

The Development of Integrated Theories in Criminal Justice

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The best quote found regarding the integration of theories in criminal justice is that; “a testable theory is one that is sufficiently explicit for the specific hypothesis and empirical data relevant to it to be identified.” Throughout history scholars, writers and criminologists have been trying to discover the true nature of crime and criminals. They come up with theories as to why one person would commit gruesome crimes yet others shy away from crime or are disgusted by it altogether. There is no one answer but a combination of beliefs, environment, education, parental ties, and peer associations that help in determining if one is to become a criminal or not.

Regardless of who or what the theory targets, in today’s society, each theory holds some values in assessing crime, and some theories hold great value in the explanation of crime and the predisposition to becoming criminal. A feasible integration of two or more theories could help explain some forms of crime or lack thereof. When reading any book on criminological theory, you will see that a lot of the theories focus on the individual during childhood because this is where it is believed we learn our future behaviors from. While one theory may focus on the criminal and why they commit crime, another theory may focus on the environment as a reason for a person’s need to commit crimes. However, as it has been shown in the past, there is no one theory but an integration of theories that drive criminal justice research in its explanation of crime and criminality.

The idea of integrating theories dates back to the 1980’s and the 1990’s with an attempt to explain crime using different ideas and models to form one overall criminological theory. Most integrated theories are formed from the Social Control, Social Learning, differential association and Strain theories. As the research suggests, there is no “one” explanation or theory, but a mixture of circumstances, behaviors and environment, not to mention parental/role model influences on the youth. These influences, or a mixture thereof, can possibly determine if one is predisposed to become criminal. With the wrong mixture of circumstances among these theories, the odds of a person gravitating towards criminality increase.

Each of these integrations does however miss variables that are present in other theories when attempting integration, but can be explained through a micro-analysis of each variable. For example, certain aspects of Merton’s strain theory coupled with the Chicago school of writers’ explanation of gang subculture and delinquency, specifically focusing on how criminal behavior is learned through cultural transmission (Lilly, et al, 2007) could describe how economic strain and peer/gang association contribute to criminal activities among youths.

One attempt made at integration by Delbert Elliot, Suzanne Ageton, and Rachelle Canter in 1979, produced the Integrated Strain-Control Theory paradigm. It is based on a part of the social learning theory regarding the adolescent peer groups in sustaining criminal behavior. Elliot, et al, believes this theory emphasizes the stages of life as important turning points in a youth’s life. Also, this theory states that there is more than one path to delinquency (Lilly, et al, 2007). By using the attachments to family, school and peers, Elliot theorized that these social bonds, if strong will instill social norms and consequences on the youth making it unlikely they will become delinquent. In contrast, if the bond with family and peers is weak, then the youth will likely become delinquent.

Other authors agree with Elliot, et al for example, one article written by Christopher Kierkus, of State University of New York at Albany, and Douglas Baer of the University of Victoria. A reviewed of 62 studies published in the last 30 years with research limited to the family structure as a significant predictor of misbehavior in youths (Kierkus, et al, 2002). The authors showed how the parental attachment of social control theory can explain *why* children from non traditional families are more likely to commit delinquent acts than those from traditional, two parent homes.

Also stated in this Integrated Strain-Control is that as these youths grow into teens, the bonds formed in their younger days will guide them on their path of criminal/non-criminal behavior by continued association with delinquents. If they associated with delinquents then they will more than likely continue this association with delinquent peers over time (Lilly, et al 2007). Elliot did cite a second path to delinquency even when family, and social bonds are strong. He stated that an event can occur that can create a strain for the youth. A disorganized, unstable environment can also create this strain. This strain in turn weakens the bonds formed and therefore leave the youth open for delinquent associations.

In a study done by Kierkus, et al, 2002, it was found that the link between family structure and delinquent behavior has tended to focus on the attachment component of the social control theory. This study also implies that the attachment component is influence by the family structure (single parent vs. two parent homes). To be more specific, this study cites an indicator used to measure attachment. The concept of this direct/indirect supervision indicator is that the more a child is attached to their parents, the more time they will spend with them, which means less time getting in trouble (Kierkus, et al, 2002).

To explain the concept of indirect supervision, the authors found that in Hershi's studies the psychological presence of parental figures creates a sort of shield against delinquent influences. In other words, a child with strong bonds to family will psychologically believe that their family will know everything their doing and where they are at most of the time, and this factor will increase the likelihood of the youth avoiding delinquent acts (Kierkus, et al, 2002). One author believes that "Because they are seen to be the primary socializing agents, parents are expected to provide warmth and protection as well as guidance (McCord, 2009)." Going further, Hershi, et al, believes that parents who are neglectful and ineffective in their parenting skills will raise children who are impulsive, insensitive and physical. At the same time, it was shown that the absence of affection and inadequate discipline contributes to criminal tendency.

