakdown of social norms.

In the **debrief**, you looked at how other factors, like the neighborhood in which Luis lives, played a role in his willingness to join a gang. We will continue to break down the components of sociological theories as we discuss their criticisms in the next lesson.

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Critiques of the Chicago School

by Sophia

1. Limitations of the Chicago School

As you will recall from an earlier lesson, the Chicago school emerged in the late 1800s and examined crime and delinquency through an ecological lens. Researchers in this school examined the characteristics of Chicago neighborhoods that led to the breakdown of social order and crime within these neighborhoods. While the Chicago school has made many contributions to the field of criminology, it has also faced some criticisms.

One of the main critiques of the Chicago school is the **ecological fallacy**, which arises from the school's focus on neighborhood-level analysis only. Critics argue that attributing individual behavior solely to the characteristics of the neighborhood may oversimplify complex social processes and might either neglect the role that individuals play in committing crimes or overgeneralize that all the individuals in a disorganized neighborhood are engaging in crime. Similarly, the Chicago school often downplays the role of individual factors in criminal behavior. Critics argue that it does not adequately address the importance of personal characteristics and individual choices in relation to the commission of crime.

Furthermore, some critics argue that the Chicago school's emphasis on urban areas may limit its applicability to rural or suburban settings, where different social dynamics may influence crime. This limitation is important, as many areas throughout the United States and beyond have suburban or rural populations, each with its unique social dynamics and challenges.

Other critics of the Chicago school argue that its theories may not be universally applicable. The school's focus was on American cities, especially Chicago, and its theories may not fully address the complexities of urbanization and social life throughout the United States or in a global context (Ohm, 1988). Urbanization processes and issues vary across different countries and cultures, and a broader perspective is necessary for a more comprehensive understanding.

Ecological Fallacy

A failure in reasoning that arises when an inference is made about an individual based on aggregate data for a group.

1a. Critiques of the Concentric Zone Model

As part of the Chicago school of criminology, Parks and Burgess developed the concentric zone model to describe the spatial distribution of different zones of the city and where crime was most likely to occur. While the theory has been influential in urban sociology and city planning, it has also faced several critiques over the years.

First, this model assumes a certain level of **homogeneity** within each zone, implying that all the individuals or households within a particular zone share similar characteristics and behaviors. Critics argue that this oversimplification ignores the diversity and heterogeneity that exist within any given urban area (Jamal, 2017).

Critics also argue that the concentric zone model overlooks the role of cultural and historical factors in shaping urban spaces. Different cities have unique histories, cultures, and patterns of development that may not fit neatly into Park and Burgess's concentric zones (Jamal, 2017). Cities within the United States are different from Chicago, and those outside the United States also have different factors that shape their histories.

Furthermore, this model assumes that neighborhoods do not change over time. It does not consider the processes of **gentrification** or urban decay, which are natural aspects of urban development, leading to changes in the use of land within cities. Lastly, this model focuses on the spatial arrangement of different social groups but does not delve into the role of social institutions (e.g., schools, churches, and community centers) in shaping urban spaces and social interactions (Jamal, 2017). Modern sociological theories consider the impact of social institutions on crime.

Overall, while the concentric zone model has provided valuable insights into the spatial organization of cities, it is not without limitations. Critics argue that it oversimplifies the complexity of urban life, neglects the impact of cultural and historical factors, and does not account for the dynamic nature of urban development. Many contemporary urban scholars advocate for more nuanced and multidimensional approaches to understanding urban structure and dynamics.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Homogeneity

The quality or state of being all the same or all of the same kind.

Gentrification

A process of urban development in which a city neighborhood develops rapidly over a short time, changing from low to high value.

1b. Critiques of the Social Disorganization Theory

Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory also originated out of the Chicago school and has influenced ecological ideas related to crime. However, like any theoretical framework, it has faced criticisms.

As the main theory to come out of the Chicago school of criminology, <u>social disorganization is also susceptible to the ecological fallacy</u>. Conclusions about individual behavior are drawn solely from aggregate neighborhood-level data. The theory often relies on neighborhood-level indicators to explain individual criminal behavior, which may oversimplify and overlook the complexity of individual actions (Kubrin et al., 2008).

Additionally, <u>social disorganization theory places a strong emphasis on structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, and residential mobility</u>. Critics argue that the theory tends to downplay the role of individual agency and choice in criminal behavior. Not all individuals in disorganized neighborhoods engage in criminal activities, and the theory may not adequately account for variations in individual choices or actions (Kubrin et al., 2008).

Similarly, <u>this theory overlooks individual and psychological factors that may contribute to criminal behavior</u>. Critics argue that focusing exclusively on the structural elements of neighborhoods neglects important aspects of human behavior, such as individual motivations, attitudes, and personality traits.

⭐ **BIG IDEA**

While the Chicago school, the concentric zone model, and the social disorganization theory have faced criticism, they have also contributed significantly to the development of criminology. Contemporary criminological theories often incorporate elements from various perspectives and address many limitations identified by critics.

	Concepts	Proponents	Assumptions	Limitations
Chicago School	Ecological approach to studying crime	Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Clifford Shaw, and Henry McKay	Certain areas are prone to crime.	The Chicago school only focused on the city of Chicago in the 1800s. The Chicago school is limited to urban areas and does not explain crime in rural ones.
Concentric Zone Model	City made up of concentric zones	Robert Park and Ernest Burgess	Chicago is divided into different zones; the zones closest to the center are most likely to exhibit crime, while the outer zones are safer.	This model assumes that the concentric zones are homogeneous within each zone. This model assumes that neighborhoods do not change over time.

Social Disorganization Theory	Neighborhood characteristics leading to crime	Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay	There are certain characteristics of neighborhoods (e.g., poverty, residential mobility, lack of collective efficacy, and ethnic heterogeneity) that lead to crime.	This theory is susceptible to the ecological fallacy. This theory overlooks individuals' decisions to commit crimes.

☑ SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **limitations of the Chicago school**. The Chicago school has made many salient contributions to the field of criminology, especially related to the ecology of neighborhoods and crime. However, it focuses on the characteristics of the neighborhoods but does not address the role that individuals play in committing crimes. It also focuses only on the city of Chicago in the early 20th century, and this theoretical framework applies neither to other domestic or international cities over time nor to nonurban areas.

You also learned about the **critiques of the concentric zone model**, which assumes that all of the zones in the model are homogeneous, ignoring the diversity that is inherent to the different zones. This model also neglects the role of cultural and historical factors in shaping urban spaces and assumes that the zones are static over time. Lastly, you learned about the **critiques of the social disorganization theory** and how it relies heavily on neighborhood-level indicators to explain individual criminal behavior, which oversimplifies the actions and behaviors of individuals.

Consider which elements of the Chicago school play into the development of the comprehensive approach to the factors that influence crime and criminal behavior as we look at strain theories in the next unit.

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📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Ecological Fallacy

A failure in reasoning that arises when an inference is made about an individual based on aggregate data for a group.

Gentrification

A process of urban development in which a city neighborhood develops rapidly over a short time, changing from low to high value.

Homogeneity

The quality or state of being all the same or all of the same kind.

Strain Theory

by Sophia

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about strain theory, along with the adaptations of this theory in the field of criminology. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

    1. Strain Theory

    2. Modes of Adaptation

1. Strain Theory

Recall that we introduced **strain theory** in a previous lesson. Strain theory is associated with Robert Merton, who expanded upon **anomie**, a term introduced by French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Anomie refers to a state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms. It suggests that deviant behavior occurs when there is a disconnect between societal goals (e.g., society's expectations to become successful) and the legitimate means (e.g., working hard) available to achieve those goals.

Anomie was a condition whereby society exerted pressure on people to achieve culturally defined goals but did not provide the institutional means to achieve them (Merton, 1938). Merton's macro-level theory has come to be known as strain theory, because the **strain** people feel to achieve the culturally defined goals (e.g., wealth and prestige) leads them to engage in innovative (i.e., criminal) activities to achieve their goals.

> ⤷ EXAMPLE Within the context of American capitalism, the primary cultural goal is money, yet the institutional means to achieve that goal is not available to everyone. Despite the American dream that everyone can become rich, the United States has relatively low levels of social mobility.

For Merton (1938, p. 681), this explains the "higher association between poverty and crime". It is not that poverty leads to crime, but that American culture sets up the goal of wealth as the objective to achieve regardless of the means. This goal permeates all aspects of life, from business and education to organized crime and sports competitions.

Take, for instance, the doping scandal that hit the world of competitive biking in 2012.

When a competitor begins to perceive the rules as an impediment to achieving their goal, widespread anomie can set in, which leads them to circumvent the regulations in their attempt to win (Merton, 1938).

> 📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**
>
> **Strain Theory**
> A criminological theory that aims to explain the relationship between social structure, social values or goals, and crime.
>
> **Anomie**
> A state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms.
>
> **Strain**
> A severe or excessive demand on the strength, resources, or abilities of someone or something.

2. Modes of Adaptation

Merton lays out five adaptations, or "modes of adjustment," that people use to relate culturally defined goals with legitimate means.

These adaptations include the following:

- Conformity
- Innovation
- Ritualism
- Retreatism
- Rebellion

The mode of adaptation used when these goals and means are both accepted is called **conformity**.

↪ **EXAMPLE** Many people attending college could be considered conformists. That is, students are getting an education in the hopes of landing a job that will allow them to pay the bills and reach the so-called goal of society.

Innovation is the adaptation that best explains most crime and was the primary focus of Merton's work. Most people living in a society accept the culturally prescribed goals and pursue them following the rules laid down by that society. Some people, though, innovate by taking a shortcut to the goal, bypassing the rules.

↪ **EXAMPLE** Someone who sells drugs accepts the goals of society, but they reach that goal through illegal means. In this case, strain exists because the ability to achieve wealth is limited to the fact that many people do not have an education or the means of legitimately obtaining wealth.

Ritualism, on the other hand, is a condition in which the rules are followed at the expense of goals. In this adaptation, the cultural goals are rejected, while the means are accepted. Consider the life of a monk. Although monks do not make much money (if any), they are satisfied with a modest lifestyle and do not engage in criminal behavior.

Retreatism involves rejecting both the means and the goals, a condition that characterizes people facing serious drug addiction and living on the streets (Merton, 1938). According to Merton, these individuals do not care about the goals or the means used to achieve those goals.

Lastly, **rebellion** overturns the goals and means that society has to offer, creating new goals and institutional regulations. In this adaptation, people reject the current culture and want to replace it with something new.

↪ **EXAMPLE** A terrorist may reject the conventional idea of wealth as a goal and propose a new means of success (e.g., suicide bombing).

Here is a chart that depicts the adaptations that we discussed above. It highlights how the different adaptations accept or reject society's goals and how individuals reach them.

Merton's modes of adaptation are as follows:

	Cultural Goals	Norms or Rules
Conformity	✔	✔
Innovation	✔	✘
Ritualism	✘	✔
Retreatism	✘	✘
Rebellion	Overturned	Overturned

Merton's model is specific to North America, but as capitalism has spread around the globe, the goal of acquiring wealth has also spread, leading to the globalization of anomie and, correspondingly, certain forms of criminal behavior. "The end justifies the means" has become the guiding norm, which is really a case of normlessness or anomie. For criminologists Messner and Rosenfeld (1997), this represents a state of **institutional anomie**, a condition that correlates with higher homicide rates cross-nationally.

Conformity

A mode of adaptation in which both the goals and the means are accepted.

Innovation

A mode of adaptation in which the goals are accepted, while the means are rejected.

Ritualism

A mode of adaptation in which the cultural goals are rejected, while the means are accepted.

Retreatism

A mode of adaptation in which both the means and the goals are rejected.

