

Two theories of youth crime criminology essay



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This essay will discuss three theories, the differential association theory, the labelling theory and the rationale choice theory. The theories will be discussed and how they can explain crime will also be discussed, and then a comparison of the theories will be given in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses in explaining youth crime. Theories within criminology try to explain why and how crime occurs. This is done through examining various facts that are related to the individual's criminal behaviour and the crime they commit. There are a wide range of theories which can be used to explain the causes of crime and deviant behaviour from youths.

The first theory is the differential association theory by Edwin Sutherland (1947). He developed the differential association theory in order to explain how youths engage in acts of criminal behaviour. This theory defines criminal behaviour as learnt behaviour which is acquired through social contact with other individuals (Hopkins Burke, 2009: 104). This theory explains how individuals learn how to engage in criminal behaviour through their attitudes, drive and motive behind the criminal act. An individual is most likely to be involved in criminal behaviour if they spend numerous amount of time with a person who has a criminal background and believes that breaking the law is acceptable. Furthermore Sutherland (1974) identifies nine main factors that can be used to explain why a person engages in criminal behaviour. This essay will now explain the nine factors in detail.

The first factor that Sutherland believes is the reason as to why an individual engages in criminal behaviour is because the behaviour is learned. Hopkins Burke (2009) Believes that the actions of an individual are influenced by the people they associate with. It is believed that because the individual main

association is with their family, as that is whom they have grown up and live with, so therefore the individual social values and norms are formulated from them. Sutherland also stated that learned behaviour is not invented, nor is it inherited. The skills and techniques required for an individual to engage in criminal activity are not automatically obtained from birth, or through association with criminals, instead they are acquired through a process of learning (Hopkins Burke, 2009: 106).

The second principle refutes the idea that criminal behaviour is learned through the individual witnessing deviant or criminal behaviour. Instead this believes that criminality is learned behaviour through interaction with others in the process of communication. Children are accustomed to the norms of society at a very young age, they are taught the roles of both a people around them. They also learn these roles by observing the male or female characteristics relating to the specific gender. For example an individual may learn about deviant behaviour through communicating with the person who is committing the deviant behaviour. The third principle states that individuals commit crime because they are influenced by the behaviour of intimate people such as family members and close friends. Methods of communication from television and or media are less effective in influencing the individual (Hopkins Burke, 2009: 106).

The fourth factor from Sutherland's theory is that learning criminal behaviour involves learning specific techniques, drives, motives and rationalization. Having a primary group of people around does not necessarily mean that the individual will engage in crime, but it does mean that they have the resources into the criminal rationale. For example being around a person

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who is has been convicted of sexual offence, may give the individual knowledge into how to engage in the same crime, but the individual may choose not to engage in that crime because they know from their socialization of societal norms that a sexual offence is unacceptable (Hopkins Burke, 2009: 106). The fifth factor can be noticed when considering cultures form the United Kingdom and the United States. Both countries have various cultures within them and each culture has different perceptions as to what is favourable and unfavourable within society and this can cause a cultural conflict. This principle believes that the specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of legal codes such as favourable and unfavourable. (Newburn, 2007: 194)

The most important principle within the differential association theory is the sixth principle, which is when individuals associate themselves with people that engage in criminal behaviour and believe it is acceptable. This principles states that an individual becomes delinquent only when definitions favourable to violation of law exceed definitions unfavourable to violation of law (Newburn, 2007: 194). The seventh principle stares that differential associations may vary in frequency, duration priority and intensity. The eighth principle believes that the process of learning criminal behaviour by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning (Newburn, 2007: 194).

The final principle states that while criminal behaviour is an expression of needs and values, it is not explained by those needs and values since non criminal behaviour is an expression of the same needs and values. For example if two individuals where both motivated by a need to gain money

and respect, but one person engage in criminal behaviour in order to get the money and respect. Whereas the other person engaged in conforming behaviour. So therefore the need for money and respect cannot be used as an explanation for an individual to commit crime (Newburn, 2009: 194).

