

2 - Functionalist Theories of Crime

The functions of crime in society – Durkheim

Functionalists believe that all social phenomena play a positive role in society, including crime. Durkheim suggested that crime was inevitable and necessary for societal functioning. He argued that societies with little crime can stagnate and perish as they fail to adapt to evolving needs. Conversely, too much crime indicates a state of Anomie, where confusion reigns regarding acceptable behaviour.

The problem with this theory lies in Durkheim's failure to quantify the amount of crime required for its benefits to society, leaving questions about what is too much or too little. Nonetheless, Durkheim identifies three positive functions of crime and deviance. Firstly, he contends that they act as reminders of societal boundaries, serving as a mechanism for boundary maintenance. When criminal and deviant behaviours are published and reported, society is reminded of what is unacceptable and the consequences thereof. For example, during the 2011 London riots, the televised condemnation of the events and the subsequent naming and shaming of those prosecuted served as reminders of unacceptable behaviour within society.

Secondly, Durkheim views crime and deviance as fostering social cohesion. Publicly naming and shaming criminals, regardless of the scale of their crimes, brings society together in mutual grief and condemnation. This was evident in the cases of the 2016 murder of MP Joe Cox and the 2017 Manchester bombing, where the public expressed unity in grief for the victims and condemnation of the extremists responsible.

Lastly, Durkheim perceives crime and deviance as agents of social change. Deviant behaviour can signal the need for societal reform or indicate underlying problems. A compelling example is the suffragettes in the early 20th century, who employed militant and criminal tactics to advance the cause of women's suffrage.

Functions of Crime - Davis and Polsky

The functions of crime in society, as discussed by Davis and Polsky, highlight the role of minor criminal and deviant behaviour as a safety valve preventing more severe acts from occurring. Davis clarifies that society does not condone such low-level criminal behaviour, but individuals may resort to these acts as a means to release their urges, thus averting more serious crimes and their consequences. Polsky exemplifies this concept using pornography, where crimes like

prostitution serve as safe outlets for releasing sexual frustrations, thereby preventing more grievous offenses like rape.

Functions of Crime - Clinard and Cohen

Moreover, Clinard and Cohen contribute to Durkheim's theory by proposing that criminal and deviant behaviours serve as warning signs indicating dysfunction within society that requires attention. This differs from the notion of adaptation and change, where specific crimes are committed to achieve particular changes. The warning sign they refer to is more generalized. For instance, a rise in teen pregnancy could signal the need for reforms in the education system.

Evaluation

The positive functions of crime and deviance have faced criticism on four main points. Firstly, as a macro approach, the functionalist theory examines the impact of crime on society but overlooks its effects on the individual victim. For the victim, the crime is unlikely to be a positive experience. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, neither Durkheim nor subsequent sociologists have quantified the beneficial level of crime required for the smooth functioning of society. While they assert that some crime is necessary and too much leads to anomie, the specific threshold remains unspecified.

Furthermore, crime does not always foster solidarity or social cohesion. In many cases, it results in ostracization and isolation for both the victim and the criminal. Certain crimes like sexual assault and abuse marginalize victims, branding them as broken or damaged by society. Similarly, criminals can face marginalization for their actions, making it difficult for them to secure employment upon release from prison. This is evident in the struggle many ex-convicts encounter while seeking jobs.

Lastly, Marxists argue that the perceived positive functions of crime and deviance only benefit the ruling class. According to their perspective, the ruling class dictates societal norms and values, thereby controlling the processes of marginalization and boundary maintenance that arise from crime and deviance. This, in turn, reinforces and perpetuates the ideology of the ruling class.

Causes of crime – Merton

Merton's strain theory, also known as the Anomie-Strain Theory, is a sociological perspective that aims to explain the relationship between societal goals, the means to achieve them, and the occurrence of deviant or criminal behaviour. It was first proposed by American sociologist

Robert K. Merton in the mid-20th century and has since become a prominent theory in criminology and sociology.

The central premise of the theory is that societies have culturally approved goals, such as financial success, material wealth, and social status, which are considered desirable and held as common aspirations by most individuals. These goals are often collectively referred to as the "American Dream," reflecting the pursuit of individual success and the accumulation of wealth.

Merton argues that societies also provide culturally approved means, such as education, hard work, and adherence to the law, to attain these goals. When the means to achieve these goals are accessible and legitimate, social order is maintained, and individuals are likely to conform to societal norms.

However, Merton contends that there is a discrepancy between the culturally approved goals and the available means to achieve them. Not everyone has equal opportunities to access the means, leading to what he terms "strain." This strain arises from the gap between society's expectations (goals) and the individual's ability to attain those expectations (means).

