A Brief Look into Strain Theory and Differential Association Theory

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Abstract

This review examines the theories of crime and delinquency. The main theoretical perspectives are presented, beginning with Strain theory that is associated with biological drives, impulse management, gender and the social processing. This is followed by Differential Association theory of learned crime through life course and gender aspects of the theory. Both theories deal with criminal behavior in the aspect of individual crimes and structures. The review concludes with the relationships and contexts of the two perspective theories.

Keywords: Strain theory, Delinquency, Differential association theory, Genders, Perspective theories

Introduction

There are many theories where crime and delinquency may be predicated. In twenty-first century many of the new theories are built on the structures from Robert K. Merton and Edwin Sutherland sociological theories of crime and delinquency. Scholars and professionals have debated over the years on which theory is best to predict criminal tendencies (Loeber & Farrington, 2012). The Strain Theory and Differential Association Theory are the two main theories that will be briefly discussed.

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First is Strain theory, this theory was developed in 1938 by Robert K. Merton, which states that society puts pressure on individuals to achieve socially accepted goals (such as the American dream) though they lack the means; this leads to strain which may lead the individuals to commit crimes (Merton, 1938). This also has individual and structural features which can be described as: 1. Structural: It refers to the processes at the societal level which filter down and affect how the individual perceives his or her needs, i.e. if particular social structures are inherently inadequate or there is inadequate regulation, it may change the individual's perceptions as to means and opportunities; or 2. Individual: It refers to the frictions and pains experienced by an individual as he or she looks for ways to satisfy his or her needs, i.e. if the goals of a society become significant to an individual, actually achieving them may become more important than the means adopted (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Second is Differential Association Theory, this theory was developed in the late 1930’s by Edwin Sutherland. In his theory he states that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior (Sutherland, 1947). This theory focuses on the individual saying that crime is learned through interaction with other criminal individuals and that it does not concern itself with why they become criminals (Wikipedia, n.d.).

2. Methodology

The electronic database search and Library were used to compile a list of crime or delinquency, and the titles of Strain and Differential Association that yielded over 2,000 references, and then reduced by specifics of juvenile and adult crime or delinquency. Taking into consideration how limited time was to be used on this review, the most frequently cited theorists were selected. Only two theories that are sociological in terms of criminal and delinquency were used; all other theories were not used to conduct this review.
Review of Literature

Strain Theory

Within every social group invariably couples its scale of desired ends with moral or institutional regulation of permissible and required procedures for attaining these ends. These needs of regulatory norms and moral imperatives do not necessarily coincide with technical or efficiency norms (Merton, 1938). This based off of traditional strain theory youths are motivated to commit delinquent acts because they have failed to achieve these desired ends, which constitutes goals of middle-class status or economic success (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994).

The extreme emphasis upon the accumulation of this status and economic wealth as a symbol of success in our own society militates against the completely effective control of institutionally regulated modes of acquiring a fortune. Fraud, corruption, vice, crime, in short, the entire catalogue of proscribed behavior, becomes increasingly common when the emphasis on the culturally induced success-goal becomes divorced from a coordinated institutional emphasis (Merton, 1938). When a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain common symbols of success for the population at large while its social structure rigorously restricts or completely eliminates access to approved modes of acquiring these symbols for a considerable part of the same population that anti-social behavior ensues on a considerable scale.

With this in mind every society has adaptations, and Merton has stated that five adaption is to be in place, conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. The Adaption I (conformity to both culture goals and means) is the most common and widely diffused of these adoptions. Conversely, Adaptation IV (rejection of goals and means) is the least common. Persons who “adjust” (or malad just) in this fashion are strictly speaking, in the society but not of it. Sociologically, these constitute the true “aliens” (Merton, 1938). Within this category are some of the activities of psychotics, psychoneurotic, chronic autists, pariahs, outcasts, vagrants, vagabonds, tramps, chronic drunkards, and drug addicts. According to Merton these categories have relinquished, in certain spheres of activity, the culturally defined goals, involving complete aim-inhibition in the polar case, and their adjustments are not in accord with institutional norms. Be it noted that where frustration
derives from the inaccessibility of effective institutional means for attaining economic or any other type of highly valued “Success “, that Adaptations II, III, and V (innovation, ritualism, and rebellion) are also possible. The results according to Merton will be determined by the particular personality, and thus, the particular cultural background involved. The-end-justifies-the-means doctrine becomes a guiding tenet for action when cultural structure unduly exalts the end and the social organization unduly limits possible recourse to approved means (Merton, 1938).