Rebellion

A mode of adaptation that overturns the goals and means that society has to offer, creating new goals and institutional regulations.

Institutional Anomie

A condition where higher rates of criminal activity are attributed to the cultural pressure exerted by economic goals that are generalized throughout a society.

📋 SUMMARY

In this lesson, you first learned about **strain theory**. Robert Merton is considered the father of this theory, which posits that people feel strain when they cannot achieve the culturally defined goals of society, leading them to engage in criminal behavior to reach their goals. This theory expands upon the idea of anomie, or normlessness, in society.

Merton suggested that there were five **modes of adaptation** or ways in which people adapted to strain. Conformity exists when people accept both the goals and means set out by society. Innovation is the most common adaptation to strain, whereby people accept society's goals but not the means to achieve them. Ritualism is the adaptation in which people reject society's goals but accept the means to achieve them. With retreatism, people reject both the goals and the means set out by society. Lastly, rebellion is the mode of adaptation that overturns the goals and means that society has to offer, creating new goals and institutional regulations.

In the next lesson, you will have an opportunity to apply strain theory to a crime.

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Messner, S. F., & Rosenfeld, R. (1997). Political restraint of the market and levels of criminal homicide: A cross-national application of institutional-anomie theory. *Social Forces*, *75*(4), 1393–1416. doi.org/10.2307/2580676

TERMS TO KNOW

Anomie

A state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms.

Conformity

A mode of adaptation in which both the goals and the means are accepted.

Innovation

A mode of adaptation in which the goals are accepted, while the means are rejected.

Institutional Anomie

A condition where higher rates of criminal activity are attributed to the cultural pressure exerted by economic goals that are generalized throughout a society.

Rebellion

A mode of adaptation that overturns the goals and means that society has to offer, creating new goals and institutional regulations.

Retreatism

A mode of adaptation in which both the means and the goals are rejected.

Ritualism

A mode of adaptation in which the cultural goals are rejected, while the means are accepted.

Strain

A severe or excessive demand on the strength, resources, or abilities of someone or something.

Strain Theory

A criminological theory that aims to explain the relationship between social structure, social values or goals, and crime.

Robert Merton

An American sociologist who is considered a founding father of modern sociology and a major contributor to the subfield of criminology.

Case Analysis: Drugs

by Sophia

1. Rolling Hills PD Explores a Drug-Related Crime

By now, you are familiar with strain theory, and we have expanded upon that idea with anomie. This condition, in which society exerts pressure on people to achieve goals but does not provide the means to achieve them, creates the strain that leads to criminal behavior.

Merton identified the "modes of adaptation," or adjustments, that many people, often those in poverty, will use to gain access to the cultural norms of success that may be out of reach by legitimate means.

Click on the plus sign to review the modes of adaptation: +

- Conformity: Socially accepting both the goals and the means
- Innovation: Taking a shortcut, often criminal, and bypassing the rules
- Ritualism: Following the rules at the expense of the goals
- Retreatism: Rejecting the means and the goals
- Rebellion: Rejecting the current culture and replacing it with something new

Let us look at how strain or anomie theory and the modes of adaptation explain a drug-related crime.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN COWORKERS

"Society places a lot of expectations on us that some people just can't reach."
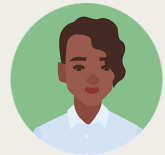
"I remember growing up and stealing candy bracelets from the convenience store, because all my friends had them at school."
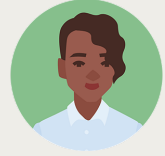
"Right, we all want to be liked by our peers."

"More than that, I wanted to look cool, look rich, and be popular."

"The next case definitely fits that bill."

1a. The Case of the American Dream

Watch and listen as Detective Henson and Professor Joon look into a case related to drug dealing.
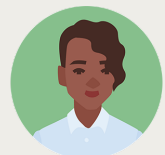
> ▶ WATCH

1b. The Debrief

Detective Henson and Professor Joon examine how the elements of strain or anomie theory fit into this case.
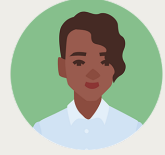
CONVERSATION BETWEEN COWORKERS

"We see these immigrants coming in and experiencing a lot of disparity, when they were probably already coming from dire circumstances."

"That creates a lot of strain—feeling like there is no one around to help you advance."

"Does strain always lead to criminal behavior?"

"Well, we saw some of the immigrants using instead of dealing."

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you watched and listened as the **Rolling Hills PD explored a drug-related crime**. According to Merton, the strain involved in the immigrants' lives and the lack of means to achieve the things they wanted led to a life of criminal behavior in **the case of the American Dream**.

Just like Professor Joon and Detective Henson in **the debrief**, we will see how the ideas formed in strain or anomie theory shaped general strain theory in the next lesson.

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General Strain Theory

by Sophia

<table><tr><td>☰</td><td>**WHAT'S COVERED**</td></tr></table>

In this lesson, you will learn about general strain theory and individual-level types of strain and how they link to deviant behavior. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

> **1. General Strain Theory**
>> **1a. Types of Strain**
>> **1b. Negative Affective States**
>> **1c. Coping Mechanisms**

---

1. General Strain Theory

You were briefly introduced to **general strain theory** (GST) in a previous lesson. We will now go more in depth into GST. GST is a criminological theory that was developed by Robert Agnew in the early 1990s. It seeks to expand upon Robert Merton's strain theory by examining criminal behavior and focusing on the role of strain in an individual's life (Siegel, 2018). GST provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how various forms of strain, or the excessive pressures or demands in one's life, can lead to criminal behavior. Specifically, it tries to explain the individual-level sources of strain rather than just looking at the strain that results from not having the means to reach the societal goals related to success.

In the following sections, you will learn about the three main types of strain that can contribute to criminal behavior:

1. The failure to achieve positively valued goals
2. The removal of positive stimuli
3. The introduction of negative stimuli

You will also learn about strain and negative affective states and the role that these states play in delinquent and criminal behavior. Lastly, you will learn about the different coping mechanisms that people use to deal with these negative affective states.

<table><tr><td>📄</td><td>**TERM TO KNOW**</td></tr></table>

General Strain Theory
A theory that posits that crime and delinquency are caused by the presence of negative emotions resulting from an array of strains.

1a. Types of Strain

The first source of strain is the <u>failure to achieve positively valued goals</u>. This source of strain refers to the inability to attain society's goals, such as financial success, academic achievement, or social status.

⤳ EXAMPLE An employee thought that they were going to get a promotion, but it was given to someone else. This would have caused strain because the employee did not achieve a positively valued goal.

GST highlights the significance of societal expectations and cultural norms in shaping individuals' aspirations. This theory suggests that the pressure to achieve socially approved goals can create strain, especially when people perceive limited opportunities or face obstacles in pursuing these goals. The strain, in turn, may lead to criminal behavior as a means of coping with the negative emotions associated with unfulfilled aspirations (Siegel, 2018).

The <u>removal of positively valued stimuli</u> is the second source of strain. Positively valued stimuli refer to the things, experiences, or conditions that individuals perceive as desirable, rewarding, or pleasurable. These stimuli could include goals, relationships, or any other positive aspect of life.

⤳ EXAMPLE The loss of positively valued stimuli can include the death of a loved one, the breakup of a relationship, and the loss of a job.

According to GST, the removal of positively valued stimuli is considered a form of strain that can lead to criminal behavior. When individuals experience the loss or removal of something that they value positively, it can generate negative emotions such as frustration, anger, or despair (Siegel, 2018), leading to criminal behavior.

Finally, the third form of strain is <u>the presentation of negatively valued stimuli</u>. Negatively valued stimuli refer to events or situations that are perceived as unpleasant, frustrating, or stressful.

⤳ EXAMPLE Negatively valued stimuli can include being victimized or sustaining a serious injury.

According to GST, these negative experiences can lead to strain, which in turn may lead to criminal or deviant behavior. This theory suggests that individuals may turn to delinquent behavior as a coping mechanism in response to the strain caused by these negative stimuli, aiming to alleviate their negative emotions or improve their situation (Siegel, 2018).

1b. Negative Affective States

In GST, **negative affective states** play a central role in understanding the link between strain and deviant behavior. Negative affective states refer to emotions and feelings that are considered undesirable or unpleasant, such as anger, frustration, anxiety, and depression. According to GST, individuals experience these negative affective states as a result of the strains they encounter in their lives, and these emotional reactions can lead to delinquency and criminal behavior (Siegel, 2018).

GST posits that individuals experience strain when they perceive a disjunction between their aspirations and their actual achievements. This strain results from the sources we discussed in the section above, including the

failure to achieve positively valued goals, the removal of positively valued stimuli, and the presentation of negatively valued stimuli.

When individuals experience strain, they often respond with negative emotions.

> ⤷ EXAMPLE If someone faces financial difficulties, they may feel frustration, anger, or despair. Similarly, if they experience a loss or failure in relationships or education, it can trigger negative emotions (Siegel, 2018).

Negative affective states serve as motivators for individuals to cope with the strain they are experiencing. People can cope in positive or negative ways, which we will now discuss in more depth.

> 📄 TERM TO KNOW

> **Negative Affective State**
> Emotions and feelings that are considered undesirable or unpleasant.

1c. Coping Mechanisms

GST suggests that individuals seek to alleviate or escape from the strain resulting from their negative affective states and may turn to adaptive **coping strategies**, also known as coping mechanisms, while others turn to maladaptive coping strategies to alleviate their strain.

People with positive coping mechanisms may take direct action to improve their situation.

> ⤷ EXAMPLE If they lose their job, they may start looking for a new one.

They may also engage in ways to manage their emotional responses to strain.

> ⤷ EXAMPLE They might see a therapist or reach out to their friends or family for support (Siegel, 2018).

Most people engage in positive ways to alleviate their strain, but this is not the case for everyone. Some people resort to criminal behavior to cope with negative emotions resulting from strain, as criminal acts may provide a temporary escape from this emotional distress.

> ⤷ EXAMPLE Some individuals may engage in direct acts of rebellion or aggression in response to their negative emotions, while others may turn to substance abuse as a means of self-medication.

In both cases, the goal is to alleviate the negative affective states associated with the experienced strain (Siegel, 2018). However, the mechanism to do so is not a productive means of coping.

> 📄 TERM TO KNOW

> **Coping Strategy**
> The thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of a stressful situation. Also called a *coping mechanism*.

> 📋 SUMMARY
>
> In this lesson, you learned about **general strain theory**. The criminologist Robert Agnew is associated with creating GST, which expands upon Merton's strain theory by explaining individual-level sources of

strain. Agnew identified three **types of strain** that can contribute to criminal behavior. First, people can experience strain when they fail to achieve positively valued goals, such as getting a job or finishing college. They can also experience strain if a positive stimulus (e.g., a relationship or a job) is removed from their lives. Third, they can experience strain when a negative stimulus is introduced into their lives, such as being victimized.

You also learned about the role that **negative affective states** play in GST and understanding the link between strain and deviant behavior. Negative affective states are undesirable emotions and feelings that people experience as a result of the strains that they encounter in their lives. These negative affective states can sometimes result in people engaging in criminal activity to reduce their strain.

Finally, you learned that people use different **coping mechanisms** to alleviate the strain that results from their negative affective states. Some people turn to adaptive coping strategies to improve their situations, while others turn to maladaptive coping strategies, such as crime or using substances, to address their strain.

In the next lesson, you will have the opportunity to examine GST as it relates to a case study on juvenile delinquency.

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🔖 **ATTRIBUTIONS**

- [Robert Agnew](#) | **Author:** Emory University

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Coping Strategy
The thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of a stressful situation. Also called a *coping mechanism*.

General Strain Theory
A theory that posits that crime and delinquency are caused by the presence of negative emotions resulting from an array of strains.