The second theory that will be discussed is labelling theory. This theory claims that deviance and conformity does not emerge from the individual's actions, but rather from how others respond to the actions. Marcionis and Plummer (2005) state that labelling theory highlights social response to crime and deviance. The main academics in this theory were Becker and Lemert. Lemert (1951) first established the view of deviant, and later developed by Becker (1963). Labelling theory has become a dominant theory in the explanation of deviance. This theory is created by the assumption that deviant behaviour is solely based on the violation of norms within society, but also by any behaviour which is defined as labelled or deviant. Deviance is not viewed as the act that the individual engages in, instead it is based on the response other individuals give to the act. Becker (1963) believed that deviance is created through social groups because they make rules which create deviance, and then they apply those rules to particular individuals labelling them as deviant. He also stated that deviance is not the act that the individual commits, but the consequences of the application of others by rules and sanctions to an offender. And the deviant one is whom the label has successfully been applied to.

Deviance has been distinguished into primary and secondary deviance by Lemert (1951). Lemert described primary deviance as diminutive reactions from others that have little effect on an individual's self-concept and

secondary deviance is described as people pushing the deviant individual out of the social circle, which can therefore cause the individual to seek the company of people who condone deviant behaviour. He further argued that instead of viewing crime as a leading to control, it may be more productive to view crime as something with control agencies structured. Secondary deviance leads Goffman (1963) to define deviant career. Goffman (1963) stated that people who acquire a ' stigma' which is a powerful negative label which changes a person's self-concept and social identity. The individuals is la

Criminal prosecution is one way in which the individual is labelled in a negative, rather than in a positive way. It is believed that stigmatizing people can often lead to retrospective labelling, which is the understanding of an individual's past with the present deviance. Lement believes that retrospective labelling distorts an individual's life in a prejudicial way guided by stigma and this is an unfair thing to do. Stigmatizing young people may actually lead them into a deviant career (Hopkins Burke, 2008: 172)

Howard Becker (1963) claimed that social groups create deviance by labelling individuals as outsiders. Through an application of infraction constitute deviance. Furthermore labelling theory's approach to deviance mainly concentrates on the social reaction to a deviant act committed by an individual as well as the interaction process that leads up to the labelling. This theory therefor suggests that too much attention has been given to criminals by academics because criminology views criminals as types of people and also to the insufficient attention to the collection of social control responses. This therefore means that the police, law, media and public

association help shape crime. This is supported by the conflict theory which shows how deviance reflects on inequalities and power. This approach may also signify that the cause of crime may be linked to inequalities of race, class and gender. The conflict theory links deviance to the power of norms and the imagery of the rich and powerful, which the law society supports.

The notion of secondary deviance, stigma and deviant career all demonstrate how individuals can include the label of deviance into a lasting self-concept. Becker (1963) believes that labelling is a practical act that has made politicians aware of which rules to enforce and what behaviour they should regard as deviant. The effects upon an individual being publically labelled deviant have been examined by Becker (1963) he believes that a label is an unbiased opinion, which contains an evaluation of the individual to whom it is applied. The labelling theory will be a master label in term of captivating over all other statuses the individuals are under. For example if an individual is labelled as a rapist it will be difficult for the individual to overlook these labels and see themselves in positive roles such a parent, friend, worker and neighbour. Other people will view that individual and respond to them according to the label; also they will assume that the individual has the negative characteristics associated with the label.

Eventually the individual will view themselves in that label because their self-concept is derived from the responses of others. This can then produce a self-fulfilling prophecy where the deviant becomes the controlling one.

The third theory that will be discussed is the strain theory. Unlike the differential association and labelling, this theory believes that social structures within society can influence individuals to commit crimes. Merton

(1938) suggests that there are two types of important elements of social structure; these elements are the cultural goals, the function of the goals and interests. The third theory that will be discussed is the strain theory. Unlike the differential association and labelling, this theory believes that social structures within society can influence individuals to commit crimes. Merton (1938) suggests that there are two types of important elements of social structure; these elements are the cultural goals, the function of the goals and interests. Merton (1938) explains the occurrence of crime and deviance using five responses to strain. The first path is 'Conformity'; this path suggests that individuals could alleviate the strain by changing their cultural goals and by withdrawing allegiance to the institutionalised means. The second path is 'Retreatism'; Merton considered this path to be the least common adaption. Retreats are those who rejected cultural goals and its institutionalised means. Individuals who normally take this path are considered not to be part of society (Hopkins Burke, 2008: 120). The third path is the 'Ritualism', these individuals are not particularly successful in attaining their conventional goal, but they emphasise on the means that obscure their judgements on the desirability of appreciating the goals. The fourth path is 'Innovation'; this path suggests that when an individual finds that an obstacle inhibits their ability to achieve the cultural goals, the individuals will use other means rather than institutional means (Hopkins Burke, 2008: 121). The final path is 'Rebellion', Merton believes rebellious people are those who simply reject but also which to change the existing social system and its goals. Rebels reject socially approved means and the goals of their society. (Hopkins Burke, 2008: 122).

