

Compare and contrast of theories and crime criminology essay



'To many citizens, politicians, and criminal justice practitioners, theory has a bad name, which is why in their minds, the word 'theory' means an irrelevant antonym of 'fact' (Akers, 1999). The term theory is often mistaken in criminology. In late 1500's, 'theory' was first used to explain a theme or concept; but by the 1630's scientists had begun to use the word to describe an explanation which was based on observation and testing (Akers, 1999). If a theory is developed properly by using real situations, feelings, knowledge and human behaviour, it can be tested against new facts and help make sense of facts we already know (Akers, 1999)

Theoretical criminology tries to explain theories of why and how crime occurs by examining the various facts related to criminal behaviour and crime.

These theories offer the sociological, psychological and biological views of the causes of crime. It is critical for people to know and understand not only why theories are important but also how it helps the criminal justice and learning from these theories of the past helps to shape new theories of the present and future (Cote, 2002). There are numerous theories which try to describe the causes of crime, some of these well-known theories are; the strain theory, control theory, differential association theory and social disorganization theory. Crime is a major issue around the world and a controversial debate that often brings up more questions than it answers. Explaining these criminal behaviours has become even more complex as researchers have become aware that crime is a more complicated and confusing situation than they have previously recognized (Burke, 2005).

'Theoretical perspectives provide us with an image of what something is and how we might best act toward it. They name something this type of thing

and not that. They provide us with the sense of bring in a world of relatively fixed forms and content. Theoretical perspectives transform a mass of raw sensory data into understanding, explanations and recipes for appropriate action' (Pfohl, 1985). This essay will analyse and compare the basic concepts of two theories (learning and self-control) to understand the nature and cause of criminal and deviant behaviour.

Learning is defined as the lifelong process of transforming information and experience into knowledge, skills, behaviour and attitudes (Cobb, 2009).

Learning theories claim that criminality is not natural but is learnt from interaction with other persons (Williams, 1991). These people can be family members, peer groups, work colleagues or any other means of socialization. If a person speaks or spends more time with people who believe breaking the law is acceptable and have criminal backgrounds then the person will most likely be involved in criminal activities. There are many theorists who use learning theories to explain why people commit crime.

The first criminologist who introduced a theory of crime as normal learned behaviour was Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904) (Vold, 1998). Tarde did not agree to Lombroso's theory of crime which stated that crime was caused by biological abnormality. He called his theory 'laws of imitation'. Tarde's first law was the law of close contact. This described that people are most likely to imitate one another depending on close contact they have with one another. For example, in cities changes take place rapidly thus imitation is more frequent and in rural areas, in contrast changes take place slowly, so therefore imitation is less frequent. 'Tarde argued that crime begins as a fashion and later becomes a custom, much like any other social

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phenomenon' (Vold, 1998). His second law of imitation was superiors by inferiors. This meant inferiors often imitate superiors, such as crime started with royalty and then took place in all social classes. Likewise, crime happened in larger cities and was then imitated by those in rural areas (Vold, 1998). The third and last law stated new methods took over old methods. Old fashions were being substituted by new ones. This was called the law of insertion. An example which Tarde argued was that crimes by knives had decreased while crimes by shooting had increased (Vold, 1998). Laws of imitation had an immense impact to scholars as it was the first theory to attempt to explain criminal behaviour relating to normal learning rather than biological and psychological problems.

A later theory was then introduced by Edwin Sutherland (1883-1950) which took the same basic idea of Tarde's laws of imitation. This theory has had the most impact in criminology. In 1939, Sutherland introduced his differential association theory in the third edition of his text, *Principles of Criminology* (Renzetti, 1994). Differential association theory defines that 'criminal behaviour is learnt behaviour and acquired by means of social contact with other individuals' (Maguire, 2007). Sutherland describes how individuals learn to become deviant and engage in criminal behaviour through the nine main principles he identifies (Sutherland, 1974).