Negative Affective State
Emotions and feelings that are considered undesirable or unpleasant.

Robert Agnew
   The criminologist who developed general strain theory.

Case Analysis: Juvenile Delinquency

by Sophia

1. Rolling Hills PD Explores Juvenile Delinquency

Strain theory is further expanded upon with general strain theory. This theory focuses on individual-level types of strain and proposes that crime and delinquency are caused by the presence of negative emotions resulting from an array of strains.

Click on the plus sign to review the three main types of strain: +

1. The failure to achieve positively valued goals
2. The removal of positive stimuli
3. The introduction of negative stimuli

**Click on the plus sign to review negative affective states:** +

Negative affective states, or negative emotions, refer to feelings that are considered undesirable or unpleasant, such as anger, frustration, anxiety, and depression. Individuals who experience these negative affective states as a result of the strains they encounter in their lives may turn to delinquency and criminal behavior.

Individuals will seek to alleviate or escape from the strain resulting from their negative affective states and may turn to one of two types of coping mechanisms: Some turn to <u>adaptive coping strategies</u>, while others turn to <u>maladaptive coping strategies</u> to alleviate their strain.

Here, we will look at how the different types of strain and other factors, laid out by Agnew in the last lesson, play out in a case of juvenile delinquency.
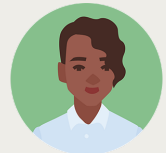
CONVERSATION BETWEEN COWORKERS

"Now that we are talking about strain—I think this happens a lot in teens. They're starting to want to live their lives as adults but are still considered children."
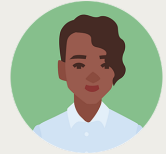
"Detective Henson, it's like you read my mind. Now, I don't say that to most people."

(Laughing)
"Well, I hope you have a case for me, then."

"I do indeed."

1a. The Case of a High-Strung Boxer

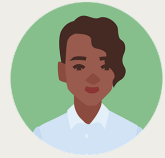Watch and listen as Detective Henson and Professor Joon look into the case of a high-strung boxer.

▶ WATCH

1b. The Debrief

Detective Henson and Professor Joon examine how the elements of general strain theory fit into this case of homicide.
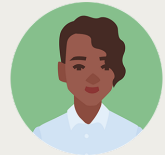
CONVERSATION BETWEEN COWORKERS

"It's obvious that Tommy had a lot of strain in his life."

"He wanted things that he couldn't have. He felt pressure from his peers to look a certain way. His mother needed him to help with his siblings so that she could work, and that left Tommy frustrated."

"But why turn to selling drugs and breaking into people's houses?"

"Because he was in a negative affective state? I'm not sure."

"Sounds like it, but did he use this as a coping strategy?"
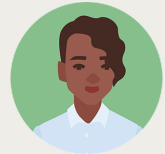
📋 SUMMARY

In this lesson, you watched and listened as the **Rolling Hills PD explored juvenile delinquency**. According to Agnew, the strain in Tommy's life, combined with a lack of means to achieve the things he wanted, led to a life of criminal behavior in this homicide **case of a high-strung boxer**.

Just like Detective Henson and Professor Joon did in **the debrief**, we will see how modern criminologists use the elements of both strain/anomie theory and general strain theory in the next lesson.

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Critiques of Strain Theories

by Sophia

	WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the critiques of strain theories in the field of criminology, including Merton's strain theory and general strain theory. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

1. **Critiques of Strain Theory**
2. **Critiques of General Strain Theory**

1. Critiques of Strain Theory

Robert Merton's strain theory has been influential in criminology and suggests that deviant behavior occurs when there is a disconnect between societal goals and the legitimate means to achieve those goals. However, like any theoretical framework, strain theory has faced critiques and criticisms.

One of the main criticisms is Merton's assumption that there is a universal set of cultural goals (e.g., economic success or social status) that everyone in society aspires to achieve. Critics argue that not everyone necessarily shares the same goals, and there can be variations based on cultural, subcultural, or individual differences. Moreover, Merton focused on the goals that society strives for in the United States. Not everyone in the United States aspires to reach these goals, and certainly not everyone throughout the world aspires to reach these goals (Kubrin et al., 2008).

⤳ EXAMPLE In Bhutan, a country in South Asia, there is a policy to pursue happiness (Sithey et al., 2015). Therefore, the societal goal of Bhutan is vastly different from that of the United States.

Similarly, Merton's focus on economic success as the primary cultural goal has been criticized for oversimplifying the complexity of human aspirations. Critics argue that individuals may have diverse goals beyond just economic success, such as personal fulfillment, social recognition, or cultural achievements (Siegel, 2018). While economic success may be a commonly recognized goal, it is not the only goal of most societies.

Furthermore, Merton's theory primarily focuses on the strain caused by the disconnect between cultural goals and the means to achieve them, with a strong emphasis on the economic success mentioned previously. Critics argue that the theory neglects other sources of strain, such as discrimination and social injustice (Nguyen & Ngo, 2021). Certain groups in society face structural barriers and systemic inequalities that limit their access to the legitimate means of success. Often, people experience strain not only because of personal and societal expectations but also due to discrimination and unequal distribution of opportunities. Factors such as race,

class, gender, and socioeconomic status can significantly impact an individual's access to educational, economic, and career opportunities.

Lastly, Merton's strain theory was developed to explain crime in lower socioeconomic classes. However, critics argue that the theory may not adequately address **white-collar crime** committed by individuals in higher social classes who have access to conventional means but still engage in criminal behavior (Kubrin et al., 2008). White-collar crime is often associated with factors such as opportunity and a different set of motivations when compared to street crime. In the coming lessons, you will learn about theories that better address why people commit white-collar crimes.

It is important to note that despite these critiques, Merton's strain theory has made significant contributions to the understanding of crime and deviance. Some researchers have expanded upon or modified the theory to address these criticisms and provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between societal goals, means, and criminal behavior.

> 🗋 **TERM TO KNOW**
>
> **White-Collar Crime**
> A crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of their occupation.

2. Critiques of General Strain Theory

Robert Agnew's general strain theory (GST) has also been both praised and criticized within the field of criminology. Recall that GST expanded upon Robert Merton's strain theory by examining criminal behavior and focusing on the role of strain in an individual's life. Specifically, it tried to explain individual-level sources of strain rather than just looking at the strain resulting from not having the means to reach societal goals. We will now discuss some of the common critiques of GST.

First, critics argue that GST has some conceptual ambiguity among scholars (Kubrin et al., 2008), particularly in defining and measuring key concepts such as "strain" and "negative emotions." The theory suggests that people experience strain, leading to negative emotions, which in turn may lead to criminal behavior. However, these concepts are not always defined or measured in the same way. As a result, it has been challenging to test and apply the theory consistently.

Additionally, some researchers have questioned the level of empirical support for GST (Aseltine et al., 2000). While there is evidence supporting the idea that strain is associated with criminal behavior, critics argue that the specific mechanisms proposed by GST are not always supported in empirical studies. The link between strain, negative emotions, and criminal behavior is complex and varies among people. While GST provides a framework for understanding this relationship, critics argue that the theory oversimplifies the relationship between these variables, and there is no clear causal link between them.

Some critics also argue that GST tends to overlook individual differences in the way people respond to strain (Kubrin et al., 2008). The theory suggests that negative emotions are the primary mediator between strain and criminal behavior, but individuals may respond differently to the same strain based on their personality, coping

mechanisms, and social support systems. All of these factors significantly impact how someone responds to strain, but the theory overlooks these important factors.

As always, it is important to note that while these critiques exist, GST has still been influential in advancing criminological thought and research.

⭐ **BIG IDEA**

Researchers have expanded upon or modified Merton's strain theory to address the criticisms and provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between societal goals, means, and criminal behavior. GST also continues to evolve as scholars refine and test its ideas. Researchers may address some of these critiques through further empirical studies, theoretical developments, or modifications to the original framework.

	Concepts	Proponents	Assumptions	Limitations
Strain Theory	Strain and adaptations to strain (conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion)	Robert Merton	People feel strain when they do not have the means to reach societal goals. There are different ways in which they adapt to alleviate strain.	There is no universal set of goals and means to which everyone adheres. This theory explains crimes committed by the lower class but not other types of crimes (e.g., white-collar crime and terrorism).
General Strain Theory	The failure to achieve goals, the removal of positive stimuli, or the introduction of negative stimuli	Robert Agnew	Crime is caused by the presence of negative emotions, including fear, anger, or frustration resulting from different strains. These negative feelings lead to a need to cope, which often leads to crime.	The concept of strain is difficult to measure. This theory overlooks that individuals respond differently to strain.

📋 **SUMMARY**

In this lesson, you learned about the critiques of strain theories. While strain theories have contributed to the field of criminology, like any theory, they have their limitations. You first learned about the **critiques of Merton's strain theory**. Merton's strain theory assumes a universal set of cultural goals that are primarily based on economic success that everyone in society aspires to achieve. However, this assumption is an oversimplification of human aspirations. Another limitation of strain theory is that it

does not consider the strains related to discrimination and inequalities, and it neglects how some people lack the opportunities that others have. Lastly, you learned that strain theory can explain the motivations for committing crimes related to poverty, but it does not adequately explain the motivations for committing white-collar crime.

You then learned about the **critiques of general strain theory**. GST came after strain theory, expanding upon some of its limitations. However, GST also has some critiques of its own. A criticism of GST is that scholars do not always define and measure the key concepts of the theory, such as "strain," in the same way, making it difficult to test and apply the theory. Other critics argue that the link between strain, negative emotions, and criminal behavior is oversimplified in GST and that there is no clear causal link between these variables in the theory. Lastly, some critics mention that GST overlooks the individual differences in how people respond to strain.

Scholars continue to test and improve upon the existing theories to make them more relevant to modern nuances and circumstances.

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📄	TERMS TO KNOW

White-Collar Crime
    A crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of their occupation.

Social Process Theories and Crime

by Sophia

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will be introduced to the different social process theories of crime, as well as their similarities and differences. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

> **1. Social Process Theories**
>> **1a. Social Control Theory**
>> **1b. Differential Association Theory**
>> **1c. Social Learning Theory**
>> **1d. Delinquency as a Subculture**
>> **1e. Labeling Theory**

---

1. Social Process Theories

Social process theories in criminology focus on understanding how individuals become involved in criminal behavior through social interactions and experiences. These theories emphasize the importance of socialization, interpersonal relationships, and societal influences in shaping criminal behavior. Unlike some biological or psychological theories that look at individual traits or characteristics, social process theories highlight the role of the social environment in the development of criminal behavior.

⚙ THINK ABOUT IT

Take a moment to reflect on the last few tasks you completed before reading this lesson.
Maybe you did the following:

- Reviewed your notes from a lecture

- Made a meal

- Scrolled through your social media accounts

Each of these are distinct, yet they all rely on one underlying thing—learned behaviors.

As students, you do the following:

- Figure out how to effectively study and process information from courses.

- Understand how to read a recipe and put each of the ingredients together into a meal.

- Generate content, pictures, or videos to portray your life (perhaps by receiving approval or attention through "likes" and comments).

Each task requires learning the motivations and skills necessary to complete them. These behaviors were also not learned in a vacuum; you are surrounded by friends, fellow students, family, and other acquaintances who have talked about or shown you their study habits, cooking skills, or social media engagement. Through these associations and social interactions, you learn behaviors. The social nature of our day-to-day lives has direct implications for our understanding of antisocial behavior.

Social process perspectives of crime suggest that we also learn the motivations, rationalizations, and skills of crime, substance use, and other deviant behavior. While you will receive an introduction to the different social process theories here, you will learn more about these theories in depth throughout the next several lessons.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Social Process Theories
Theories that view criminality as a function of people's interactions with various organizations, institutions, and processes in society.