In contrast to this is the fact that parents who raise children with discipline and tight supervision will develop the necessary "self-control needed to resist the easy temptations offered by crime and to sustain the hard work necessary to succeed in school, work and marriage (Lilly, et al, 2007)." There is also research that suggests parental controls might decrease self-control among girls and increase it among boys in single family homes. Also shown in this study is that "levels of self control are increased by effective school socialization and decreased by adverse neighborhood conditions (Lilly, et al, 2007)"

As an added variable when looking at neglectful parents and their lack of nurture, and guidance, let's look at the media we allow our children to watch. Parents, who neglect their

children, in most cases use media as a tool to control children (i.e. cartoons, power rangers). There is research that suggests there is more violence in media and cartoons aimed at young children than there is in almost any other programming (Zeanah, et al, 1997). Could media violence forced on children at a young age in the form of Saturday morning cartoons instill violent notions?

As we can see the integration of ideas and theories to explain the reasons for crime is nothing new. With the coexistence of several variables including neighborhood type, family structure, economic status of community, the possibilities for new and more informative theories can emerge. What this paper is attempting to do is show how several integrations already exist, and how a lack of one or more variables could change the course and/or the outcome.

For example, Sutherland's differential association theory has nine propositions that guide the theory. If there is some merit to other theories as to why people commit crimes, they will meet one or more of these criteria put forth by Sutherland because most theories believe crime is learned through social interaction, environment and peers. Believing he had a general theory for crime, Sutherland put forth his theory.

- Criminal Behavior is learned
- Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons on a process of communication
- The principle part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups
- When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes techniques of committing the crime, which sometimes are very complicated, sometimes are very simple; and the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes
- The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of legal codes as favorable and unfavorable
- A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions unfavorable to violation of law. This is the principle of differential association
- Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity

- The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning
- While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values since non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values (Lilly, et al, 2007).

Although this does not account for all crime, Sutherland did conclude that this theory could also account for white collar crime. He feels his theory shows that “criminal behavior is due neither to poverty nor to the psychopathic and sociopathic conditions associated with poverty (Lilly, et al, 2007)” Part of Sutherland’s differential association theory is that white collar criminals grow up in good neighborhoods and go to college with expectations of the real corporate world. However, upon graduation, some realize going into the corporate world that white collar crime among occupations such as business, politics and others is a way of doing business.

Ronald Akers also used Sutherland’s Differential association theory as an expansion point for his social learning theory. This theory focused on “how” people learn to become a criminal. He asserts that delinquent friends cause delinquent behavior, but here have been critics who assert quite the opposite and use the old adage “birds of a feather, flock together” citing that delinquent kids hang around one another because they share the common trait of delinquency (Lilly, et al, 2007). There are also studies that show the continued association with other antisocial peers can amplify delinquent involvement. According to Shaw and McKay’s Social disorganization theory, criminal traditions in urban “ghetto” neighborhoods overrule conventional traditions because the social controls had weakened.

If this is the case then the norms (positive or negative) in a particular neighborhood or community would be a factor on the types of crimes committed. For example in urban areas drug dealing is a large problem. Although you have this problem in the suburbs it is not as bad as urban inner-city communities. If you move fifty miles north to a different community, the acceptable standard there may be higher than in the urban area. Their police force may take a different stance on drug enforcement in their community. This in turn forces the youths to conform to new norms of the community they are involved in or face being an outcast or committing delinquent crimes.

Shaw and McKay were not the only scholars who believed that the weakened norms in a given community gave way to delinquency. According to Merton strain theory, anomie and deviance are mutually reinforcing. According to Merton, “...the weakening of institutionalized norms initially allows a limited number of people to violate socially approved standards. But such deviance, once completed successfully and observed by others, poses a concrete challenge to the norms legitimacy (Lilly, et al, 2007).”

According to two writers for the Chicago school of thought, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, "...delinquent subcultures could emerge and persist only in areas where enough youths were concentrated to band together to support one another's alienation from conventional values (Lilly, et al, 2007)." The Chicago school also believed that the roots of crime were embedded only in American slums or "ghettos" and a person became deviant by learning the cultural values of their environment.

As you have seen, many ideas and theories go into youth and delinquency research. It is not just one reason, but many reasons. As stated earlier, once a youth has those strong criminal ties with delinquent friends, these ties will likely carry over to adulthood. This transition from youthful delinquency to adult offender carries with it the expectations from other delinquent peers of the same standing.

According to one theory, once an adult, the drive for the American dream instilled on us as youths forces one to adapt to the particulars of their situation. Robert K Merton's Strain Theory asserts that although people want to achieve and rise above poverty, the social structure limits access to success by legitimate means such as requirements like a college education. Due to the limited access to the means to success, people change their goals or withdraw from the race for success altogether (Lilly, et al, 2007).

Merton emphasized four modes of adaptation in his theory.

- Innovation is achieved when those who continue to want the American dream but turn to illegal means when they find their path to legitimate success obstructed by obstacles.
- Ritualists are those who mitigate the strain produced trying to achieve the dream by scaling down their goals so that they may be reached comfortably and realistically.
- Retreatist are those who faced with the strain of roadblocks to legitimate means, and choose to relinquish and retreat from achieving their goals through the use of drugs, alcohol, or becoming vagrant as well as other low level deviant means.
- Finally, Rebellious are those who not only reject the way the current system is run but also attempt to change the system. These are the type of people that propose to substitute a new set of goals and means (Lilly, et al, 2007).