Merton identifies five possible responses to strain:

- **Conformity:** Individuals accept both the societal goals and the approved means. They strive to achieve success through legitimate channels and do not resort to deviant or criminal behaviour.
- **Innovation:** Individuals accept the goals of society but reject the approved means. In this response, they turn to unconventional or deviant methods, such as theft or fraud, to achieve the desired success.
- **Ritualism:** Individuals abandon the pursuit of societal goals but rigidly adhere to the accepted means. They may continue with routine and repetitive behaviour, despite losing faith in achieving the original goals.
- **Retreatism:** Individuals reject both the goals and the means of society. Instead, they disengage from conventional society and may turn to drug use, vagrancy, or other forms of deviant behaviour.
- **Rebellion:** Individuals challenge the established goals and means of society and seek to replace them with alternative ideologies and objectives. This response can be political or revolutionary in nature, aiming to bring about significant societal change.

Merton's strain theory has been influential in understanding the root causes of criminal behaviour and deviance. It emphasizes the role of social structure and opportunities in shaping individual actions, highlighting how societal pressures can lead to deviant responses when legitimate pathways to success are limited or blocked. The theory also points to the importance of addressing social inequalities and providing equal opportunities to reduce strain and potential criminal behaviour in society.

Evaluation

Merton's strain theory appears sensible, yet it faces substantial criticisms. The first critique centres on its determinism. The theory proposes that criminal behaviour is not an individual choice but a result of external factors leading to criminal and deviant actions. This perspective shifts some responsibility away from the criminal.

Moreover, Merton's theory falls short in explaining the presence of white-collar and corporate crime. It suggests that crime stems from people striving to achieve socially approved goals but facing barriers to access socially approved means. However, those engaging in white-collar and corporate crime usually belong to the upper middle class or higher, indicating they have already attained socially approved goals of success and material wealth. Consequently, the theory fails to account for why these individuals' resort to criminal acts.

Additionally, Merton's theory implies a consensus value within society, where the majority agrees with the socially approved goals of material wealth and success. However, this assumption overlooks the fact that not everyone aspires to these goals. Therefore, when linking someone's behaviour to one of the responses to strain, it may not necessarily be due to strain itself, but rather indicative of a more complex postmodern society.

Another criticism involves the theory's exclusive focus on utilitarian crime, driven by financial motivation. This limited scope ignores numerous crimes where the offender gains no financial benefits, such as crimes of passion or sexual crimes like rape.

Finally, Merton's strain theory lacks an explanation for why and how individuals choose their responses to strain. Although the theory presents five potential options, Merton does not delve into the underlying factors that influence an individual's decision between these paths.

Subcultural Theory

The subcultural theory posits that deviance is a collective response to marginalization, explaining non-utilitarian crimes like vandalism and joyriding, which functionalist theories struggle to account for. Within subcultural theory, there are three important perspectives to consider.

Status Frustration

Status frustration, as presented by Albert Cohen, highlights the emergence of subcultures due to societal denial of status to certain groups. Cohen's study focused on working-class boys to

illustrate this concept. He argued that these boys, lacking the means to achieve success in a middle-class world, experience status frustration, leading to feelings of personal failure and inadequacy. In response, many of them reject socially acceptable values and norms. As several boys share similar experiences, they form delinquent subcultures, where status is gained through malicious behaviour, intimidation, breaking school rules, and engaging in illegal activities.

Illegitimate Opportunity Structures

Cloward and Ohlin built upon Cohen's subcultural theory, seeking to explain why different types of subcultures emerge in various regions. They propose that the illegitimate opportunity structure influences the type of subculture that arises in response to status frustration. The social circumstances in which working-class youth live lead to three types of delinquent subcultures.

Criminal Subcultures: These develop in more stable working-class areas with an established pattern of crime. They involve utilitarian crimes like theft, offering a learning opportunity and career structure for aspiring young criminals as an alternative to legitimate job opportunities. Adult criminals also exert social control over the young to deter non-utilitarian delinquent acts such as vandalism, which might attract police attention.

Conflict Subcultures: Emerging in socially disorganized areas with high population turnover and a lack of social cohesion, these subcultures experience blocked or limited access to both approved and illegal means of achieving mainstream goals. Young people express their frustration through violence or street crime, gaining status within their subcultural peer groups.

Retreatist Subcultures: Found among individuals who have failed to succeed in both mainstream society and criminal or gang cultures, retreatist subcultures involve drug addiction, alcoholism, and engagement in petty theft, shoplifting, and prostitution.

