Lecture Notes

# Chapter 9: Social Structure Theories of Crime II: Social Disorganization and Subcultures

**Learning objectives**

* Describe how the ecological principles of invasion, domination, and succession among animals or plants apply to the growth of cities and cause different crime rates among varying regions of a city
* Explain how the model presented by Chicago theorists explains the city (or cities) where you live or have lived and identify such zones in cities you have lived in or visited, and the increased risk factors in certain areas
* Discuss Shaw and McKay’s Theory of Social Disorganization
* Identify some current, modern-day examples of specific cultures or subcultures in the United States, especially in the region where you live or work, and how they relate to crime
* Evaluate the criticisms of cultural theories of crime

**Summary**

This chapter examines social disorganization and subcultures and their relationship to crime. The chapter begins with the Park’s discussion related to city growth and concentric circles. Park argued that much of human behavior, especially the way cities grow, follows the basic principles of ecology. In addition, he claimed that all cities contain identifiable clusters, which he called natural areas, where the cluster has taken on a life or organic unity by itself. Applying these ecological principles and others, Park noted that some areas may invade and dominate adjacent areas, as well as the recession of previously dominant areas. Expansions such as these can devastate the informal controls in these areas. Burgess expanded on Park’s proposition by noting that city growth occurs from the inside out. In other words, growth begins in the center of the city. To demonstrate this proposition, Burgess identified primary zones that all cities appear to have. The zones numbered one through five and one unnumbered zone, the factory zone, represent various aspects of cities. Zone I contains the large business buildings, the next zone contains the factories, Zone II is identified as the zone in transition, Zone II is largely made up of relatively modest homes and apartments, Zone IV contains higher-priced family dwellings and more expensive apartments, and Zone V is considered the suburban or commuter zone. The important point of this theory of concentric circles is that growth of each inner zone puts pressure on the next zone to grow and push on the next adjacent zone. The chapter continues with the discussion of Shaw and McKay’s Theory of Social Disorganization. They proposed a framework that begins with the assumption that certain neighborhoods in all cities have more crime than other parts of the city, most of them located in Burgess’ Zone II. According to Shaw and McKay, neighborhoods with the highest rates of crime typically have at least three common problems: physical dilapidation, poverty, and a high cultural mix (heterogeneity). These problems lead to a state of social disorganization, which in turn leads to crime and delinquency.

The chapter concludes with various cultural and subcultural theories of crime. Cultural/subcultural theories of crime assume that there are unique groups in society that socialize their children to believe that certain activities that violate conventional law are good and positive ways to behave. One of the key developments of cultural theory has been largely attributed to the 1967 work of Ferracuti and Wolfgang who examined the violent themes of a group of inner-city youth from Philadelphia. Their primary conclusion was that violence is a culturally learned adaptation to deal with negative life circumstances and that learning such norms occurs in an environment that emphasizes violence over other options. Next, Miller presents a theoretical model proposing that the entire lower class has its own cultural value system. In this model, virtually everyone in the lower class believes in and is socialized to the values of six focal concerns: fate, autonomy, trouble, toughness, excitement, and smartness. Additionally, Anderson places a focus on African-Americans and claims that due to very deprived conditions in the inner cities, black Americans feel a sense of hopelessness, isolation, and despair. This leads to these individuals adopting the code of the streets to maintain one’s reputation and demand respect. Despite these theoretical proposals, studies have concluded that there are no large groups who blatantly deny the middle-class norms of society.

**Chapter Outline**

* **The School of Ecology and the Chicago School of Criminology**
  + The Chicago School of criminology represents one of the most valid and generalizable theories, in the sense that many of its propositions can be readily applied to the growth and evolution of virtually all cities around the world.
  + The Chicago School is often referred to as the Ecological School or the theory of Social Disorganization.
  + **Cultural Context: Chicago in the 1800s and early 1900s**
    - Experts have identified 19th century Chicago as the fastest growing city in the history of the United States.
    - The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the inception of the first U.S. passenger train in 1828 created a continuous stream of migration to the Chicago area, which was only increased once the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869.
    - Keep in mind that many large cities had virtually no formal social agencies to handle problems of urbanization.
      * Communities were largely responsible for solving their own problems, including crime and delinquency.
        + However, by the late 1800s Chicago was largely made up of citizens who did not speak a common language and did not share each other’s cultural values.

Thus, it was almost impossible for these citizens to organize themselves to solve community problems.

This resulted in the type of chaos and normlessness that Durkheim predicted would occur when urbanization and industrialization occurred to rapidly.