Traditional strain theory has focused on long-range (educational/occupational) goals (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994). With few exceptions, measured discrepancies between occupational/educational aspirations and expectations have generally been found to be unrelated to delinquent behavior. Support has been found for strain when it was measured as the disjunction between economic goals and educational expectations. In general, however, the empirical evidence has not been supportive of these versions of strain theory (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994). Rather than aspiring to long-range goals (educational/occupational) adolescents were now conceived as being motivated toward the satisfaction of more short-term and immediate wants, such as athletic success, good grades and popularity with peers. This version of strain theory was met with the same fate as their earlier counterpart; weak empirical support existed for the presumption that those adolescents who failed to achieve their immediate goals were more likely to be delinquent than those who were more successful (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994).

Measuring variables within strain theory has the loss of positive stimuli such as loss of a boyfriend/girlfriend, moving from one’s neighborhood, or the death of a parent, and the presence of negative stimuli such as victimization of various types; a wide assortment of stressful life, insults, verbal threats, and other noxious behavior, and this has a conceptual role in general strain theory (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994). There are things such as aversive events and experiences, residence in an unappealing and unsafe neighborhood, stressful life events, and disagreeable relationships with adults and peers (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994). These events stipulates that aversive experiences and relationships result in specific negative affective states (anger, frustration, disappointment) that ultimately lead to delinquency (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994).
Strain on Students

The stress which is thrust upon students from families and school system may have a great impact on delinquency according to Robert Agnew. He states that students of middle class focuses on immediate goals which could explain the delinquency within the social statues of middle class (Agnew, 1985). Furthermore, Agnew explains that students fall into a pain-avoidance behavior, which can be seen as “the individual is walking away from an aversive situation and his or her path is blocked” (Agnew, 1985). This blockage could cause different outcomes on individuals depending on the valued goals of each student according to Agnew.

In this aversive environment Agnew states that students turn to delinquency for one or two reasons these being as followed; one, to escape the environment or to remove sources of the aversion and two, is more emotional based and deals with a student lashing out at the source of the aversion (Agnew, 1985). With the two reasons of delinquency comes many factors, one crucial factor that Agnew states is the is that the student believes the aversion being experienced is truly undeserved or not, other factors point to if the student will be punished, delinquent peers, and the students belief in what delinquency may or may not consist (Agnew, 1985). According to Agnew and a study conducted, states that delinquency in surveyed students is greatly determined by the dissatisfaction of school and family, only exceeded by dating and to some extent grades (Agnew, 1985). The aversive environment explanation that Robert Agnew put forth in his study attests to blockage of pain avoidance behavior is one of the major sources of delinquency in students.

3.3 Strain in Genders

Delinquency between genders has much similarities and difference on various levels of strain (Mazerolle, 1998). One could consider that males have a higher stress and strain in their life, which leads to higher levels of crime and delinquency. According to Mazerolle females has just as high stress level as do males, but females handle the stress and strain differently than do males. Males takes the stress according to Mazerolle and turns it into anger, in turn this anger is related to higher level of crime and delinquency compared to females.
The factors between high crime rate and gender is due to different relations in morals, beliefs, and exposures to delinquent peers (Mazerolle, 1998). In relation to these factors males may be exposed to higher level of delinquent peers compared to females, whereas females would be exposed to higher morals and beliefs (Mazerolle, 1998). Another factor that would affect higher levels of violent crime in male juvenile is due to gender roles (e.g., physical size, socialization of social norms, and difference in self-control) (Mazerolle, 1998).

