

# Social theories on criminology



Social theories in criminology are primarily designed to answer one of the basic questions: why do people commit crimes? Understanding etiology of crime and disorder is crucial to decrease the level of crime and delinquency in our society.

Despite the fact that all social theories in criminology possess common features and have similar goals, they are at times too contradicting each other, and display inconsistency. Only in the light of comparison/ contrasting several theories it is possible to determine their disadvantages, and to decide which of them (if any) can answer the basic questions of criminology. It will be interesting and useful to re-consider the three social criminology theories: the theory of social disorganization, Hirschi's social bond theory, and the theory of differential disassociation. In the light of the performed analysis we will be able to conclude, which of the theories possesses the best explanatory ability, and whether any of them is compelling enough to make us understand the motives of crime. " In sociology, social disorganization is usually treated as both perspective and theory" (Akers 2000, p. 3).

The theory of social disorganization is the type of criminological theory, which attributes variations in delinquency and crime to the absence of positive impact of social institutions on the specific person. The social institutions in this theory include family, school, community, etc. In case these institutions are absent or broken down, the probability of the person to be pushed towards crime dramatically increases. These are the basic provisions of this theory, if explained in simple words.

To be more specific, disintegration of large family and homogenous neighborhoods as agents of social control, expanded the realm of relationships that were not governed by family and neighborhood, and undermined governmental controls. This disorganization of institutions that had traditionally reinforced the law facilitated the development and persistence of ‘systematic’ crime and delinquency”. (Akers 2000, p. 49)

Thus, the social theory of disorganization makes environment serve the basic motivation for the crime and delinquency, avoiding any relation to inner motives any person may have towards crime. One essential point should be emphasized: there is a widely spread tendency towards trying to explain how the crime occurs, but there are considerable difficulties in trying to analyze what exactly causes crimes.

The discussed theory is the example of relative environmental determinism: we do not possess any reliable knowledge about the causes of the crime, but we prefer to transfer the guilt for this crime onto various environmental factors. Doubtlessly, social disorganization theory has become a landmark in the theoretical development of criminology. Social disorganization theory conceives of rapid social change as the cause for breakdowns in community social controls, increasing the deviance” (Taylor 2001, p. 126).

In this context, do we speak about social institutions’ breakdowns as those causing the crime, or do we speak about social changes, which cause social breakdowns and impact variations in crime and delinquency? The criticism of the social disorganization theory is in the assumption that theory represents the collision of cause and effect, without clearly distinguishing between them. This is why it is at times difficult to understand, whether this theory

answers the question, why people commit crimes. There are two basic assumptions of the social disorganization theory, which may help determining the real causes and motives of crime. First of all, and as it has already been mentioned, crime and delinquency are primarily caused by the community-based control and institutions (Akers 2000, p.

41). As a result, people in these socially broken environments naturally respond to them through committing the crime. Second, the social processes of urbanization and industrialization indirectly impact variations in crime, and directly (and mostly, negatively) impact the integrity of the social institutions. Social disorganization theory does not completely explain why the crime occurs.

There are several reasons of such misinterpretation. One of them relates to the inconsistency of this theory towards broken down institutions, and as a result, the absence of constraints against crime. Cohen (1971) tried to persuade us, and I would agree with his suggestions, that social disorganization theory did not provide us with either causes, or solutions of the situation with crime and delinquency. It did not provide us with total understanding of the real motives of crime.

Instead, it provided us with the slight basis for creating a more solid social theory of crime. What we read in the social disorganization theory is that the presence of crime in the society is caused by the absence of constraints against it (Taylor 2001, p. 128). Thus, when the community bonds weaken, the person tends to commit a crime. Is it always true? The theory does not

provide us with any consistent answer. The concept of social disorganization is rather weak and non-transparent in itself.

What do we mean when we say that community is socially “disorganized”? There are reasons to assume that even such social environments inherently possess their own organization (Cohen 1971, p. 51). The fact that social organization of any specific community does not follow the widely spread standards does not mean that this community does not possess any social organization. In this light, the motives of crime acquire new tints and meaning, and it appears that the social disorganization theory cannot provide us with any understanding of what crime really is. In this theoretical framework the social bond theory of Travis Hirschi is partially connected with that of social disorganization.

The major similarity between the two theories is their reliance on the principles of community bonds between the personality and the society. Consequentially, these bonds serve the determining factors in motivating the person towards committing a crime. The social bond in Hirschi’s theory “refers to the connection between the individual and the society” (Hirschi 1969, p. 20).

If we try to follow the provisions of this theory, we will conclude that any deviance occurs as soon as the bond between the person and the society breaks. The similar line has already been discussed and criticized in the social disorganization theory. However, Hirschi has gone further and has developed the concept of the social bond into a complex set of sociological notions, with each contributing into the quality and power of these bonds

between the person and the society. The first element of the social bond in Hirschi's interpretation is attachment. Attachment in his words are the ties of the person with the so-called "significant others" (Hirschi 1969, p. 7).