1a. Social Control Theory

Social control theory was developed by Travis Hirschi in the 1960s, and it focuses on the factors that prevent individuals from engaging in criminal behavior. It argues that people are naturally inclined toward deviance, but social bonds and controls, such as family, school, and community connections, can deter individuals from committing crimes.

Strong social bonds, the attachment to conventional institutions, the belief in moral values, and the fear of social consequences are seen as protective factors against criminal behavior (Siegel, 2018).

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Social Control Theory
A theory proposing that people's relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs encourage them not to break the law.

1b. Differential Association Theory

Differential association theory was developed by Edwin Sutherland in the 1930s, and it is a sociological perspective that seeks to explain criminal behavior by focusing on the role of social interactions and learning processes. This theory puts forward the idea that criminal behavior is learned through interactions with others and is not an inherent trait.

People not only learn criminal behavior from others but also the techniques of committing crimes and the definitions of right and wrong (Siegel, 2018). This theory is related to social learning theory, which is discussed in the section below.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Differential Association Theory

A theory proposing that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior.

1c. Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory in criminology was developed by Akers and Burgess in the 1960s. It expands on differential association theory by emphasizing social interactions and observational learning in the development of criminal behavior. This theory suggests that individuals learn deviant or criminal behaviors through observing others and modeling their actions.

According to this theory, reinforcement plays a crucial role in the social learning process. Positive reinforcement rewards behaviors, increasing the likelihood of those behaviors being repeated. On the other hand, negative reinforcement involves the removal of an unpleasant stimulus, also increasing the likelihood of repeating a behavior.

> 📄 **TERM TO KNOW**
>
> **Social Learning Theory**
> A theory that emphasizes the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others.

1d. Delinquency as a Subculture

Delinquency as a subculture was introduced by Albert Cohen (also known for general strain theory) in the 1950s. According to Cohen, delinquency as a subculture emerges as a response to the strain experienced by individuals who fail to achieve success within the conventional social structure, particularly in terms of educational and occupational goals.

Cohen argued that not everyone has equal access to legitimate means of achieving success, and when individuals experience a sense of failure and frustration in meeting socially approved goals, they may turn to alternative subcultures. He focused on the experiences of lower-class boys and proposed that they develop a subculture with its own values, norms, and codes of conduct as a reaction to their perceived inability to succeed in mainstream society (Siegel, 2018).

> 📄 **TERM TO KNOW**
>
> **Delinquency as a Subculture**
> A solution for lower-class boys to retrieve some measure of status apart from the middle class and demonstrate their own values.

1e. Labeling Theory

Labeling theory became popular in the 1960s and is often associated with the work of Howard Becker. This theory emphasizes the significance of societal reactions and labels in influencing criminal behavior.

According to labeling theory, when individuals are stigmatized as criminals by society, they may internalize this label, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy where they adopt the role of a criminal. This process can contribute to a cycle of criminal behavior and societal reaction (Siegel, 2018).

Labeling Theory

A theory that suggests that people's behavior is influenced by the label attached to them by society.

✅ **SUMMARY**

In this lesson, you were introduced to the different **social process theories**. These theories focus on understanding how individuals become involved in criminal behavior through social interactions and experiences. You were first introduced to **social control theory,** which examines why people do not commit crimes. This theory suggests that people's relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs encourage them not to break the law.

Differential association theory suggests that criminal behavior is learned through interactions with others. Similarly, **social learning theory** also emphasizes the role of social interactions and observational learning in the development of criminal behavior. These theories posit that criminal behavior is learned, just as people learn other behaviors.

Delinquency as a subculture focuses on the experiences of lower-class boys who develop their own subculture to adapt in society. Lastly, **labeling theory** suggests that when people are stigmatized as criminals, they internalize this label. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby they adopt the role of a criminal.

In the next lesson, you will look more closely at social control theory.

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Siegel, L. J. (2018). *Criminology: Theories, patterns, and typologies* (13th ed.). Cengage.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Delinquency as a Subculture

A solution for lower-class boys to retrieve some measure of status apart from the middle class and demonstrate their own values.

Differential Association Theory

A theory proposing that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior.

Labeling Theory

A theory that suggests that people's behavior is influenced by the label attached to them by society.

Social Control Theory

A theory proposing that people's relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs encourage them not to break the law.

Social Learning Theory

A theory that emphasizes the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others.

Social Process Theories

Theories that view criminality as a function of people's interactions with various organizations, institutions, and processes in society.

Social Control Theory

by Sophia

☰	**WHAT'S COVERED**

In this lesson, you will learn about social control theory and the roles of social bonds in understanding criminal behavior. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

1. **Social Control Theory**
2. **Types of Social Bonds**

1. Social Control Theory

The main question criminologists have been exploring so far is "Why do certain people engage in criminal activity?" Criminologist Travis Hirschi (1969) says that the question we should be asking is "Why don't people engage in criminal behavior in the first place?" He suggests that everyone in society has the potential to violate the law and that there are many opportunities to do so. However, he examines the reasons why most people do not go down the wrong path.

He argues that human beings are like animals in that we sometimes fight and steal, while at other times, we are pleasant and cooperative. Aggression and impulsivity do not require an explanation, as these traits are simply a part of our nature. What requires an explanation is why people do not engage in more of this type of behavior, as it is the easiest way to satisfy our desires. The answer proposed by **social control theory** is that this behavior is controlled and regulated by our **social bonds**, or connections to society. When someone's bonds are strong and well developed, they are discouraged from engaging in criminal behavior. On the other hand, if these bonds are weak or lacking, people may be more prone to deviate from societal norms and engage in criminal activities.

According to social control theory, a person's behavior is controlled by four types of bonds:

- Attachment
- Commitment
- Involvement
- Belief

We will discuss each of these bonds in more depth below.

Social Control Theory

A theory proposing that people's relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs encourage them not to break the law.

Social Bonds

The connections to society, including attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

2. Types of Social Bonds

The first type of bond is **attachment**, which refers to the emotional ties that a person has with other people, particularly with their parents. This bond is associated with how much time children spend with their parents, how closely they identify with them, and whether they feel as though their parents care for their well-being.

⑦ DID YOU KNOW

Attachment can also be to other relatives, teachers, or friends, but parents are the most pivotal people in a child's life.

The stronger the attachment to these individuals or institutions, the less likely the person is to engage in criminal activities. Moreover, the weaker the attachment, the more likely someone is to engage in crime.

The next type of bond is **commitment**, which refers to the time and energy that a person spends in the pursuit of goals, such as getting an education, building a career, or other personal goals (e.g., running a marathon). Individuals who are deeply committed to these elements are less likely to engage in deviant behavior, because they have more to lose. The potential consequences of deviance, such as damaging one's reputation, losing one's social standing, or jeopardizing future goals, act as deterrents when a person is committed to conventional norms. You can probably relate to this type of bond.

⇨ EXAMPLE You are taking classes to pursue a degree and may even be working in addition to your coursework. You have put so much effort into reaching your goals that you would have a lot to lose if you engaged in criminal activity.

Another type of bond is **involvement**, or the degree to which a person is active in conventional activities. Involvement can include going to school, working, playing a sport, or being an active member of the community (e.g., being involved in a church group or being a member of a club). By being actively involved in positive pursuits, individuals have less time and opportunity to engage in criminal behavior. Thus, by being involved in conventional activities, people are less apt to get into trouble.

🚩 HINT

You may have heard the saying "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." This proverb sums up the importance of involvement according to social control theory. That is, people who are unoccupied become bored and often find ways to get themselves in trouble.

Lastly, **belief** refers to the acceptance of a common value system shared by people in each society. This is not the same as religious beliefs, though religion may play a role. Rather, it is the belief in the validity of the laws

and norms of their society, such as honesty or morality. When people believe in the moral validity of societal rules, they are less likely to violate those rules. Thus, strong beliefs act as an internalized control mechanism against deviance, because people do not want to violate society's norms.

You can see that social control theory is a little different from the theories we have discussed so far in this course. It looks at reasons why people do not commit crimes rather than why people do commit crimes. Essentially, strong social bonds act as a protective factor against criminal behavior by fostering emotional connections, commitment to conventional activities, active involvement in positive pursuits, and a belief in societal values. On the other hand, if someone has weak bonds, they will be more apt to engage in criminal activity. This perspective helps us understand the mechanisms that contribute to or deter individuals from engaging in deviance.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Attachment
The emotional ties that a person has with other people, particularly with their parents.

Commitment
The time and energy that a person spends in the pursuit of their goals.

Involvement
The degree to which a person is active in conventional activities.

Belief
The acceptance of a common value system shared by people in each society.

☑ **SUMMARY**

In this lesson, you learned about **social control theory**. This theory examines why people do not engage in crime, suggesting that our behavior is controlled and regulated by our social bonds. When someone has strong bonds to society, they will be more apt to conform to society's rules. However, when they have weak bonds, they will be more apt to engage in criminal activity.

There are four **types of social bonds** identified in social control theory. "Attachment" refers to the emotional ties that a person has with other people. According to this theory, people with a stronger attachment to others are going to be less apt to engage in crime or deviance. "Commitment" is the time and energy spent on pursuing goals, such as when people commit to attending college to pursue a specific career path. The more committed someone is to achieving a conventional goal, the less apt they will be to commit crimes.

"Involvement" is the degree to which a person is active in conventional activities, such as playing sports, being engaged in the community, or participating in other positive social activities. The more someone is involved, the less time they will have to get themselves into trouble. "Belief" refers to the acceptance of society's value system. The more someone believes in society's morals and values, the less likely they will be to engage in crime or deviance.

In the next lesson, you will learn about differential association theory, which is a theory that looks at how people learn criminal attitudes and behaviors through those around them.

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📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Attachment
   The emotional ties that a person has with other people, particularly with their parents.

Belief
   The acceptance of a common value system shared by people in each society.

Commitment
   The time and energy that a person spends in the pursuit of their goals.

Involvement
   The degree to which a person is active in conventional activities.

Social Bonds
   The connections to society, including attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

Social Control Theory
   A theory proposing that people's relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs encourage them not to break the law.

👤 **PEOPLE TO KNOW**

Travis Hirschi

The American sociologist known for developing social control theory.

Differential Association Theory

by Sophia

:= WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the propositions and variations in differential association theory and how this theory is applied in the field of criminology. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

1. **Differential Association Theory**
    1a. **The Nine Propositions**
    1b. **Variations in Social Influence**

---

1. Differential Association Theory

In the early 1930s, Jerome Michael and Mortimer J. Adler (1933) published a report titled *Crime, Law, and Social Science* that examined the state of knowledge in criminology and criminal justice. The conclusions from this report suggested that criminological research was futile and reflected the poor theoretical development and research methods at the time (Michael & Adler, 1933). Partially in response to this critique, Edwin H. Sutherland argued that the field needed a sociological approach to the theory that could be empirically tested and explain known correlates of crime (e.g., gender, race, and socioeconomic status).

⇗ **EXAMPLE** A meaningful theory of crime needs to be able to explain why offending behavior is concentrated in adolescence and young adulthood and declines subsequently thereafter.

Now recognized as one of the most important criminologists of the 20th century, Sutherland (1947) developed **differential association theory**. Sutherland aimed to establish an individual-level sociological theory of crime that refuted the claims that criminality was inherited. Instead, Sutherland explored the role of the immediate social environment, which was often discounted in broader macro-level theories, and suggested that behavior was primarily learned within small group settings.

▤ TERM TO KNOW

Differential Association Theory

A theory proposing that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior.