Sutherland's first principle as to why a person engages in criminal behaviour is because 'criminal behaviour is learned' (Cote, 2002). Most learning theories believe that the performance of a person's behaviour are influenced and created by other individuals they correlate with. Criminal behaviour is learned by 'interacting with others in a process of communication' is his <https://assignbuster.com/compare-and-contrast-of-theories-and-crime-criminology-essay/>

second principle (Cote, 2002). Gestures and verbal interactions between people are other ways of communication, and this is how individuals become criminals. Sutherland's third factor says that learning criminal behaviour takes place within intimate personal groups such as family, friends, peers, their most intimate, personal companions and that impersonal ways of communication such as television and newspapers play no role in why a person becomes deviant (Newburn, 2009). The fourth principle of Sutherland differential theory is that 'Learning criminal behaviour involves learning the techniques, motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes' (Cote, 2002). 'The specific direction of motives and attitudes is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favourable or unfavourable' (Cote, 2002). This is the fifth principle of Sutherland's theory. This principle can be applied to different cultures. An example would be the many different perceptions and various cultures in the United States which may be favourable as compared to United Kingdom which may be non-favourable. Therefore, conflicts arise in societies. 'A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavourable to violation of law' (Cote, 2002). This was described as the sixth factor of his theory and was one of the main principles because Sutherland believes a person who associates with groups of individuals who believe crime is acceptable more than people who believe crime is not acceptable, the person will become in favour to and against the rules of society. The seventh and eighth factors are 'differential associations vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity' (Cote, 2002) and 'the process of learning criminal behaviour involves all the mechanisms involved in any other learning' (Cote, 2002). Last of all,

'although criminal behaviour is an expression of general needs and values,
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criminal behaviour and motives are not explained nor excused by the same needs and values, since non-criminal behaviour is explained by the same general needs and values'(Cote, 2002). (((ADD SUMTHING))

A famous Arabic once said 'A wise man associating with the vicious becomes an idiot; a dog travelling with good men become and rational being' (Paternoster & Bachman, 2000), 'if you live with a cripple, you will learn to limp' (Paternoster & Bachman, 2000), this was a saying by an ancient Greek biographer Plutarch and a saying by Sutherland himself 'A person can become a professional thief only if he is trained by those who are already professionals' (Paternoster & Bachman, 2000). These are some sayings by famous writers which relate and support Sutherland's differential theory.

Every theory has faults and weaknesses just like differential association theory. Even though differential association has been criticised many times, there are many theorists who have been motivated and extremely influenced by him and have made theories relating to his. Many theorists have extended and modified the key problems in Sutherland's differential association theory. 'Several authors have maintained Sutherland's view that criminal behaviour is normally learned behaviour, but have updated the conception of what is involved in 'normal learning'' (Vold, 1998).

'Burgess and Akers extended Sutherlands theory to specify the components of learning process, and created links to psychology' (Burgess & Akers, 1966). In late 1960's Ronald Akers and Robert Burgess created a differential reinforcement theory which was first published in the Society for the Study of Social Problems (Burgess & Akers, 1966). Differential reinforcement refers to

the actual or expected of a given behaviour. Burgess and Akers recreated Sutherlands nine key principles into seven by keeping the first and eighth. These seven factors were criminal behaviour is learned through conditioning or imitation, criminal behaviour is learned both in non-social reinforcing situations or non-social discriminative situations and thru social interaction, the principal components of learning occur in groups, learning depends on available reinforcement contingencies, the type and frequency of learning depends on the norms by which these reinforces are applied, criminal behaviour is a function of norms which are discriminative for criminal behaviour and the strength of criminal behaviour depends upon its reinforcement (textbook). Later, Akers added the idea of imitation to differential reinforcement theory and started to refer the theory as social learning theory. Rather paying attention to the seven factors, he centrally focused on four concepts, which were differential association, differential reinforcement, definitions and imitation (Paternoster & Bachman, 2000). The first two ideas's come directly from Sutherland and imitation and differential reinforcement are taken from psychology. Akers believes that not all sources of definitions or role models are equally the same, for example not everyone is as important as their parents or peers. Overall, 'Social learning theory (SLT) proposes that individuals learn new behaviour through reinforcement, punishment or observational learning' (Vold, 1998). Those who observe positive outcomes of behaviour are more likely to imitate or adopt that behaviour themselves.