The extent to which the person is emotionally and passionately tied to these significant people in his life will determine the person's propensity towards delinquency or crime. The stronger these bonds are the less likely is the person to be involved into deviant behavior. If we speak about young people, we mean the attachment they feel towards their parents or close relatives. Hirschi includes commitment into the list of social bonds' contributing features. Commitment in his representation is equaled with the amount of energy, time, and other conventional investments a person makes in his life. For example, the amount of time spent at receiving a scientific degree is essential to distract a person from any thought about committing a crime.

The more resources the person has spent, the more jeopardizing will the crime seem in terms of one's individual achievements (Hirschi 1969, p. 32). Similar explanations can be provided for involvement, which is the third feature discussed by Hirschi. Logically, the more the person is involved into conventional activities, the less time he has to be "engaged into deviant behavior" (Akers 2000, p.

70). However, these three factors will lack power without the fourth one – belief: the person should believe into the traditional set of values imposed by his community. "This belief component includes a general acceptance of the rules of society as being morally valid and binding, as well as respect for authority" (Hirschi 1969, p. 9). While the social disorganization theory lacked

consistence in terms of the notion of organization/ disorganization itself, it also omitted one essential aspect, which was also absent in Hirschi's theory: if societies exercise environmental standards which are different from those widely accepted, it does not mean that these new standards cannot exist at all.

This is why the social disorganization theory is a rather simplified version of what really motivates the crime. In case we accept the probability not of disorganization, but of numerous organizations of various types, we will have to look for motives of crime and delinquency in each of them. This will make the task considerably more difficult, but more objective and useful. In the same manner, Hirschi argues that “ there are no sizeable subcultural milieus linked to social class where delinquency is either demanded or an automatic outcome of conformity to subcultural traditions” (Hirschi 1969, p. 94). Hirschi speaks about attachment, but despite the fact that he tends to constantly use the notion of “ significant others”, in reality his theory does not represent attachment as limited by family ties.

The theorist has for some reason neglected the possibility of attachment with deviant and delinquent personalities. Will the motives of crime be different in this case? Certainly, they will. We see that the possibility of crime increases as soon as social bonds are eliminated; but what exactly motivates the person towards crime when these bonds are absent? The theory does not give any clear answer to that. We again face the fact that none of the discussed social theories in criminology can fully and consistently list the motives, which move the person towards committing a crime.

The recognition of the problem with differentiated social standards was partially resolved in the social theory of differential association. In 1939 Sutherland argued that “ cultural conflict is a specific aspect of social disorganization and in that sense the two concepts are names for smaller and larger aspects of the same thing. Differential association is possible because society is composed of different groups with varied cultures” (Sutherland 1939, p. 1).

Again, the theory of differential association concentrated on how people became criminals, but it did not explain, what pushed them to committing a crime. In the differentiated environments, people acquire the skills necessary to commit a crime; they learn how to commit a crime, and the propensity towards crime and delinquency increases in the environments, which are more law-breaking than law-abiding. In this respect the theory of differential association is the combination of the theory of social bond and the theory of social disorganization. Differential association predicts that an individual will choose the criminal path when the balance of definitions for law-breaking exceeds those for law-abiding. The earlier in life the individual comes under the influence of those of high status within that group, the more likely the individual is to follow in their footsteps. ” (Taylor 2001, p.

131) It is difficult to disagree with the assumptions of the differential association theory, according to which criminal behavior is learned and the principal part of this learning takes place within the small intimate social groups. These provisions are absolutely similar to those of the social disorganization theory (when crime is caused by the social environment), and the social bond theory (when the close attachments to the intimate



social group impact the individual behavior towards committing a crime).

The problem of the differential association theory is that it does not exactly determine, which terms and conditions favor the crime, and which of them oppose (or serve the constraint) to the crime. It is very interesting and useful in explaining how a person learns about crimes, and how these crimes are committed.

It is the theory, which shows “ wrong presumptions about human behavior and the role of culture in deviant behavior” (Sutherland 1939, p. 43). When one speaks about motivation of any crime, one frequently forgets the importance of individual variations between the personalities. This is why most of social theories are inconsistent. While we try to find the motives of the crime in the outside world, it is better to concentrate on the inner world of the potential and real criminal.

The theory of differential association rests on the assumption that group cultural characteristics are determining in motivating the deviant behavior of an individual. However, the theory completely neglects the possibility of inner group individual variations, and cannot explain why people within this group violate or conform to norms. Thus, the theory cannot explain why people commit crimes. It only suggests that culture is the only cause of crime, but it cannot serve its motive. Culture may only partially contribute into the deviant behavior, but cannot be the only reason of crime or delinquency.