1a. The Nine Propositions

Importantly, Sutherland (1947) sought to articulate a formal theory by presenting propositions that could be used to explain how individuals come to engage in crime. In his *Principles of Criminology* textbook, Sutherland articulated the following nine propositions of differential association theory:

1. Criminal behavior is learned. Stated differently, people are not born criminals. Experience and social interactions inform whether individuals engage in crime.

2. Criminal behavior is learned in interactions with other people in the process of communication. This communication is inclusive of both direct and indirect forms of expression.

3. The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups. Such learning processes occur with the important and key people in your social life. People acquire criminal tendencies from interactions with these groups.

4. When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes the following:
   a. The techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated and sometimes very simple
   b. The specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes wherein the learning process involves both instruction on how to commit crimes and why they might be committed

5. The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from the definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable. That is, they learn the definitions of what is right and wrong. Definitions encompass an individual's attitude toward the law. Attitudes toward the legality of crimes, deviance, or antisocial behavior can vary.

6. A person becomes a delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of the law over definitions unfavorable to violation of the law (i.e., conforming to the law). The balance of exposure to definitions favorable or unfavorable to the law is the primary determinant of whether an individual will engage in crime. If exposed to more definitions that are unfavorable to the law, individuals will be more likely to engage in crime.

7. Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. Not all associations (or interactions) are created equal—how often one interacts with a peer, how much time one spends with a peer, how long someone has known a peer, and how much prestige one attaches to certain peers determines the strength of a particular association.

8. The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anticriminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning. Learning is a process not specific to crime but to all behavior. Thus, the mechanisms through which we learn how to behave at work or in our families are the same general mechanisms that impact how we learn crime.

9. While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values since noncriminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values. Behaviors can have the same end goal; however, the means to obtain this goal can vary.

   ⇗ EXAMPLE Selling drugs or working at a retail store may both reflect the need to earn money; thus, we cannot separate delinquent and nondelinquent acts by different goals.

Other factors (e.g., the balance of definitions that one is exposed to) determine whether or not a person engages in a specific behavior (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978, pp. 80–83).

1b. Variations in Social Influence

The primary component of this theory is the role of differential association(s). Individuals have a vast array of social contacts and "intimate personal groups" with whom they interact.
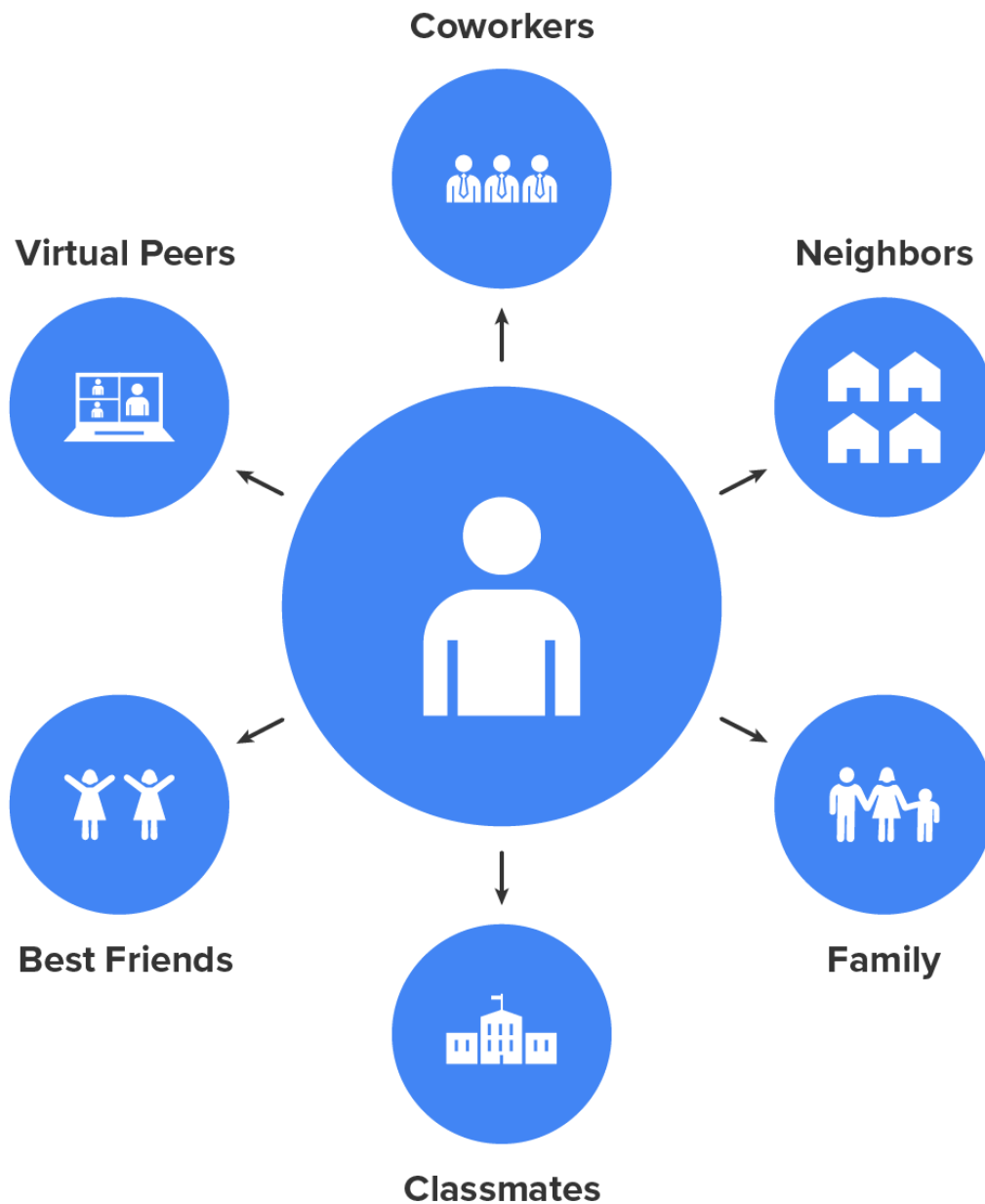
In the image, we can see some examples of the different sources of social influences, including friends, family, classmates, virtual peers, neighbors, and coworkers. They all serve as different sources of social influence, but the extent of their influence depends on the factors that characterize the interactions (e.g., frequency, duration, priority, and intensity). Not all peers or associates have the same level of influence.

Consider your own social world—whom do you spend the most time with, trust more, or look to regularly for help?

These individuals comprise your own intimate personal group that facilitates the definitions that you might have regarding deviant or prosocial behavior.

⇄ EXAMPLE An individual's friends who are extremely important to them and whom they have known for multiple years would be anticipated to have a greater degree of influence on that individual's behavior than a new acquaintance from class or work.

Overall, research demonstrates that affiliation with delinquent peers can explain the initiation, persistence, frequency, type, and cessation of criminal behavior. Association with delinquent peers contributes to criminal behavior partially by shaping one's attitudes toward the law as either positive or negative.

📋 SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **differential association theory**. This theory was developed by Edwin Sutherland to explain how crime is a learned behavior, similar to how other behaviors are learned. There are **nine propositions** of differential association theory that state how criminal behavior is learned through others, typically in small intimate groups. People learn the techniques, definitions, and rationalizations of committing crime.

The propositions also teach us that people become delinquent when they have more definitions that favor violating the law than not violating it. Moreover, the theory emphasizes that the frequency and intensity of the interactions with procriminal or anticriminal influences shape an individual's orientation toward criminal behavior. If a person associates more with those who engage in criminal activities and the interactions are intense, the likelihood of adopting criminal behavior increases.

You also learned that there are **variations in social influence**. People interact with many different groups, such as friends, family, and coworkers. All of these groups provide a different level of influence on individuals, and the ones whom they have known the longest and interact with more closely will be the ones that they learn the most from. If someone has frequent contact with groups providing favorable definitions and attitudes toward crime, that individual will be more apt to learn those techniques to commit crime.

Differential association theory emphasizes the significance of social influences and the role of learning in shaping an individual's actions. This theory has been influential in criminology and has contributed to understanding how social environments and interactions play a crucial role in the development of criminal behavior. In the next lesson, we will explore social learning theory, which is a theory that expands upon differential association theory.

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ATTRIBUTIONS

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TERMS TO KNOW

Differential Association Theory
  A theory proposing that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior.

PEOPLE TO KNOW

Edwin Sutherland
  The American sociologist known for developing differential association theory.

Social Learning Theory

by Sophia

1. Social Learning Theory

While Sutherland developed one of the most well-known theories, differential association theory, one limitation to the theory was his description of precisely *how* learning occurred. In Proposition 8 of differential association theory, Sutherland (1947) states that all the mechanisms of learning play a role in the learning of criminal behavior. So, the acquisition of criminal behavior involves more than the simple imitation of observable criminal behavior but does not fully explain *how* exactly definitions from associates facilitate criminal behavior.

Building off the recommendations of Jeffery (1965) to integrate concepts of **operant behavior theory** into differential association theory, criminologists Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers (1966) reformulated the propositions developed by Sutherland into what was initially called differential reinforcement theory. Akers eventually modified differential reinforcement theory into its final form, **social learning theory** (SLT), which suggests that criminal behavior is acquired through social interaction and behavior modeling and is maintained through continued criminality.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Operant Behavior Theory
A method of learning that utilizes punishment and rewards for behavior that either increase or decrease the likelihood that the behavior is committed again.

Social Learning Theory

A theory that emphasizes the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others.

2. The Components of Social Learning Theory

SLT is composed of four main components:

1. Differential association
2. Definitions
3. Differential reinforcement
4. Imitation

We will now explore each of these in more detail.

2a. Differential Association

The first two components are nearly identical to those observed in differential association theory. Differential association theory was expanded to include both direct interactions with others who engage in criminal acts and more indirect associations that expose individuals to various norms or values.

⤷ EXAMPLE Friends of friends who may not directly interact with an individual still exert an indirect influence through the reinforcing behaviors and definitions of a directly tied friend.

2b. Definitions

Definitions were similarly described as attitudes, or the meanings attributed to behaviors, and can be both general and specific. General definitions reflect broad moral, religious, or other conventional values related to the favorability of committing a crime, whereas specific definitions contextualize or provide additional details surrounding one's view of acts of crime.

⤷ EXAMPLE A general definition of crime may reflect an individual's belief that they should never hurt someone else, but the use of substances is acceptable because it does not harm anyone else.

Recent efforts have also underscored that attitudes toward crime can be even more specific and depend on the situational characteristics of the act (Thomas, 2018, 2019).

⤷ EXAMPLE An individual may hold the general definition that they should never fight someone; however, they may adopt a specific definition that suggests that if someone insults their family or starts the conflict first, then perhaps fighting is acceptable.

2c. Differential Reinforcement

Borrowing from the principles of operant conditioning, Burgess and Akers (1966) argued that **differential reinforcement** is the driver of whether individuals engage in crime. This concept refers to the idea that an individual's past, present, and anticipated future rewards and punishment for actions explain crime. If an

individual experiences or anticipates that certain behaviors will result in positive benefits or occur without consequences, this will increase the likelihood that the behavior will occur. That is, people are more likely to engage in certain behaviors if they have been rewarded for those behaviors in the past.

This process is comprised of four types of reinforcements or punishment:

- Positive reinforcement
- Positive punishment
- Negative reinforcement
- Negative punishment

Positive reinforcement involves the presentation of a rewarding stimulus following a desired behavior, with the intention of increasing the likelihood that the behavior will be repeated in the future.

> ⇗ EXAMPLE Positive reinforcement can come in the form of money, status from friends, or good feelings, and it increases the likelihood that an action is taken and repeated.

Positive punishment is the presentation of a negative consequence after a behavior is exhibited to decrease the likelihood that it will happen again.

