

Contribution of chicago school to criminology



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Critically assess the contribution of the Chicago School

In this essay I will critically assess the contribution of the Chicago school. I will open this essay by briefly describing the Chicago school and the conditions in which it arose. I will then look at the context within criminology in which the Chicago School emerged; I will do this by looking at the dominating criminological theories that existed before the Chicago school. Furthermore I will discuss the influence Emile Durkheim and Ernest Simmel made to the Chicago school theories. I will follow by describing and critically assessing the contributions made by some of the key Chicago School thinkers, Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, Edwin Sutherland and Robert Merton. This essay will be concluded by assessing the contributions of the Chicago School theories.

The Chicago school is the name given to the work conducted at the University of Chicago since the 1890's. The Chicago school emerged at a time when the city was experiencing rapid social changes owing to a rapid increase in population as a result of great migration. These massive social changes caused problems regarding; housing, poverty and strain on institutions. These rapid social changes interested sociologists; they were concerned as to how the city would stay stable in relation to these changes (Faris, 1967, p. 5).

The Chicago school primary work took a positive stance; however, sociologists were more focused on social positivism. This social positivism I will demonstrate in social structural theories by Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Robert Merton, Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay. Following world

Two of the sociologists at the school employed a different form of enquiry to the previous positivist approach. These sociologists applied an interactionist form of enquiry to study the social world; this was called symbolic interactionism strongly influenced by the work of Ernest Simmel. This interactionist form of inquiry will be demonstrated in the work of Edwin Sutherland.

In order to understand the contributions made by the Chicago school, we need to understand the context in which the Chicago school emerged. The dominant theories in Criminology preceding the Chicago school were classical criminological and positivist theories of crime.

The classical school of criminology dates back to the enlightenment in the early 18th century. Philosophers Jeremy Bentham and Cesare Beccaria, focused their interest on the system of criminal justice and penology, they suggested that crime is a product of human nature and rational humans possess free will, therefore have the ability to control their actions.

(Carrabine et al, 2004, chap. 3)

This perspective emerged as an alternative to the old barbaric system of capital punishment and was concerned with generating a criminal justice system which was more reasonable. This theory was not concerned with the individual causes of crime but instead focused on the law enforcement and legal procedure. Classical criminologists believe that laws are constructed to demonstrate that non-criminal behaviour is in people's self interests because, according to Jeremy Bentham, it corresponds to his hedonistic utilitarian principle, 'the greatest good for the greatest number' (Bentham, 1789).

Beccaria suggests that crime is a result of bad laws and had nothing to do with bad individuals. Beccaria's famous book *On Crime and Punishment*, offered a new perspective based on justice, his notions became the foundations of the modern criminal justice system (Beccaria, 1764, p. 8-19).

Early positivist theories of crime are deterministic as they reject the notion of free will. This deterministic approach uses empirical research methods. This perspective proposes that crime is a consequence of biological, psychological and environmental determinants (Cebulak et al, 2004, chap. 3). This is in contrast to the classical approach, which focuses on legal issues and prevention of crime. Positivist criminologists alleged that the causes and effects of criminal behaviour are directly observable; this view was shared by Cesare Lombroso. Lombroso did not believe in the notion of free will, he believed that criminal behaviour was inherited. Lombroso suggested that a 'criminal type' exists, criminals are physiologically different to non-criminals and these criminals display observable physical signs and deformities. Lombroso conducted research on criminals to gain observable evidence (Macionis and Plummer, 2005, p. 442).

Both of these theories offer interesting explanations of crime and have contributed to the development of criminology today. The criminal justice system might not exist without the work of Beccaria and perhaps capital punishment might still be in use presently. The work of early positivist criminologists have contributed to criminology by suggesting that crime is not necessarily a matter of free will but could in fact be a result of determining external factors. The positivist tradition was also employed by Emile Durkheim. The Chicago school was highly influenced by Durkheim's

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work and his ideas contributed to the development of some of their theories. The Chicago School's early work employed a social positivist tradition as they believed that crime was not a matter of free will but was determined by social factors.

Emile Durkheim was interested in social positivism; his theories focused on macro sociological issues. Durkheim looked at societies as a whole and believed that there were laws that govern and control our behaviour. Durkheim suggested that a certain degree of crime and deviance was necessary for a healthy society. He suggested that individuals are influenced by different factors and may not share the same values; these conflicting values can cause deviant behaviour (Durkheim, 1895, p. 65-73).

