

# **Week 4 Breakdown of Sociological Theories of Crime**

## **Social Learning Theory and Differential Association**

- Social learning theory says that all behavior is learned in much the same way
- Crime, like other behaviors, is also learned
- People learn to commit crimes from others
- Crime is a product of the social environment, not an innate characteristic
- Criminality is learned through a process of differential association with others who communicate criminal values and advocate the commission of crimes
- All significant human behavior is learned and crime is not substantively different from any other form of behavior

## **Principles of differential association**

- Criminal behavior is learned
- Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with others in a process of communication
- The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups
- The learning includes techniques of committing crimes and the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes

- The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable
- A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to law violation over those unfavorable to law violation
- Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity
- The process of learning criminal behavior involves the same mechanisms involved in other learning
- While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those needs and values

## **Social Control Theory- Containment theory**

- Seek to identify features of the personality and environment that keep people from committing crimes
- Focus on the process through which social integration develops
- Rather than stressing causative factors in criminal behavior, social control theories ask why people obey rules instead of breaking them
- Crime is the consequence of social pressures to violate the law and failure to resist such pressures
- Compares crime to a biological immune response
  - Sickness, like crime, results from the failure of control mechanisms, both internal and external
- External containment: The holding power of the group
- Inner containment: The ability of the person to follow expected norms
  - This ability is enhanced by a positive self-image, a focus on socially approved goals, realistic personal aspirations, a good tolerance for frustration, and a general
- Adherence to social norms and values

- Containment is a stabilizing force—if effective, it blocks pushes and pulls from leading an individual toward crime

## Social Bond Theory - Hirschi

- Social bonds are formed between individuals and the social group, When the bond is weakened or broken, deviance and crime may result
- Attachment –A person's shared interests with others
- Commitment –The amount of time and energy put into conforming activities
- Involvement –The amount of time spent with others in shared activities
- Belief –A shared value and moral system
- Low self-control accounts for all crimes at all times
- Self-control:
  - The degree to which a person is vulnerable to the temptations of the moment
  - Acquired early in life
  - Low self-control combined with impulsivity is the main individual-level cause of crime
  - Parents foster self-control development
- The theory is built on a rational choice perspective
  - Offenders lack control over their desires
  - An individual's ability to exercise self-control is an outcome of the interaction between personality traits and the immediate situation
  - Personal morality and moral contexts provide a filter that prevents some people from considering crime as a realistic possibility
- A well-developed social bond will result in the creation of effective self-control mechanisms
- The link between self-control and crime depends substantially on criminal opportunity

# Control Balance Theory

- Blends social bond and containment perspectives, suggesting that too much control is as bad as too little
- Control ratio: The amount of control to which a person is subject versus the amount of control that a person exerts over others
  - Predicts the probability an individual will engage in crime and also the form it will take
- Control surpluses—high levels of control/overcontrol
  - Individuals can exercise control over others and will work to extend that control through deviant acts involving exploitation, plunder, decadence
- Control deficit—low levels of control/over-controlled
  - Results in deviance as an attempt to escape repressive controls through predation, defiance, or submission
- Deviance occurs when a person realizes that deviance can favorably reset the control ratio
- Opportunity also plays a significant role

# Labeling Theory

- Society's response to known/suspected offenders determines the future of those labeled as criminals and contributes to the incidence of criminality by reducing available behavior options
- Tagging
  - Happens to offenders after arrest, conviction, sentencing
  - Once a person is defined as bad, few legitimate opportunities remain open
  - The tagged individual can only associate with others who are similarly defined

- This continued association with negatively defined others leads to continued crime
- Primary deviance:
  - The initial deviant act
  - May be to solve an immediate problem or meet group expectations
- Secondary deviance:
  - Continued deviant acts that may occur if primary deviance results in tagging with the status of criminal
  - Plays a role in causing tagged individuals to internalize the negative labels applied to them and assume the role of the deviant
- Society's response to circumscribed behaviors creates both deviance and a deviant person
- No act is intrinsically deviant/criminal—acts are defined as such by others
- Becoming deviant involves a sequence of steps leading to a commitment to a deviant identity and participation in a deviant career
- Contributions of labeling theory
  - Deviance is the result of social processes involving the imposition of definitions rather than the consequence of any quality inherent in the human activity itself
  - Deviant individuals achieve their status by social definition rather than because of inborn traits
- Labeling by society and handling by the justice system tend to perpetuate crime and delinquency rather than reduce it