> ⇗ EXAMPLE If someone is arrested, injured, or caught because of committing a crime, they may be less likely to attempt the crime again.

Negative reinforcement removes a negative stimulus, training people to learn that engaging in a certain behavior causes the negative stimulus to disappear, creating a favorable outcome for the person.

> ⇗ EXAMPLE A child gets their chores taken away for the weekend because they kept their room clean all week.

Negative punishment is the removal of a positive reinforcement or stimulus after an undesired behavior occurs to decrease the likelihood that a person will engage in the behavior again.

> ⇗ EXAMPLE If a child gets into a fight with a friend, their parents may take away their cell phone, cut off their television access, or remove other privileges.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Differential Reinforcement
The concept that an individual's past, present, and anticipated future rewards and punishment for actions explain crime.

Positive Reinforcement
The introduction of a desirable or pleasant stimulus after a specific behavior.

Positive Punishment
The presentation of a negative consequence after a specific behavior.

Negative Reinforcement
The removal of a negative stimulus to aid in the promotion of a specific behavior.

Negative Punishment

    The removal of a positive stimulus after an undesired behavior occurs.

2d. Imitation

Lastly, **imitation** is the mimicking of a behavior after observing others participate in the behavior. This process involves observing the behaviors of others and replicating those behaviors if they are perceived as rewarding or reinforcing. Within intimate personal groups, individuals will observe criminal acts or substance use that often facilitates the initiation of the behavior. Once the behavior has been engaged in, imitation plays less of a role in the maintenance or discontinuation of that behavior.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Imitation

    The mimicking of a behavior after observing others participate in the behavior.

✅ **SUMMARY**

In this lesson, you learned about **social learning theory**. SLT expanded upon differential association theory by explaining how criminal behavior is acquired through social interaction and behavior modeling. There are four **components of social learning theory**. The first two components, **differential association** and **definitions**, are similar to what you learned about in differential association theory.

The third component, **differential reinforcement**, is unique to SLT. It refers to how people are more apt to engage in certain behaviors if they have been rewarded for those behaviors in the past. Differential reinforcement has different types of reinforcement and punishment. Positive reinforcement presents a rewarding stimulus after a desired behavior to increase the likelihood of that behavior in the future. Positive punishment is the presentation of a negative consequence after a behavior to decrease the likelihood that it will happen again. Negative reinforcement removes a negative stimulus to aid in promoting a specific behavior. Negative punishment is the removal of a positive stimulus after an undesired behavior occurs.

The fourth component of SLT is **imitation**. Imitation involves mimicking behaviors after observing others participate in the behaviors. People replicate the behaviors of others if they are perceived as rewarding or reinforcing.

SLT has had a significant impact on our understanding of how individuals learn from their social environment and how behaviors can be acquired and modified through observation and imitation. In the next lesson, you will learn about delinquent subcultures.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Differential Reinforcement

The concept that an individual's past, present, and anticipated future rewards and punishment for actions explain crime.

Imitation

The mimicking of a behavior after observing others participate in the behavior.

Negative Punishment

The removal of a positive stimulus after an undesired behavior occurs.

Negative Reinforcement

The removal of a negative stimulus to aid in the promotion of a specific behavior.

Operant Behavior Theory

A method of learning that utilizes punishment and rewards for behavior that either increase or decrease the likelihood that the behavior is committed again.

Positive Punishment

The presentation of a negative consequence after a specific behavior.

Positive Reinforcement

The introduction of a desirable or pleasant stimulus after a specific behavior.

Social Learning Theory

A theory that emphasizes the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others.

Delinquency as a Subculture

by Sophia

1. Delinquency as a Subculture

> *"Juvenile delinquency represents a particular type of subculture. Children learn to become delinquents by being socialized into youth gangs, where they learn the beliefs, values, and codes of the group."*
>
> Albert Cohen

Cohen's theory of **delinquency as a subculture**, developed in the 1950s, offers a different way of understanding crime from classical rational choice theories and Merton's strain theory. It is a complementary theory that helps explain crimes that are "nonutilitarian, malicious, and negativistic"—that is to say, crimes that do not have any rational goals but are done simply for "the hell of it" (Cohen, 1955).

As with many early criminologists, Cohen saw juvenile delinquency primarily as a "working-class phenomenon" in boys. This is because working-class youth are taught the democratic ideal that everyone can become rich and successful, but in school, they encounter a set of distinctly middle-class values against which their behavior is measured. These class-specific values are framed as universal, making it much easier for middle-class youth to achieve recognition in school for behaving "correctly." This leads to feelings of inferiority, which last as long as the working-class boys cling to that particular worldview (Cohen, 1955).

Cohen proposed that these individuals experience frustration when they fail to meet the middle-class standards and values prevalent in mainstream society, especially in educational institutions. The working-class youth often find it difficult to achieve success in conventional terms, leading to a sense of failure (Siegel, 2018). To cope with

this frustration, Cohen suggested that working-class youth form their own subculture, distinct from mainstream values.

This subculture presents young boys with a new set of values and a means of acquiring status within a different cultural context. These new values are an inversion of the middle-class standards that working-class boys are judged by in school. Traits such as toughness, street smarts, and rebellion against authority become highly valued, contrasting with the middle-class emphasis on academic success, ambition, and conformity. The subculture provides an alternative framework for achieving status and recognition.

> ⇌ EXAMPLE While the middle class places value on controlling aggression and respecting property, the
> culture of the gang legitimates violence and group stealing (Cohen, 1955). While the act of theft may bring
> material benefits, it also reaffirms the cultural cohesion of the group and the status of its members. It is a
> joint activity that derives its meaning from the common understandings and loyalties of the group.

Cohen argued that by conforming to the values of the delinquent subculture, individuals can gain a sense of status and respect within their peer group, even if they have failed to achieve success in mainstream terms (Siegel, 2018). Criminal or deviant acts are seen as a means of proving oneself within the subculture and achieving a positive identity. Cohen's theory emphasizes the collective response of working-class youth to their shared experiences of frustration.

Furthermore, Cohen suggested that the development of the delinquent subculture was learned in low-income environments where parents are not equipped to teach their children the skills to enter the middle-class culture (Siegel, 2018). According to Cohen, children in these environments often lack the skills to achieve success in society. Moreover, they lack the education needed to build the skills for socialization.

☆ **BIG IDEA**

The delinquent subculture develops its own set of values and norms that oppose those of the middle class. This subculture is seen as a group phenomenon, providing a sense of belonging and identity to those who adopt its values.

▤ **TERM TO KNOW**

Delinquency as a Subculture
A solution for lower-class boys to retrieve some measure of status apart from the middle class and demonstrate their own values.

1a. The Roles in Delinquent Subcultures

There are three types of subcultures identified by Cohen:

- The corner boy
- The college boy
- The delinquent boy

The most common response to middle-class rejection is the role of the **corner boy**. With this role, the boy is not always a delinquent but may skip school, engage in petty offenses, and occasionally use drugs or alcohol. The

corner boy is loyal to his peer group because he depends on them for support and motivation. The corner boy is a stable member of the neighborhood and usually holds a menial job and gets married (Siegel, 2018). The next role is that of the **college boy**, who embraces the values of the middle class. Instead of scorning middle-class values, the college boy actively strives to achieve their standards. Cohen views the college boy as one who goes down a hopeless path, because he is not equipped to achieve middle-class values academically or socially (Siegel, 2018).

Lastly, the **delinquent boy** is the boy who encompasses delinquent subcultures. He adopts norms and principles opposing those of the middle class. The delinquent boy engages in self-gratification and living for the moment.

Delinquent boys resist any type of institution that tries to control their behavior. They often join gangs to be autonomous and independent from mainstream society, and they often have hostility toward the middle class. These boys are willing to take risks and violate the law (Siegel, 2018).

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Corner Boy

In Cohen's theory of delinquency as a subculture, a young man who remains in his birth neighborhood, acquires a family and a menial job, and adjusts to the demands of his environment.

College Boy

In Cohen's theory of delinquency as a subculture, a young man from a working-class background who tries to achieve middle-class success.

Delinquent Boy

In Cohen's theory of delinquency as a subculture, a young man who adopts delinquent subcultural values.

1b. Girls and Delinquent Subcultures

What about girls? Do they not also engage in group delinquency?

In this area, the theory of delinquent subcultures reflects the gender stereotypes of the 1950s. Cohen (1955) argues that girls do not get involved with gang activities because their status is determined primarily by their relationship to males, and therefore, they do not suffer the same forms of status inferiority as their male counterparts.

❓ DID YOU KNOW

From 1914 to 1937, 600 girls aged 8 to 18 were incarcerated at the Provincial Industrial School for Girls in Vancouver, Canada, for the crimes of **incorrigibility**, **vagrancy**, and association with a criminal rather than engaging in criminal activity themselves (Chapman, 2016).

Because the status of women was traditionally tied to that of males, Cohen argues that most female delinquency tends to be "sexual delinquency" (Cohen, 1955). Whether or not this explains the cause of female delinquency, it certainly represented society's reaction to the behavior of young girls during this period.

TERMS TO KNOW

Incorrigibility

The state of a person or their tendencies not able to be corrected, improved, or reformed.

Vagrancy

The state of living as a vagrant or being homeless.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **delinquency as a subculture**. This theory examines young boys from the working class who are frustrated because they cannot achieve the success that is typical of the middle class. These boys often form their own subculture that has its own values and rules.

According to this theory, young boys from the working class assume different **roles in delinquent subcultures**. The corner boy remains in the neighborhood, eventually acquiring a family, holding a menial job, and adjusting to the demands of the environment. The college boy tries to get out of the neighborhood and adapt to middle-class values but is rarely successful, because he does not possess the necessary skills. Lastly, the delinquent boy succumbs to the delinquent subculture of the neighborhood, often joining a gang and violating the law.

Finally, you learned about **girls and delinquent subcultures**. The theory that girls do not typically get involved with delinquent subcultures held 1950s ideas of gender roles, assuming that the status of women and girls was determined by their relationship to men and boys. Instead, girls were often punished for engaging in sexual delinquency.

Overall, Cohen's delinquent subculture theory contributed to the understanding of deviant behavior by highlighting the social and cultural factors that shape delinquency, particularly among working-class boys. It stresses the importance of subcultures and group dynamics in explaining patterns of delinquency. In the next lesson, you will learn about labeling theory.

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TERMS TO KNOW

College Boy

In Cohen's theory of delinquency as a subculture, a young man from a working-class background who tries to achieve middle-class success.

Corner Boy

In Cohen's theory of delinquency as a subculture, a young man who remains in his birth neighborhood, acquires a family and a menial job, and adjusts to the demands of his environment.

Delinquency as a Subculture

A solution for lower-class boys to retrieve some measure of status apart from the middle class and demonstrate their own values.

Delinquent Boy

In Cohen's theory of delinquency as a subculture, a young man who adopts delinquent subcultural values.

Incorrigibility

The state of a person or their tendencies not able to be corrected, improved, or reformed.

Vagrancy

The state of living as a vagrant or being homeless.

PEOPLE TO KNOW

Albert Cohen

The American criminologist associated with subculture of deviance theory.

Labeling Theory

by Sophia

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will be introduced to labeling theory, including its related concepts and its consequences. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

1. Symbolic Interactionism
2. Labeling Theory

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1. Symbolic Interactionism

Another approach to studying crime and deviance is through labeling theory. Before we dive into this theory, it is important to know that its roots can be found in the work of George Herbert Mead (1934/2015), who pioneered a new way of studying social reality known as **symbolic interactionism**. He explains that we construct our social world and our sense of self through the symbols we exchange—language being the most significant form of symbolic communication.

According to Mead, symbols are objects, words, gestures, or any other elements that carry meaning. They are not inherently meaningful, but their significance comes from the shared understanding that the people in a society attribute to them.