Durkheim suggested that too much crime and deviance threatens the stability of society but too little indicates apathy as well as limiting change and innovation. Durkheim also suggested that deviance has a positive function because exposure to criminal behaviour reinforces society's belief in shared norms and values, when a criminal trial transpires; it heightens awareness of society's moral code. Durkheim believed that society can be viewed similarly to an organic organism because both are made up from interdependent parts working together in order for the whole to function; he suggested that institutions such as the family, education and religion all contribute to the overall functioning of society. (Macionis and Plummer, 2005 p. 444)

After World War Two, some Chicago School thinkers were influenced by the work of Ernest Simmel, his ideas are essential for understanding the original

notions from where symbolic interactionism emerged. Simmel looked at micro sociological issues. Simmel suggested that individuals are not directly observable because of their subjective nature; he believed that individuals are self interested and try to gain their needs by using the means available to them. Simmel looked at individual's actions as he believed that through these actions the social world was constructed he suggests "... society is made up of the interactions between and among individuals, and the sociologist should study the patterns and forms of these associations, rather than quest after social laws" (Farganis, p. 133). This perspective is different from the deterministic positivist theory as it believes that individuals have the free will to construct their own reality.

Robert Park was an influential figure at the university during the 1920's and 1930's, he was interested in human Ecology. He was highly influenced by the work of Emile Durkheim and his organic analogy of society. Park saw the city as a super organism and held that social changes were a natural process required by society in order to proceed and effectively evolve. (Park and Burgess, 1921)

Robert Park was pioneer of a new research method called ethnography. This pioneering new method made huge contributions to the way sociologists/criminologists studied the social world. Park encouraged his students to go into the city and collect primary data using observational methods. (Macdonald and Plummer 2005 p. 648-649)

" Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedown; sit in

the Orchestra Hall and the Star and Garter Burlesque. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research.”

(Park, Cited in Prus 1996, pg 103-140)

Using a mixture of ethnographic methods combined with ecology, Park and Ernest Burgess conducted an ecological study on the city of Chicago.

Together they constructed a diagrammatical representation of the city called the concentric zone model. The concentric zone model was the first model to demonstrate how urban land was used. This model showed the location of certain social groups within the city of Chicago (Macdonald and Plummer, 2005 p. 650-651).

This theory revealed that there was a correlation in distance from the central business zone depending on class, it showed that richer people lived further away from the central business district and poorer people lived near it in the zone of transition. Their theory suggests that areas nearest the core are impacted higher by social changes for example poverty, immigration (Macdonald and Plummer, 2005 p. 650-651).

This theory has contributed to criminology as it shows the correlation between social ecology, class and crime; this model demonstrates the impact social changes have on crime. This was a change to previous explanations of crime as it suggests that crime is a result of external social factors, and therefore challenges the earlier positivist's biological causal theory supported by Lombroso.

The centric zone model has been criticised because the theory is context and historically specific. This theory cannot be applied to explain city's other than Chicago. This theory does not explain modern ecology, as high-class housing is near the centre of the city and not on the outskirts. Another criticism is that Park and Burgess used official data to produce their theory but they did not have knowledge of how this official data was configured, such as; if the data was affected by bias, if individuals were labelled. This theory also did not take into account white collar crime. Furthermore Park and Burgess' theory did not offer explanations as to why crime in the zone of transition was higher in other areas. This theory also did not suggest who committed crime's and why? (Short, 1976)

Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay also made contributions to the development of the Chicago school. They were interested in how these social forces influence crime, an area overlooked by the earlier work of Park and Burgess. Shaw and McKay were interested in social disorganization; they suggest that crime is a social disorder resulting from social disorganization (Lotz, 2005 p. 122-127).

Shaw and McKay used Park and Burgess's concentric zone model to investigate the relationships in crime rates and delinquency in the different zones in the city. They also found that areas located near the city centre that were experiencing high disorganization were also experiencing high delinquency. They suggest that " Delinquency rates were for these groups high...because of other aspects of the total situation in which they lived" (Shaw and McKay, 1942 pg56).

Their theory looked at the reasons behind the high levels of disorganization.

They advocate that social disorganization in urban areas is linked to social changes for example, industrialization, urbanization and immigration. They propose that disorganized areas will develop deviant and criminal values that substitute conventional values. The diagram below demonstrates Shaw and McKay's theory (Shaw and McKay, 1942).

Shaw and McKay theory is unique as it looks at the social aspects causing crime; it explains why there are increased amounts of delinquency in certain areas and within certain groups (Shaw and McKay, 1942).