* + - There were many manifestations of complete breakdown, but one of the most notable was children were running wild on the streets in gangs, with little attempts to intervene by the adults in the neighborhoods.
      * Delinquency was soaring and it appeared the gangs were controlling the streets.
    - The leaders and people of Chicago needed theoretical guidance to develop solutions to their problems, particularly regarding the high rates of delinquency.
      * This was a key factor in why the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago became so important and dominant in the early 1900s.
  + **Ecological Principles in City Growth and Concentric Circles**
    - Robert E. Park
      * Much of human behavior, especially the way cities grow, follows the basic principles of ecology that had been documented and applied to wildlife for many years.
      * Park claimed that cities represent a type of complex organism that had a sense of unity which was made up of the interrelations that exist among the citizens and groups in the city.
      * Applied the ecological principle of symbiosisto explain the dependency of the various citizens and units upon each other.
      * In addition, he claimed that all cities would contain identifiable clusters, which he called **natural areas**, where the cluster had taken on a life or organic unity by itself.
        + To clarify, many cities have neighborhoods that are made up of primarily one ethnic group or are distinguished by certain features.
      * Applying several other ecological principles, Park noted that some areas (or species) may invade and dominate adjacent areas (species), as well as the recession of previously dominant areas (species).
        + The dominated area or species can either recede and migrate to another location or die off.
      * In human cities, some areas invade other zones or areas, and the previously dominant area must succeed or die off.
        + This is easy to seen in modern times with the growth of what is known as urban sprawl.

Businesses moving into a traditionally stable residential area can be detrimental.

The invasion can create chaos due to increased traffic, transient population, and perhaps most importantly crime.

* + - * At the time in which Park developed his theory of ecology, he observed the trend of businesses and factories invading the traditionally residential areas of Chicago, which caused major chaos and breakdown in stability in those areas.
        + Such development can devastate the informal controls (i.e., neighborhood networks, and family ties), in these areas due to the “invasion” of a highly transient group of consumers and residents who do not have a strong tie to the area.
      * The invasion leads to a psychological indifference toward the neighborhood, in which no one cares about protecting the community any longer.
        + Those who can afford to leave the area do, and those who cannot afford to get out will simply remain until they can save enough money to move out.
    - Ernest W. Burgess
      * Proposed a theory of city growth in which cities were seen as growing not simply on the edges, but from the inside outward.
        + The source of growth begins in the center of the city.
      * Specifically, the growth of the inner city puts pressure on the adjacent zones of the city, which in turn begin to grow into the next adjacent zones.
        + This type of development is referred to as “radial growth,” meaning from beginning on the inside and rippling outward.
      * Burgess also specified the primary zones that all cities appear to have, which included five pseudo-distinctive natural areas (which were in a constant state of flux due to growth).
      * Zones
        + Zone I

The Central Business District.

This area of a city contains the large business buildings (modern skyscrapers), which would include banking, chambers of commerce, courthouses, and other essential business/political centers such as police headquarters, post offices, etc.

* + - * + Factory Zone

The adjacent area just outside the business district, was the “factory zone” (unnumbered), which is perhaps the most significant in terms of causing crime because it was this factory zone that invaded the previously stable residential zones in Zone II.

* + - * + Zone II

**Zone in Transition**

In a state of transition from residential to industrial.

The area that was most significantly subjected to the ecological principles suggested by Park, namely invasion, domination, recession, and succession.

It is this zone that subsequent theorists focused on in criminological theorizing.

* + - * + Zone III

“Workingmen’s Homes”

Largely made up of relatively modest homes and apartments.

* + - * + Zone IV

Consisted of relatively higher priced family dwellings and more expensive apartments.

* + - * + Zone V

Considered the suburban or commuter zone.

* + - * The three outer zones were of less importance in terms of distinction, primarily because as a general rule, the further a family could move out of the city the better in terms of social organization and the lower the rate of social ills (e.g., poverty and delinquency).
      * The important point of this **theory of concentric circles** is that growth of each inner zone puts pressure on the next zone to grow and push on the next adjacent zone.
  + **Shaw and McKay’s Theory of Social Disorganization**
    - Known as the Chicago School of Criminology
    - Proposed a framework that began with the assumption that certain neighborhoods in all cities have more crime than other parts of the city, most of them located in Burgess’ Zone II, which is the zone in transition from residential to industrial, due to the invasion of factories.
    - According to Shaw and McKay, the neighborhoods that have the highest rates of crime typically have at least three common problems in the area: physical dilapidation, poverty, and heterogeneity (high cultural mix).
    - There were other common characteristics to these neighborhoods such as high transient population as well as unemployment among the residents of the neighborhood.
    - It is predicted that the antecedent factors of poverty, heterogeneity, and physical dilapidation lead to a state of social disorganization, which in turn leads to crime and delinquency.
    - One of the most significant contributions of Shaw and McKay’s model was that they demonstrated that the prevalence and frequency of various social ills, be it poverty, disease, low birth weight, etc., tend to overlap with higher delinquency rates.
    - Regardless of what social problem is measured, higher rates of social problems are almost always clustered in the zone in transition.
      * It was in this area that Shaw and McKay believed there was a breakdown in informal social controls and that children began to learn offending norms from their interactions with peers on the street, through what they called “play activities.”
        + Thus, the breakdown in the conditions of the neighborhood leads to social disorganization, which in turn leads to delinquents learning criminal activities from older youth in the neighborhood.
    - One of the best things about Shaw and McKay’s theoretical model is they supplied data to support their propositions.
      * They demonstrated through data from the U.S. Census and city records that neighborhoods that had high rates of poverty, physical dilapidation, and high cultural mix were the neighborhoods that had the highest rates of delinquency and crime.
        + The high rates of delinquency and other social problems were consistent with the Burgess’ framework of concentric circles, in that the highest rates were observed for the areas that were in Zone II.