   ⤼ EXAMPLE A red traffic light is a symbol for stopping, while a wedding ring is a symbol for marriage. The core of symbolic interactionism is the idea that people act based on the meanings that they attribute to symbols. These meanings are not fixed or universal; rather, they are socially constructed and can vary between individuals and groups.

In other words, people engage in a continuous process of interpreting symbols and adjusting their behavior based on the meanings that they perceive in social situations. These interactions occur in various settings, such as families, schools, workplaces, and communities (Mead, 1934/2015).

The theory also addresses the development of self and identity. According to Mead's ideas, people acquire a sense of self through a process called "the looking-glass self," where they imagine how others perceive them. This self-perception influences their behavior and contributes to the ongoing construction of their identity.

🗎 TERM TO KNOW

Symbolic Interactionism

A theoretical approach that can be used to explain how societies and/or social groups come to view behaviors as deviant or conventional.

2. Labeling Theory

Mead's approach to studying social life set the stage for new ways of thinking about crime and deviance. One approach, which came to be known as **labeling theory**, was formulated by the sociologist Howard Becker in the 1960s. Rather than looking at the qualities or circumstances that make a person turn "bad," Becker (1963) asks how this definition of bad behavior was originally constructed.

> As Becker explains in his book, *The Outsiders*, "Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders."

Labeling theory focuses on societal reactions to deviant behavior rather than the behavior itself. Becker's theory suggests that societal reactions, particularly the labels applied to individuals, play a crucial role in the development of deviant identities. Moreover, Becker argues that deviance is not an inherent quality of an act but rather a social construct. Acts are thus labeled as deviant by society based on the reactions and perceptions of those in power (Siegel, 2018).

Becker also discusses the role of **moral entrepreneurs**, who are individuals or groups that seek to influence the societal definition of deviance to label certain behaviors as deviant. Moral entrepreneurs try to shape which acts and individuals are labeled as criminal.

It is important to note that labels can be positive or negative:

- Labels such as "smart" or "hardworking" suggest that someone is competent (Siegel, 2018). This type of label is assumed to set someone up for success, because without even meeting these people, we assume that they are successful.
- On the other hand, we also have negative labels. People who have run-ins with the authorities or school officials are often given the label of "troublemaker," which can stigmatize and define them. They are assumed to be dangerous, unstable, or violent.

In an earlier formulation of labeling theory, Frank Tannenbaum (1938) refers to the process whereby a stigmatizing label may lead a person to start seeing themselves as a criminal. This becomes a **self-fulfilling prophecy** that occurs through "a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious" the criminal traits in question (Tannenbaum, 1938). He calls this process the "dramatization of evil," whereby the treatment a young person is given by the police and the courts is instrumental in leading them to see themselves as a criminal.
Labels can thus have adverse impacts on those who are labeled.

Additionally, negatively labeled people begin to see themselves as the label they are given by society. Once someone believes that others view them as a troublemaker or a criminal, they assume the role that the label signifies. They often become more committed to a deviant career and may turn to similarly stigmatized individuals for companionship and support. By associating with other people who have adopted similar attitudes and behaviors, individuals are at further risk for committing crimes, as well as being victimized (Siegel, 2018).

Lastly, if someone has a criminal conviction, they are often labeled an "ex-con." This label assumes that the person is dangerous, aggressive, or dishonest. However, not everyone with a conviction meets these assumptions, nor do these descriptions capture their totality as a person. Once someone has a label, society often sees the person's entire identity as that one label, and it is difficult for that person to separate themselves from the label.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Labeling Theory
A theory that suggests that people's behavior is influenced by the labels attached to them by society.

Moral Entrepreneur
An individual or group who seeks to influence the societal definition of deviance and create or change rules to label certain behaviors as deviant.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
An expectation, belief, or label that can influence one's behaviors, thus causing the belief to come true.

📋 **SUMMARY**

In this lesson, you first learned about the roots of labeling theory in **symbolic interactionism**. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the way that individuals create and interpret symbols to give meaning to their social world. It paved the way for many of the ideas associated with Becker's **labeling theory**, which examines how society reacts to deviant behavior. Becker suggests that the labels applied to people by society play a crucial role in the development of deviant identities. What is considered deviant in

society changes over time, and moral entrepreneurs try to shape acts and definitions of deviance.

There are many consequences of labeling individuals, especially for those people who are given a negative label by society. Once someone is given a label, others in society tend to see that individual's main identity as the label that is given to them. Moreover, people who are given a label by society take on the attitudes and roles of that label and also view themselves as being that label. After someone has been labeled, it is difficult to detach from it.

Overall, labeling theory emphasizes the social construction of deviant identities, and it sheds light on the consequences of labeling for individuals and society. In the next lesson, we will examine an organized crime case using social process theories.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Labeling Theory
A theory that suggests that people's behavior is influenced by the labels attached to them by society.

Moral Entrepreneur
An individual or group who seeks to influence the societal definition of deviance and create or change rules to label certain behaviors as deviant.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

An expectation, belief, or label that can influence one's behaviors, thus causing the belief to come true.

Symbolic Interactionism
A theoretical approach that can be used to explain how societies and/or social groups come to view behaviors as deviant or conventional.

👤 PEOPLE TO KNOW

Howard Becker
The American sociologist who developed labeling theory.

Case Analysis: Organized Crime

by Sophia

<table>
<tr><td>☰</td><td>WHAT'S COVERED</td></tr>
</table>

In this lesson, you will determine whether or not the components of social process theories apply to organized crime. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

1. **Rolling Hills PD Explores Organized Crime**
     1a. Case of a Learned Choice
     1b. The Debrief

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1. Rolling Hills PD Explores Organized Crime

We have looked at the day-to-day social interactions and experiences that shape and influence our tendencies toward socially acceptable behavior. Unlike physical characteristics or biological factors, social process theories use social processes to explain why people do or do not engage in criminality.

Click on the plus sign to review social control theory's types of bonds:	**+**

According to social control theory, a person's behavior is controlled by four types of bonds:
- **Attachment:** How much time children spend with parents, how closely they identify with them, and whether they feel as though their parents care for their well-being
- **Commitment:** The time and energy a person spends in the pursuit of goals, such as getting an education, building a career, or other achieving personal goals (e.g., running a marathon)
- **Involvement:** The degree to which a person is active in conventional activities
- **Belief:** The acceptance of a common value system shared by people in each society

Click on the plus sign to review the nine propositions of differential association theory:	**+**

1. Criminal behavior is learned.
2. Criminal behavior is learned in interactions with other persons in the process of communication.

3. The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups.

4. The learning of criminal behavior includes techniques of committing the crime and the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.

5. The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of legal codes as favorable or unfavorable.

6. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of the law over definitions unfavorable to violation of the law (i.e., conforming to the law).

7. Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.

8. The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anticriminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.

9. While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values, since noncriminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values.

Click on the plus sign to review the four main components of social learning theory: +

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1. **Differential association:** Both direct interactions with others who engage in criminal acts and more indirect associations that expose individuals to various norms or values.

2. **Definitions:** Attitudes, or the meanings attributed to behaviors, that can be both general and specific.

3. **Differential reinforcement:** An individual's past, present, and anticipated future rewards and punishments for actions explain crime. This process is comprised of four types of reinforcement or punishment: positive reinforcement, positive punishment, negative reinforcement, and negative punishment.

4. **Imitation:** The mimicking of a behavior after observing others participate in the behavior.

Click on the plus sign to review delinquency as a subculture: +

The delinquent subculture develops its own set of values and norms that oppose those of the middle class. This subculture is seen as a group phenomenon, providing a sense of belonging and identity to those who adopt its values.

Click on the plus sign to review labeling theory: +

Labeling theory suggests that deviance is not an inherent quality of an act but rather a social construct. Acts are thus labeled as deviant by society based on the reactions and perceptions of those in power. Moral entrepreneurs (i.e., those in power) try to shape which acts and individuals are labeled as criminal. Labels can thus have adverse impacts on those who are labeled.
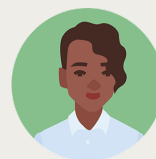
Can just one specific theory within these social process theories explain organized crime?

CONVERSATION BETWEEN COWORKERS

"Alicia, it seems like teens get into drugs and drug dealing a lot to make money."

"Even in cybercrimes in D.C., kids thought they could get away with selling their parents' prescription pills on the dark web."

"This may just be our perception and not entirely the truth when it comes to kids in poverty. Let's see with this next case."

1a. Case of a Learned Choice

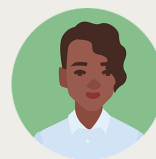Watch and listen as Detective Henson and Professor Joon look into the case of a learned choice.

▶ WATCH

1b. The Debrief

Detective Henson and Professor Joon will see how the elements of the social process theories factor into this case of a drug-dealing gang member.

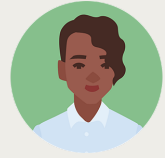**CONVERSATION BETWEEN COWORKERS**

"Did society make Danny a criminal?"

"Where he grew up, most people probably thought that he was a criminal to begin with."
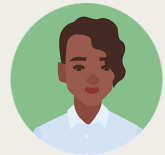
"His brother never committed a crime, and they grew up in the same environment, so why did Danny decide to join a gang and deal drugs?"

"Within his gang, they had their own set of rules, expectations, and values. While outside of society's norms, it was what they deemed they needed to do to survive in the world. And in Danny's mind, that made it acceptable."

"It seems like in this case, society *did* make him a criminal."

<table>
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In this lesson, you watched and listened as the **Rolling Hills PD explored organized crime**. Danny, learning new sets of values and expectations from his friends along with the weakened bonds with his parents and brother, decided to engage in criminal behavior in this **case of a learned choice**.

Just like Detective Henson and Professor Joon did in the **debrief**, we will see how modern criminologists use the elements of social process theories in the next lesson.

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Critiques of Social Process Theories

by Sophia

1. Limitations of Social Process Theories

Throughout this Challenge, you learned about different social process theories that explain criminal behavior as a function of people's interactions with various organizations, institutions, and processes in society. As you know by now, all criminological theories make contributions to the field, but they all have limitations. You will now learn about the limitations of the various social process theories.

1a. Social Control Theory

Social control theory is unique in that it examines why people *don't* commit crimes. It suggests that weak bonds lead people to commit crimes. Similar to all theories, social control theory has some limitations.

For one, critics argue that <u>youth who report high levels of involvement can actually engage in high levels of criminal behavior</u>. There are many teenagers involved in activities that lack parental supervision.

> ⤳ EXAMPLE Youth who spend time hanging out with friends in an unsupervised capacity, especially those who own cars, are the ones most apt to engage in substance use and get in trouble. Similarly, teens who date are more likely to get into trouble.

Critics suggest that involvement is important, but it depends on the behavior of the individuals involved in the activities (Siegel, 2023).

Another criticism lies in Hirschi's idea that all forms of social attachment, even attachment to deviant peers, are beneficial. Rather than deterring youth from deviance, <u>attachment to deviant peers supports antisocial behavior</u>. Likewise, youth attached to drug-abusing parents are also more apt to use drugs. Ultimately, research indicates that attachment to deviant groups motivates youth to engage in crime (Siegel, 2023).

Furthermore, social control theory suggests that weakened bonds lead to delinquency, but it may be the other way around. That is, <u>youth who get into trouble find their bonds to parents, schools, or society weakened as a result of their delinquency</u> (Siegel, 2023).

1b. Differential Association Theory

Recall that differential association theory focuses on how individuals learn deviant behavior through interactions with others. Let's now address several of the critiques and limitations associated with the theory.