Focal Concerns

Miller's focal concerns theory suggests that the working class internalize specific values, termed focal concerns, which increase the likelihood of engaging in delinquent or deviant behaviour. These focal concerns include seeking excitement, demonstrating toughness, street smarts or wit, independence, and fatalism. Although these values alone do not guarantee criminal behaviour, they do heighten the likelihood of non-utilitarian crime or violent behaviour resulting from toughness.

Evaluation

Like all theories, functionalist subcultural theories face criticisms. Firstly, status frustration is critiqued for its focus on youth delinquency, particularly among males, and its failure to explain female delinquency or adult criminality. Paul Willis's study, "Learning to Labour," highlights that working-class boys may not share the same ideas of status as middle-class boys, challenging

the notion of status frustration proposed by Cohen. Moreover, Cloward and Ohlin's methodology is criticized for relying solely on official statistics without critical evaluation and for potentially exaggerating the availability of criminal opportunities for young people. Their theory also predominantly focuses on youth crime.

Matza criticizes Miller's focal concerns, arguing that subculture membership is often short-lived, and many delinquent youths transition into law-abiding adults. Additionally, the criticism against Miller stems from the fact that not all working-class individuals engage in criminal behaviour, implying that the focal concerns of the working class may not be the sole cause of criminal behaviour.

Bond Theory

Hirschi's bond theory diverges from other covered theories, as it shifts the focus from why people commit crime to why they do not. Hirschi explores the factors that restrain individuals from engaging in criminal behaviour rather than what drives them towards it. He contends that criminal activity arises when people's attachment to society weakens. This attachment is contingent upon the strength of four social bonds that bind individuals together in society.

- **Attachment:** Attachment refers to the emotional bond and connection an individual has with significant others, such as family, friends, and community members. The stronger the attachment, the more individuals care about these relationships and value the opinions and expectations of those they are attached to. The fear of disappointing or losing the support and respect of these individuals acts as a deterrent from engaging in criminal behaviour. For example, a strong attachment to one's family may discourage an individual from committing a crime because they do not want to bring shame or disappointment to their loved ones.
- **Commitment:** Commitment relates to the investments an individual has made in their future and society. These investments can include personal achievements, education, career aspirations, and community involvement. When individuals have significant investments at stake, they are less likely to jeopardize their future by engaging in criminal activities. The potential loss of these valuable commitments acts as a deterrent. For instance, someone with a promising career may be deterred from criminal behaviour as a criminal record could sabotage their professional aspirations.
- **Involvement:** Involvement pertains to the level of participation and engagement individuals have in legitimate activities within their community and society. When individuals are actively involved in positive and constructive activities such as work, school, volunteering, sports, or social clubs, they have less free time and fewer opportunities to engage in criminal behaviour. The positive and meaningful

engagements create a natural barrier against criminal activities. For example, a person heavily involved in community service projects is less likely to have the time or inclination to engage in criminal acts.

- **Belief:** Belief refers to an individual's adherence to societal norms, values, and rules. This bond is closely tied to the process of socialization, during which individuals internalize societal norms and develop a sense of moral obligation to follow these norms. The strength of an individual's belief in the legitimacy of societal rules influences their likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour. Those with strong beliefs in the importance of obeying laws and societal norms are less likely to commit crimes as they feel a sense of duty to adhere to these norms. For example, a person who strongly believes in the value of honesty is less likely to commit fraud or engage in deceptive activities.

Hirschi's social bond theory emphasizes that the presence and strength of these four bonds play a crucial role in determining an individual's level of social control and propensity towards criminal behaviour. The theory suggests that a strong social bond acts as an effective deterrent against criminal activities by instilling a sense of responsibility and attachment to societal values and expectations.

Evaluation

One of the major weaknesses of bond theory is its failure to explain why certain individuals possess weak bonds while others have strong ones, and how these bonds are established. Additionally, the theory struggles to account for criminals who seemingly maintain strong ties to society, particularly in cases of white-collar and corporate criminals, though not exclusively. Illustrative examples include Dr. Harold Shipman, estimated to have murdered 200 elderly patients, and Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, involved in offering political positions for cash. Despite their strong connections to the community and society at large, they still committed crimes.

Furthermore, Hirschi's theory does not provide specific explanations for crimes; instead, it solely addresses the existence of crime and deviance in general. The theory implies that human nature is inherently flawed, and society serves as the restraining force preventing individuals from engaging in criminal behaviour. However, it does not delve into the intricacies of individual motivations for specific criminal acts.