Strain theory can cause negative feelings from the outside environment. These feelings include fear, defeat and despair; the most applicable feeling that can occur is anger. Agnew (1992) emphasised that when they become angry, individuals tend to blame their negative relationships and circumstances on others (Agnew, 1992: 59). An individual is incited with anger, low inhibitions and they begin to create a desire for revenge (Agnew, 1992: 60). Agnew stated that individuals who are subjected to repetitive strain are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal acts, this is due to the fact that the individual becomes aggressive because they are unable to cope and the negative strain may become too much for them (Agnew, 1992: 61).

Overall all three theories give a good explanation of youth crime. The similarity between these theories is they all aim to give a detailed explanation as to why individuals engage in crime and deviance. Differential association theory believes that all behaviour is learned and so therefore deviant behaviour is also learned. This theory focuses on key variables such as the age of the learner, the intensity of contact with the deviant person whom they learn from and the amount of good and bad social contacts they have in their lives. Whereas the labelling theory explains deviance as a social process where individuals are able to define others as deviant. This theory emphasises on the fact that deviance is relative and the individual only becomes deviant when they are labelled. Alongside this strain theory explains deviance as the outcome of social strains within the way society is structured.

Not all theories give a good explanation for tackling youth crime, the labelling theory states that the label is the route of criminal behaviour; this is not a good explanation because there is a reason an individual becomes a burglar, not because they have been labelled as one. The individual is aware that their actions are deviant and that they are breaking the law. Some academics believe that there should be more research into the labelling theory and why individuals engage in criminal behaviour. The left realist have stated that the idea of avoiding labelling in order to avoid deviance is unrealistic. Also Aker (1994) criticised the labelling theory for claiming that deviants are normal individuals who have been labelled. However the labelling theory fails to explain why some individuals are labelled and some are not. Another criticism of the labelling theory is that it is possible to reject the label. Becker (1963) claimed that once an individual is labelled and accepts the deviant behaviour, all their other qualities become irrelevant and the label becomes their master status. However there are examples that show it is possible to reject the label. This example comes from Reiss (1961) study on young male prostitutes. Although the males engage in homosexual behaviour they regard this behaviour as work and still maintain their 'straight' image despite working as prostitutes. This study shows that the labelling theory is open to negotiation as some individuals reject the label.

Differential association theory and the strain theory can be used to tackle youth crime. The differential association accepts that criminal behaviour is evident across all social classes, and that criminal attitudes and behaviour is learned through interaction with influential groups. In order to tackle youth crime the government will need to introduce organizations that aim at using

positive role models to encourage young individuals who do not have positive role models in their lives. By doing so individuals can learn positive behaviour instead of deviant behaviour from people who engage in unacceptable behaviour. The differential theory has been criticised in Glueck (1956) article on ' Theory and fact in Criminology'. Glueck stated that it is difficult to measure the duration, priority, frequency and intensity of an individual's association, so therefore this makes it impossible to predict and measure how the differential associations result in the learning of criminal behaviour. It could be argued that the individual did not learn criminal behaviour from an intimate social group, because the duration, frequency, priority and intensity was not sufficient. Glueck (1956) argued that if there is no sufficiency then the theory is not falsifiable which therefore makes it defective.

Finally the strain theory can be used to tackle youth crime because it explains the strains with society that may influence individuals to engage in criminal activity. This theory can enable the government to improve the social structure within society, for example providing more employment and better education opportunities. Strain theory has been criticised by Cohen (1955) who stated that the theory can be accounted for some but not all deviant behaviour. Cohen also criticised Merton's theory of strain for being too individualistic in describing the adaptations to strain.