However, there was an exception to the model; the Gold Coast area along the northern coast of Lake Michigan was notably absent from the high rates of social problems, particularly delinquency, that existed throughout the otherwise consistent model of concentric circles and neighborhood zones.

* + - * Shaw and McKay’s longitudinal data showed that it did not matter which ethnic groups lived in Zone II, because all groups (with the exception of Asians) that lived in that zone had high delinquency rates while they lived there.
      * Once most of each ethnic group moved out of Zone II, their delinquency rates decreased significantly.
        + This finding rejects the notion of Social Darwinism, because it is obvious that it is not the culture that influences crime and delinquency, but rather the criminogenic nature of the environment.
  + **Reaction and Research for Social Disorganization Theory**
    - Virtually all of the research has supported Shaw and McKay’s version of social disorganization and the resulting high crime rates in neighborhoods that exhibit such deprived conditions
    - Some critics have raised some valid concerns regarding the original model.
      * Specifically, it has been argued that Shaw and McKay’s original research did not actually measure their primary construct: social disorganization.
        + Although this criticism was accurate in calling out Shaw and McKay’s research in not measuring their primary intervening variable, recent research has shown that the model is valid even when measures of social disorganization are included in the model.
    - Additional criticisms of Shaw and McKay’s formulation of social disorganization also focus on the emphasis that the theory places on the macro, or aggregate, level of analysis.
      * The model does not attempt to explain why some, albeit a very small amount of, youths in the best neighborhoods (Zone V) choose to commit crime.
    - Perhaps the biggest criticism of Shaw and McKay’s theory deals with their blatant neglect in targeting the most problematic source of criminality in the Zone II, transitional zone neighborhoods.
      * The findings seem to undoubtedly point to the invasion of the factories and businesses into residential areas as a problem, yet the researchers did not focus on slowing such invasion as a recommendation.
        + This is likely due to political and financial concerns, being that the owners of the factories and businesses were financing their research and later funded their primary policy implementation.
    - Despite the criticisms and weaknesses of the Chicago School perspective, this theory resulted in one of the largest programs to date in attempting to reduce delinquency rates.
      * Clifford Shaw was put in charge of establishing the Chicago Area Project (CAP), which established centers in the most crime-ridden neighborhoods of Chicago.
        + These neighborhood centers sought to create activities for youth, as well as to establish ties between parents and officials in the neighborhood.
        + Although this program was never scientifically evaluated, it still exists and many cities have implemented programs that are based on this model.

For example, Boston implemented a very similar program that was evaluated by Walter Miller.

This evaluation showed that while this project was effective in establishing relationships and interactions between local gangs and community groups, as well as providing more educational and vocational opportunities, the program appeared to fail in reducing delinquent/criminal behavior.

* **Cultural and Subcultural Theories of Crime**
  + Cultural/subcultural theories of crime assume that there are unique groups in society that socialize their children to believe that certain activities that violate conventional law are good and positive ways to behave.
  + **Early Theoretical Developments and Research in Cultural/Subcultural Theory**
    - One of the key developments of cultural theory has been largely attributed to the 1967 work of Ferracuti and Wolfgang who examined the violent themes of a group of inner-city youth from Philadelphia.
      * Their primary conclusion was that violence is a culturally learned adaptation to deal with negative life circumstances and that learning such norms occurs in an environment that emphasizes violence over other options.
        + Their conclusion was based on an analysis of data that showed great differences in rates of homicide across racial groups.
      * However, Ferracuti and Wolfgang were clear that their theory was based on subcultural norms.
        + Specifically, they proposed that no subculture can be totally different from or totally in conflict with the society of which it is a part.
      * The distinction between a culture and a subculture is that a culture represents a distinct, separate set of norms and values among an identifiable group of people that are summarily different from that of the dominant culture.
    - Walter Miller
      * Miller presented a theoretical model that proposed that the entire lower class had its own cultural value system.
        + In this model, virtually everyone in the lower class believed in and socialized the values of six **focal concerns**.