As Mazerolle (1998) notes, the studies show that there is not a significant difference in general delinquency between male and female juveniles. The only variance according to Mazerolle is that violent crime and property damage was the key difference between the genders, this which Mazerolle claims is due to the way genders process stress from negative life events (e.g. unemployed parent, losing a family member). This correlates directly with genders manifestation of anger and how each gender externalizes these aggressions (Mazerolle, 1998).

**Differential Association Theory**

Differential association theory has spawned two major developments—one empirical, the other theoretical, and two types of explanations of criminal behavior situational/dynamic and historical/genetic the following will discuss briefly on the topics.

The most serious criticism of differential association theory argues that the theory cannot be tested empirically (Matsueda, 1988). Though Sutherland noted that implicit in the abstract theory of differential association is the possibility of deriving a mathematical formula expressing a person’s ratio of weighted definitions favorable and unfavorable to a specific crime. The theory was general supported of association of frequency with delinquent peers. The theory: juveniles who reported more delinquent friends tended to commit more delinquent acts. This strategy assumes that most delinquent behaviors are learned from one’s peers, that delinquent peers are likely to transmit delinquency and non-delinquency, therefore the concept of delinquent peers is highly correlated with the concept of association with definitions favorable and unfavorable to delinquency (Matsueda, 1988). With this same concept Orcutt found that consistent with differential association theory, marijuana smoking is explained by definitions favorable to marijuana use and number of friends who smoke marijuana (Matsueda, 1988).
Criminologists have attempted to revise the theory of differential association so it would be more amenable to empirical test. One part that was to be revised was with operant conditioning and social learning, by reinforcement that can direct or vicarious, whereby simply observing another’s criminal behavior being reinforced will reinforce the observer’s own criminal behavior. Definitions of crime are learned through this process and affect behavior directly, as well as indirectly, by serving as cues (discriminative stimuli) for law violation (Matsueda, 1988). Another revision attempted to answer two important theoretical questions implied by differential association theory. The first according to Matsueda the origins of crime: where did normative conflict or definitions favorable to crime come from? The second concerned the specific nature of differential social organization: What are the social structural elements that influence rates of crime? Both questions prompted research on the origins and persistence of sub cultural delinquency as a phenomenon of lower-class adolescent males (Matsueda, 1988). This lead to the “In integrated lower-class neighborhoods, in which bonds form between criminal and conventional roles (such as fence and fixes) and between older and younger offenders, stable subcultures of theft flourish. In unintegrated, disorganized neighborhoods, little opportunity exists to learn and execute such sophisticated crimes, instead, frustrated youth must turn to violence to obtain status and vent hostility. Finally in neighborhoods lacking such organization, drug subcultures develop (Matsueda, 1988).

The abstract principals of differential association theory are compatible with other theories of social structure, such as Marxist theories of class structure under capitalism. In fact, differential association theory seems more compatible with a Marxist political economic theory than is social control theory, even though recent writings have attempted to combine the latter two (Matsueda, 1988).

The criminal behavior work within criminological explanation has attempted to isolate personal and social pathologies among criminals, and from this point of view has, at least, resulted in the conclusion that the immediate determinants of criminal behavior lie in the person-situation complex (Sutherland, 1947). According to Sutherland, a psychological or sociological sense, the situation is not exclusive of the person, for the situation which is important is the situation as defined by the person who is involved. This means that the
situation is defined by the person in terms of the inclinations and abilities which the person has acquired up to date. This could mean while a person could define a situation in such a manner that criminal behavior would be inevitable results, his past experiences would for the most part determine the way in which he defined the situation (Sutherland, 1947).

Criminal behavior may be based on genetic explanation or process by which a particular person comes to engage in criminal behavior. According to Sutherland, criminal behavior is learned, so it is not inherited. This process is learned in an interaction with other people through communication. The process of learning criminal behavior on the principal part occurs within intimate personal groups. Criminal acts have learned techniques of committing crime, specific direction of motives, drives, rationalization, and attitudes. These specific directions of motives and drives are learned from definitions of legal codes as favorable or unfavorable according to Sutherland. These legal codes lead a person to become delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violations of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law (Sutherland, 1947).

Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. This means that associations with criminal behavior and also associations with anti-criminal behavior vary in those respects (Sutherland, 1947). The process of learning criminal behavior according to Sutherland is by association with criminal or anti-criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning, criminal behavior is not restricted to the process of imitation. 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 (Sutherland, 1947).

A person’s associations are determined in a general context of social organization. The best explanation of crime rate from this point of view is that a high crime rate is due to “social disorganization.” The term social disorganization is not entirely satisfactory, and it seems preferable to substitute for it the term differential social organization. Differential group organization as an explanation of variations in crime rates is consistent with the differential association theory of processes by which persons become criminals (Sutherland, 1947).
Differential Association Theory and Juveniles

Differential Association Theory could explain certain tendencies of juvenile actions. When looking at youth gang activities, one can consider that peers influence delinquency within juveniles. One of the strongest correlation of youth gang culture is juvenile delinquency of peers (Haynie & Osgood, 2005). The delinquency of the juveniles in gangs may be influenced by gang activities; however, it can be perceived that juvenile criminals prefer to associate with one another, rather than the gang being the primary factor that influences the behavior (Haynie & Osgood, 2005). It is difficult to determine which factor has the most influence, even though it cannot define both criminal and anti-criminal that are at play (Haynie & Osgood, 2005).

The differential association theory can explain youth gang crimes because of the simplicity that it offers; a simple explanation why certain individual juveniles commit crimes or commit delinquency acts and other juveniles chose not to commit crimes. However, the simplicity of this theory is one of the major criticism that many professionals and scholars point out when it comes evaluating juvenile crimes.

Differential Association Theory and Gender Role

Differential Association has been criticized for ignoring gender related factors such as power relations and gender group criminal association, the study conducted in 2000 by Alarid, Burton, and Cullen shows relative variations in delinquency and crime in male and female offenders.

When the gender role of Differential Association is analyzed; the connection between male and female juvenile’s general crime is not significantly different (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000). Although, when violent crimes were evaluated, males had higher involvement than did females (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000). A noteworthy exception is that even though males were higher in violent crimes than females the types of violent crime committed by both male and female was similar (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000).

Examining the relationship between male and female with the concerns of being involved in criminal activities due to the effect of criminal friends Alarid, Burton, and Cullen found no significant difference between the genders. However, it was found that Anglo male
and female were more likely to have been involved in criminal activities than non-White male and females (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000).

According to Alarid, Burton, and Cullen as the age changed in male and female juveniles so did the types of crimes. As females aged, the decrease in violent crimes among offenders were significant, but as males aged, the drug crimes increased among offenders (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000). A noteworthy exception here between genders would be property offenses, whereas males are more likely to commit these types of offenses than females.

Differential Association study conducted by Alarid, Burton, & Cullen has shown that criminal behavior between male and female shows that there is not a significant difference between male and female based solely on gender alone. When other factors are added to the equation then the study shows some significant difference in the types of crimes committed by male and female offenders.

Conclusion

The review provides some evidence that both strain and differential association theory has some aspects that seem to be similar in terms of criminal behavior and gender roles. Even though one may learn criminal or delinquency tendencies from the pressure of society and the roles genders play in that society, whereas the others may learn from the observation of peers or family members the results are commonly the same. These tendencies of criminal behavior have a great impact on individuals, genders, and the society in general. When these tendencies are evaluated one can conclude that the crime from an individual relies on society putting pressure on individuals to live up to a standard that may be out of reach for certain families. This in turn has forced criminal behavior of individuals and with this behavior, members in the family (especially younger more impressionable children) have learned through evaluation that the only way to achieve success is through criminal behavior.

These theories dealing with juveniles tend to stride on parallel patterns; as both see juveniles in circumstances, where their decisions no matter if society or peer influence, they will make certain action based on the environment. The different circumstances that are
perceived as a choice or forced can set the bases of judgment that will lead a juvenile to commit crimes and delinquency acts.

References