On the other hand, social control theories take an opposite approach to explain why people would commit crime. Many theories of crime believe if

people were left to themselves, they would not break the law and factors relating to biological, psychological and social are actually what compel people to commit crime but control theories argue the opposite. Control theories use the biological, psychological and social ideas to prove their theory. They argue that 'restraining' and 'controlling' factors can prevent a person from offending. The earliest theorist to identify control theories was Albert. J Reiss in 1951 who said crime was the result of a failure of personal and social controls (Burke, 2005). A person needs self-control and the control over the person's actions through the external application of social sanctions such as rewards for good deeds and punishments for bad deeds. Reiss's work on control theory was criticized many times, but he still managed to influence many other criminologists who carried on with control theories.

Couple of years after, another early theory of control theory was initiated. This theory was provided by Jackson Toby in 1957 who introduced the concept of 'stakes in conformity'. (Vold, 1998) This theory relates to how much a person has to lose and go through after he/she has broken the law. This was majorly about juvenile delinquency. Some youths risk more by committing crimes because other youths do not care about jeopardizing their future careers. Therefore, they have 'high' stakes in conformity than the ones who do not care.

In 1958, Ivan Nye published a study that said that family was the single most important source of social control for youth (Nye, 1958). He believed that crime was being committed due to lacking social control. After doing research in schools, his findings showed that youths came from homes with either complete freedom or no freedom at all (Vold, 1998). Toby added onto <https://assignbuster.com/compare-and-contrast-of-theories-and-crime-criminology-essay/>

Nye's research findings and said that this type of social control is vital to adults as well.

In 1960's two other control theories were introduced which were David Matza's drift theory in the mid 60's and Walter Reckless's Containment theory in 1967 but the most influential contribution to the development of later social control theory was by Travis Hirschi in 1969 (Vold, 1998) Hirschi believed that people who were closely bonded to social groups such as parents, peers, school or siblings would be less likely to commit crimes (Vold, 1998). Attachment was one of the most important factors in social control theory. The other three factors are commitment, involvement, and belief. Commitment relates to Toby's 'stake in conformity' theory. Involvement means keeping yourself busy, so the more you are involving yourself, and restricting yourself from criminal opportunities then less likely you will commit one. Lastly, believing and obeying rules of society will help you not go against the law but if a person doesn't believe he should obey the rules, the more likely he will disobey them. There have been many surveys, reports and research studies done on social control theories and many people have supported it (Vold, 1998).

Travis Hirschi moved on to self-control theory from social control theory in 1990. Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson published a book called 'A General Theory of Crime' which stated that low-self control can explain all types of crime (Vold, 1998). This theory attracted many criminologists. Hirschi's previous social control theory specified the importance of indirect control but Gottfredson and Hirschi argue the importance of direct control. 'Self-control theory as a generalized theory that explains all individual differences in the "

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propensity" to refrain from or to commit crime, which they point out includes all acts of crime and deviance at all ages, and circumstances' (Burke, 2005)

Low self-control takes place while the person is a youth and remains like that throughout adulthood. Gottfredson and Hirschi try to find out what causes low-self control to people. As Dennis Giever explains, 'children who are not attached to their parents, who are poorly supervised, and whose parents are criminal or deviant themselves are the most likely to develop poor self control' (Cunningham, 2006). So, Parents who reject to take care, watch, and punish their children's behaviours are the ones who will lack in self-control. Lack of self-control occurs instantly when deviant behaviour is not stopped over a period of time. These criminals find their behaviour to be exciting, and thrilling. The crimes they commit are rarely planned and often cause pain and discomfort to the victim. The theory states that the higher a person's self-control the less likely a person will engage in criminal acts and having lower self-control will make them participate in more criminal activities (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).

'All theories relating to law-violating behavior address the same question of why people commit or refrain from committing crime' (Akers, 1999). It is very easy to get confused with social learning and control theories due to the fact that they have many other theories connecting to them. Both of these theories appeal to many criminologists and have influenced many people and have been strongly supported and tested on. Another similarity they share is that they both believe 'socialization' is a key factor to why individuals