Fate

The concern of luck, or whatever life dealt you; it disregarded responsibility and accountability for one’s actions.

Autonomy

The value of independence from authority.

Trouble

The concern of staying out of legal problems, as well as getting into and out of personal difficulties.

Toughness

Maintaining your reputation on the street in many ways.

Excitement

The engagement of activities (some illegal) that helped liven up an otherwise mundane existence of being lower class.

Smartness

An emphasis on “street smarts” or the ability to con others.

* + - * Miller claimed that these six Focal Concerns were emphasized and taught by members of the lower class as a culture or environment (or “milieu,” as stated in the title of his work).
    - Elijah Anderson
      * Focuses on African-Americans, and claims that due to very deprived conditions in the inner cities, black Americans feel a sense of hopelessness, isolation, and despair.
      * Anderson clearly notes that while many African-Americans believe in middle-class values, these values have no value on the street, particularly among young males.
      * According to Anderson, *The Code of the Streets*, which was the appropriate title of his book, is to maintain one’s reputation and demand respect.
  + **Criticisms of Cultural Theories of Crime**
    - The studies on cultural theories of crime, at least in the United States, show that there are no large groups who blatantly deny the middle-class norms of society.
      * Specifically, Miller’s model of lower class focal concerns simply does not exist across the entire lower class.
        + Studies consistently show that most adults in the lower class attempt to socialize their children to believe in conventional values, such as respect for authority, hard work as positive, delayed gratification, etc., and not the focal concerns that Miller specified in his model.
      * Even Ferracuti and Wolfgang admitted that their research findings lead them to conclude that their model was more of a subcultural perspective and not one of a distinctly different culture.
    - It is likely there are small groups or gangs that have subcultural normative values, but that does not consist of a completely separate culture in society.
    - It can be concluded that if there are subcultural groups in our society, they seem to make up a very small percentage of the population, which somewhat negates the cultural/subcultural perspective of criminality.
* **Policy Implications**
  + Many of the policy implications that are suggested by the theoretical models proposed in this chapter are rather ironic.
  + The neighborhoods that are most desperately in need of becoming organized to fight crime are the same inner-city ghetto areas that are, by far, the most difficult to cultivate such organizations (e.g., neighborhood watch or “Block Watch” groups).
    - Although there are some anecdotal examples of success in neighborhood watch programs, the majority of the empirical evidence shows that this approach is “almost uniformly unsupportive” of its ability to reduce crime in such neighborhoods.
    - Many studies of these neighborhood watch programs actually find that in a notable amount of communities these groups actually increase the fear of crime, perhaps due to the heightened awareness regarding the crime issues in such areas.
  + Perhaps the most notable program that resulted from the Chicago School/Social Disorganization model—the Chicago Area Project (CAP)—and similar programs have been dubbed as failures in reducing crime rates among the participants.
  + Regarding cultural/subcultural programs, there have been some promising intervention and outreach programs that have been suggested by such models of offending.
    - There are now many programs that attempt to build pro-social attitudes (among other health and opportunity aspects) among high-risk youth, often young children.
      * For example, a recent program called Peace Builders, which focuses on children in early grades, was shown to be effective in producing gains in conflict resolution, development of pro-social values, and reductions in aggression, and a follow-up showed that these attributes were maintained for a long period of time.
* **Conclusion**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Theory | Concepts | Proponents | Key Propositions |
| Ecological/Chicago School Perspectives on City Growth | Natural Areas  Concentric Circles | Park, Burgess | Virtually all cities grow in a natural way, whereby they form distinct natural areas, which tend to grow in a radically fashion from the center outward, forming rings of concentric circles. |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Social Disorganization Theory | Various Zones in the City  Zone in Transition  Factory Zone | Shaw & McKay | Nearly all cities experienced large growth of factories around the city center, which invades residential areas and essentially creates a state of transition and instability, which leads to chaos and higher crime/delinquency rates. |
| Subcultural Theories |  | Wolfgang & Ferracuti, Anderson | Some groups of people have normative structures that deviate significantly from the mainstream culture, which inevitably leads to illegal behavior. |
| Lower Class Focal Concerns | Six Focal Concerns (that go against middle-class norms) | Miller | The lower class have an entirely separate culture and normative value system (i.e., focal concerns), which in many ways value the opposite of many middle-class standards. |