For one, <u>the theory tends to downplay the role of larger societal factors such as poverty, inequality, and systemic issues in influencing criminal behavior</u>. It may oversimplify the complex interplay between individual learning and broader social structures, especially those related to inequality (Kubrin et al., 2009).

Some critics suggest that the theory's concepts, such as <u>"differential association" and "definitions favorable to law violation," are somewhat vague and difficult to put into practice</u>. This vagueness can make it challenging to test and measure the theory empirically.

Moreover, this theory establishes <u>a correlation between association with deviant peers and engaging in criminal behavior, but it does not provide a clear causal mechanism</u>. This means that it is challenging to determine whether association causes criminal behavior or if individuals with criminal tendencies are more likely to associate with deviant peers (Siegel, 2023).

1c. Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory (SLT), expanded upon by Ronald Akers, has been influential in understanding how individuals learn from observing others in a social context. However, like other theories, it has faced criticism.

First, critics argue that SLT places <u>too much emphasis on observational learning as the primary mechanism for behavior acquisition</u>. This may overlook the role of other factors such as biological predispositions, individual differences, and cognitive processes (Stewart, 2012).

Other critics suggest that SLT focuses on the importance of observational learning and modeling, but it may <u>not adequately address the cognitive processes involved in learning</u>. Critics argue that cognition, including attention, retention, and motivation, is a crucial aspect of learning that SLT does not fully explain. SLT has also undergone modifications and refinements over time in response to its limitations. Researchers continue to explore and build upon the theory to address some of these critiques and enhance its explanatory power.

1d. Delinquency as a Subculture

Critics of the delinquency-as-a-subculture approach suggest that <u>we cannot be sure that the lower-class culture itself promotes crime, rather than another force in society</u>. It is possible that crime in lower-class areas is related to biases in the criminal justice system as opposed to a lower-class subculture.

↪ EXAMPLE Research indicates that police use discretion when making arrests, and social status influences their decisions (Siegel, 2023).

Additionally, even if there were a delinquent subculture, the vast majority of people in lower-class areas are not criminals. Therefore, those who do break the law in lower-class areas must be motivated by an individual mental, physical, or social process or trait that cannot be explained by a subculture. Similarly, critics also question whether a lower-class culture actually exists. Lower-class youth appear to value middle-class concepts, such as earning money or getting an education, just like middle-class youth do (Siegel, 2023).

Lastly, delinquency as a subculture focuses primarily on working-class boys. It does not adequately explain why girls commit crimes, nor why boys in other classes commit crimes. While Cohen's subculture theory has contributed significantly to the study of deviance and societal reactions, these critiques highlight the need for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the emergence of subcultures and the societal responses to deviance.

1e. Labeling Theory

Labeling theory has also faced criticism. Critics question whether stigma produces crime or crime produces stigma. They suggest that labeling comes after offending, but getting labeled by the system and having a criminal record may have little effect on individuals with extensive involvement in the system (Siegel, 2023).

↪ EXAMPLE When considering gangs, members do not seem to be affected by an arrest or a conviction, and they may actually consider it a badge of honor.

Labeling theory also places insufficient emphasis on structural factors, such as economic inequality, institutional discrimination, and societal power dynamics. By not adequately addressing these issues, labeling theory may overlook the root causes of deviance and crime (Nguyen & Ngo, 2021).

Furthermore, other critics argue that this theory tends to overlook individual characteristics that may influence the labeling process and its outcomes. Factors such as the seriousness of the offense, prior criminal history, or the offender's demographic profile are likely to affect how a person is labeled through the system.

☆ **BIG IDEA**

Let's review the elements of the social process theories that we looked at in this Challenge:

	Concepts	Proponents	Assumptions	Limitations
Social Control Theory	Social bonds; attachment; commitment; involvement; belief	Travis Hirschi	Social control theory looks at why people *don't* commit crimes. It suggests that weak bonds lead to criminality.	All forms of attachment are not beneficial. Someone can be heavily involved in deviant activities.
Differential Association Theory	Learned behavior; nine propositions	Edwin Sutherland	Criminal behavior is learned. People learn the definitions, techniques,	This theory does not consider environmental factors that could lead someone to commit

			and rationalizations to commit crimes.	crimes. Some of the concepts are difficult to define and measure.
Social Learning Theory	Differential associations; definitions; differential reinforcement; imitation	Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers	Criminal behavior is acquired through social interaction and behavior modeling.	There is too much emphasis on observational learning, which overlooks other factors that may contribute to crime. This theory does not adequately address the cognitive processes involved in learning.
Delinquency as a Subculture	Delinquent boys; college boys; corner boys	Albert Cohen	Working-class boys are unable to reach the goals of the middle class, so they create their own subculture of delinquency.	The theory assumes that most people in working-class areas are delinquent. The theory only addresses the delinquency of working-class boys.
Labeling Theory	Symbolic interactionism; self-fulfilling prophecy	Howard Becker	Society assigns labels to individuals or certain groups, which can have an effect on their behavior.	There is debate whether stigma produces crime or crime produces stigma. Labeling theory overlooks structural factors that contribute to crime.

📋 SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **limitations of social process theories**. One critique of **social control theory** is that youth who report high levels of involvement can actually engage in high levels of

criminal behavior. Another limitation of this theory is that not all forms of attachment are as beneficial as the theory suggests.

Differential association theory downplays structural influences that contribute to criminality and is known for having vague definitions of important concepts, which makes it difficult to test. Similarly, **social learning theory** is often criticized for overlooking the role of factors such as biological predispositions and individual differences in the criminal process.

Critics of **delinquency as a subculture** argue that the theory is limited to explaining crimes among lower-class boys but nobody else. Lastly, critics of **labeling theory** have often questioned whether stigma produces crime or crime produces stigma.

Despite the limitations laid out by some critics of the various social process theories, these theories have all made significant contributions to the field. Scholars continue to test these theories and improve upon them. In the next Challenge, we will move away from social process theories and examine biological, psychological, and critical theories of crime.

REFERENCES

Kubrin, C. E., Stucky, T. D., & Krohn, M. D. (2009). *Researching theories of crime and* deviance. *Oxford University Press.*

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Siegel, L. J. (2023). *Criminology* (8th ed.). Cengage.

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Terms to Know

Anomie

A state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms.

Attachment

The emotional ties that a person has with other people, particularly with their parents.

Belief

The acceptance of a common value system shared by people in each society.

Codes

The formalized sets of rules or laws that govern behavior within a society.

Collective Efficacy

The ability of members of a community to control the behavior of individuals and groups in the community.

College Boy

In Cohen's theory of delinquency as a subculture, a young man from a working-class background who tries to achieve middle-class success.

Commitment

The time and energy that a person spends in the pursuit of their goals.

Conformity

A mode of adaptation in which both the goals and the means are accepted.

Coping Strategy

The thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of a stressful situation. Also called a *coping mechanism*.

Corner Boy

In Cohen's theory of delinquency as a subculture, a young man who remains in his birth neighborhood, acquires a family and a menial job, and adjusts to the demands of his environment.

Criminogenic

The production or tendency to produce crime or criminals.

Delinquency as a Subculture

A solution for lower-class boys to retrieve some measure of status apart from the middle class and demonstrate their own values.

Delinquent Boy

In Cohen's theory of delinquency as a subculture, a young man who adopts delinquent subcultural values.

Differential Association Theory

A theory proposing that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior.

Differential Reinforcement

The concept that an individual's past, present, and anticipated future rewards and punishment for actions explain crime.

Ecological Approach

The study of crime in terms of its environmental influences.

Ecological Fallacy

A failure in reasoning that arises when an inference is made about an individual based on aggregate data for a group.

General Strain Theory

A theory that posits that crime and delinquency are caused by the presence of negative emotions, resulting from an array of strains.

Genocide

Acts committed with the intent of destroying (in whole or in part) a group of people with a shared identity, such as a racial, ethnic, national, or religious group.

Gentrification

A process of urban development in which a city neighborhood develops rapidly over a short time, changing from low to high value.

Homogeneity

The quality or state of being all the same or all of the same kind.

Imitation

The mimicking of a behavior after observing others participate in the behavior.

Incorrigibility

The state of a person or their tendencies not able to be corrected, improved, or reformed.

Innovation

A mode of adaptation in which the goals are accepted, while the means are rejected.

Institutional Anomie

A condition where higher rates of criminal activity are attributed to the cultural pressure exerted by economic goals that are generalized throughout a society.

Involvement

The degree to which a person is active in conventional activities.

Labeling Theory

A theory suggesting that self-identity and the behavior of individuals may be determined or influenced by the terms used to describe or classify them.

Moral Entrepreneur

An individual or group who seeks to influence the societal definition of deviance and create or change rules to label certain behaviors as deviant.

Morals

A person's standards of behavior or beliefs concerning what is and is not acceptable for them to do.

Negative Affective State

Emotions and feelings that are considered undesirable or unpleasant.

Negative Punishment

The removal of a positive stimulus after an undesired behavior occurs.

Negative Reinforcement

The removal of a negative stimulus to aid in the promotion of a specific behavior.

Norms

The standard patterns of behaviors typical for a given group.

Operant Behavior Theory

A method of learning that utilizes punishment and rewards for behavior that either increase or decrease the likelihood that the behavior is committed again.

Positive Punishment

The presentation of a negative consequence after a specific behavior.

Positive Reinforcement

The introduction of a desirable or pleasant stimulus after a specific behavior.

Rebellion

A mode of adaptation that overturns the goals and means that society has to offer, creating new goals and institutional regulations.

Restitution

An offender's repayment to a victim for the financial losses the victim has incurred as a result of a crime.

Retreatism

A mode of adaptation in which both the means and the goals are rejected.

Retribution

The infliction of punishment on an offender.

Ritualism

A mode of adaptation in which the cultural goals are rejected, while the means are accepted.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

An expectation, belief, or label that can influence one's behaviors, thus causing the belief to come true.

Social Bonds

The connections to society, including attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

Social Control Theory

A theory proposing that the process of socialization and social learning builds self-control and reduces the inclination to indulge in behavior recognized as antisocial.

Social Disorganization

An approach that links crime and delinquency to the disordered ecological characteristics of a neighborhood.

Social Disorganization Theory

A sociological perspective that seeks to understand the relationship between the ecology of a community and its levels of crime and deviance.

Social Learning Theory

A theory proposing that new behaviors, including crime, can be acquired by observing and imitating others.

Social Norms

The shared expectations or rules about appropriate behavior in a specific social group or culture.

Social Process Theories

Theories that focus on the social interactions and processes that lead individuals to engage in criminal behavior.

Strain

A severe or excessive demand on the strength, resources, or abilities of someone or something.

Strain Theory

A criminological theory that aims to explain the relationship between social structure, social values or goals, and crime.

Symbolic Interactionism

A theoretical approach that can be used to explain how societies and/or social groups come to view behaviors as deviant or conventional.

Vagrancy

The state of living as a vagrant or being homeless.

White-Collar Crime

A crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of their occupation.

People to Know

Albert Cohen

The American criminologist associated with subculture of deviance theory.

Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay

Researchers from the Chicago school who developed social disorganization theory.

Edwin Sutherland

The American sociologist known for developing differential association theory.

Howard Becker

The American sociologist who developed labeling theory.

Robert Agnew

The criminologist who developed general strain theory.

Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers

Criminologists associated with social learning theory.

Robert Merton

An American sociologist who is considered a founding father of modern sociology and a major contributor to the subfield of criminology.

Robert Park and Ernest Burgess

Researchers from the Chicago school who developed the concentric zone model.

Robert Sampson and Bryon Groves

Criminologists known for contributing the element of collective efficacy to social disorganization theory.

Travis Hirschi

The American sociologist known for developing social control theory.

Émile Durkheim

A French sociologist who established anomie.