However, even this line of thinking has its critics. Authors for the Chicago school of thinking feel that this part of Merton's Strain theory does not offer an explanation on the conditions under which a person would choose which adaptation method to follow (Lilly, et al, 2007). However,

Shaw and McKay's Social disorganization theory states that criminal traditions in urban "ghetto" neighborhoods overrule conventional traditions because the social controls had deteriorated. This argument could be used to explain this discrepancy between which adaptation method to follow, and the hierarchy of the traditions of the community. Adding to this, the integration of Sutherland's Theory that deviance is learned through association, it could be argued that Ghetto neighborhoods, with high rates of crime will produce criminals through association and conformity of the norms of the community and its hold on a youth.

However, in contrast to Sutherland's theory, "Control theories rest on an assumption that deviance is natural and that only conformity must be learned. Social learning theories, on the other hand, assume that both pro-social and antisocial activities are learned. They claim that a desire for pleasure and for avoidance of pain motivates behavior, and hence they focus on rewards and punishments (McCord, 2009)."

Another integration of theories could be devised using examples from Hershi's Control theory. Hershi, et al, theory states that "self-control is the restraint that allows people to resist crime and other short-term gratification." An example would be a study of middle school students done by Unnever, Cullen, and Agnew in 2006 which found that "low self-control and aggressive attitudes not only both independently predict delinquency, but also have a significant interactive effect on violent and nonviolent offending (Kierkus, et al, 2002)." found that the attachment component of the control theory, where the strength of the bond between parents and child have a bearing on the understanding of right and wrong, as well as attitude and acceptance of social norms over delinquency have a strong influence in direction of behaviors.

One commonality that was found among the different theories is that they do not differentiate a boy from a girl. What are the effects of strain on gender, and how does each gender accept and handle this strain? Most studies done were done with the male as the target of the theory. For example, Piquero, et al, (2004) conducted a study and found that several scholars believe that the Strain, Subculture, differential association and social control theories "were all developed with direct and exclusive reference to males."

The strain theory asserts that individuals feels unequal when surround by those who flaunt their success. This in turn make the less successful person feel frustrated at their situation and the greater the inequality, the higher the strain, the more the less successful person is to commit crime (Morgan, 2000) . Morgan went on to state that according to the social disorganization theory, inequality causes crime indirectly by being associated with poverty. She says that a survey in the 1990 showed that because of the strong connection "...between poverty, race, unemployment, and other measures of deprivation making it hard to separate the effects of inequality on crime from those on poverty (Morgan, 2000)."

Rather than try to form a general account for crime, Broidy and Agnew, in 1992 formulated a General Strain Theory (GST) from the classic strain theory to show that offending is similar across gender but the content is different also. The author asserts in this new GST that there are three major causes of strain, and the way one handles those strains in life will be a determining factor in their becoming criminal (Piquero, et al, 2004). The author also explained how Broidy and Agnew's GST focused on three issues of why males tend to have a higher crime rate.

According to Broidy and Agnew

- Males are subject to different strains than females, with male strain more conducive to crime.
- Males have different emotional responses to strain, with male responses more conducive to crime
- Males are more likely to respond to anger/strain with crime.

The author also states that Broidy's GST points out two set of processes, mediating and conditioning, through which an explanation of crime can be formed. By evaluating the emotional conditions associated with certain types of strain, Broidy was able to show that when strain is introduced, the social support system in place can determine if the strain will lead to deviance or not. A strong support system is more likely to keep one from going to crime in times of distress or strain (Piquero, et al, 2004). Here we can integrate the attachment element of the control theory to show how these parental bonds are important earlier in a child's life if rooted in understanding, discipline, teaching of social norms and communication. This will make the youth more able to deal with their emotional issues instead of letting them explode in a disastrous way.

There are two short-comings of integration that are very important. The first is that it is assumed that the knowledge gained will increase with a mixture of theories rather than having competitive theories. The second is that integration can lead to theories that are not properly researched or put together (Lilly, et al, 2007). No matter which way you look at the causes of or the reason for people committing crimes, it all seems to focus on delinquency as a learned experience or as delinquency being forced as a way of survival and snowballing from there. There are problems with integrated theories, and the failure to recognize variables dependant to each independent theory can leave integration as a "work-in-progress" and make integrated theories lose their credibility. For instance, during this research very little information was found on the differences between girls and boys as far as reasons for and acceptance of delinquency.

As research suggests, no matter whom or what causes researchers and sociologist come up with for the commission of crime, there is no one answer. There are many factors and variables that in the absence of just one could mean the difference between criminal or college student. It is obvious that a strong family support system, with strong moral and ethical values, and those who value education will likely raise a child who will excel in life given the right circumstances and decisions made by the individual. Unfortunately, there are individuals that, because of circumstance and parental absence have chosen to give up on the American dream and settle for the quick easy money provided by a life of crime. As research in this field continues to grow, more and more integrations could be possible given all of the relevant factors involved are computed into the theory.

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