There are however criticisms of Shaw and McKay's social disorganizational theory. Critics suggest that not everyone who lives in disorganized communities engage in criminal acts. It also does not explain why criminal acts are still present in areas that are seen to have low disorganization. This theory also overlooks middle class crime as it only focuses on disorganized areas. This theory does not explain how deviant norms and values are transmitted (Lotz, 2005, p. 122-127).

Another theory associated with the University of Chicago was the theory of differential association developed by Edwin Sutherland 1939. Its aim is to understand the process in which deviant behaviour is learnt. This theory explains areas that Shaw and McKay missed. This theory looks at the cultural transmission it proposes that criminal behaviour is learned through human interactions and suggests that criminal and deviant norms, attitudes and motives transpire from learned behaviour. He looked deeply at individuals' values and cultural perspectives in order to recognize the reasons behind

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deviant and criminal behaviour. This perspective was influenced by the ideas of Simmel and the idea that researchers needed to look at the underlying causes of criminal behaviour (Cote, 2002, p. 125-130).

This perspective made contributions to criminology as it suggests that the causes of crime are related to learning deviant or criminal norms. This theory contrasts the positivist theories as it takes an interactionist's stance. This theory suggests that criminal behaviour is learned through interaction and can be transmitted through groups of people through communication and a collection of shared attitudes. This theory also can be used to explain white collar crimes (Lotz, 2005 p. 127-131).

However, this theory does not explain why not all individuals who are influenced by criminal or deviant norms don't become deviant or criminals. This theory can be criticized for its lack of empirical evidence due to its interpretive form of inquiry. This theory does not take into account the pressure society puts on individuals to achieve their goals; this pressure is explained by Robert Merton's strain theory (Cote, 2002, p. 125-130).

Robert Merton's strain theory was derived from Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie. This theory looks at the impact society has on individuals. Merton suggests that there is an inequality in the ability for individuals to achieve their goals. This theory suggests that when individuals cannot acquire the means to achieve their goals, this can lead to criminal and deviant behaviour. His theory is broken down into five elements as this diagram demonstrates (Lotz, 2005, p. 127-131).

- Conformity is when individuals accept there are means and goals.

- Innovation is when there is a rejection of the means but the individual still desires the goal, this could result in criminal behaviour.
- Ritualism is not a rejection of the goals but the individual accepts that they can't reach their goals.
- Retreatism, individuals want to withdraw from society and are not interested in inquiring the means or reaching their goals.
- Rebellion, these individuals reject the means and goals but do not withdraw from society but rather wants society to change and become active force of change.

This theory has contributed to criminology as it focuses on how strain society puts on people, to obtain the means in order to achieve their goals, these pressures Merton calls anomie. This theory gives explanations to why poor people commit crime. It demonstrates that the poor don't have the means they need to achieve their goals (Cote, 2002, p. 125-130).

There is however criticisms of this theory this theory does not explain why there is white collar crime. It overlooks the issue that rich people who have the means to achieve their goals still commit crime (Lotz, 2005, p. 127-131).

In conclusion the Chicago school theories made significant contributions to the study of criminology. The modern structural theories changed our thinking from the idea that crime was caused by individual biological/genetic factors, to the idea that crime was a result of social factors. The Chicago school's social structural theories suggest that crime is a result of external social and cultural factors. Robert Park and Ernest Burgess ecological theory, made a contribution as it demonstrated how external social factors can influence crime. Shaw and McKay made contributions to criminology by <https://assignbuster.com/contribution-of-chicago-school-to-criminology/>

explaining how these external social factors had an impact on criminal behaviour. Their social disorganizational theory demonstrates the link between external factors (social disorganization) and crime. Their disorganizational theory demonstrates what happens if there is a break down of social control in society. They suggest that this break down leads to disorganization. However this theory does not explain the pressure social control has on individuals. This was the focus of Merton's strain theory; Merton was interested in the pressure society put on individuals. Merton's strain theory highlights effects the social forces have on determining crime. The Chicago School also contributed by adopting an interactionist's form of inquiry as demonstrated in Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory. This form of inquiry was inspired by the work of Simmel and is unique in comparison to the positivist tradition. The interactionist approach made significant contributions to the way we understand the underlying reasons behind criminal behaviour. This perspective is not interested in finding the cause of crime but its aim. The Chicago school contributed by using ethnography, this allowed researchers to get in-depth detailed accounts of the social phenomena they were observing. Ethnographic methods are still used today as they are considered a vital way to gain detailed primary information. Every Chicago school theory has contributed to the way we study criminology some theories may be more relevant than others but all the theories have raised important issues.

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