

Brothers and keepers and sociological theory essay



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It is widely accepted that people of color represent the highest rates of incarceration in relation to their population rates. This does not mean that Black people are more inclined to criminality.

The criminal justice system persecutes them with more imprisonment, heavier sentences and lesser chances for paroles than they do white people. John Edgar Wideman's book, *Brothers and Keepers*, tells the story of two brothers, himself and his brother, and the different paths that they have led. Wideman is a successful writer and college professor. His younger brother, Robbie, is serving a life-time sentence for murder, no chance for parole.

Throughout this paper, I will show how and why the outcome of their lives differ using sociological theories. Perhaps the theory most useful to explain the story of the two brothers is under the school of social ecology. From that, the social disorganization theory is attributed to the professors associated with the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago between 1920 and 1932. These professors, referred to as the Chicago School have been large contributors to the advancement of sociological theories to help explain all facets of society. Many acknowledged professors came from these school of thought, most noteworthy among them include George H. Mead, Edwin H.

Sutherland, Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess. The Chicago School, while having a diverse group of professors, shares certain assumptions in the area of crime and delinquency. While human nature is generally good, as the theory believes, people are susceptible to vulnerability and have difficulty

resisting temptations. The Chicago School holds that crime and delinquency are primarily caused by the social environment.

However that social environment is structurally in a constant state of instability; there is conflict, anomie, and social disorganization in all communities. Issues of class are also components of focus to the Chicago School. The lack of stability effects the lower class populations to a much higher degree than those of higher class (Cohen ; Felson, 1976). In terms of crime, those of poorer class are impressed to incline more to a life of crime than are those of higher class.

Many sociologists from the Chicago School contributed to the social disorganization theory and its equivalents, among them were Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay. Social disorganization theory, also referred to as human ecology, was derived from theories of biology. The theory links a relationship between human populations and their physical environment. In terms of crime, it is theorized that crime is related to the disorganization of the social communities. Research by Shaw and McKay have shown that in areas of high poverty and unemployment levels, physical dilapidation of buildings and residential overcrowding, crime and delinquency were most widespread (Berger et al.

, 2001). Parks and Burgess also offered contributions to the social disorganization theory under the name of the concentric zone theory. They viewed cities in a circular shape consisting of five zones: central business district (CBD), transition, workingman, residential and commuter. The fluidity

is outwards, as people become more affluent, they move outside the main city.

The CBD area is the most important to our study. The area is characterized as poverty stricken, many new and differing immigrants, high unemployment and few social services. They theorize that in the business district the most poverty is found and thus so is the most crime (Cohen ; Felson (1976).

Though the social ecology school of thought was developed during the 1920s and thus viewed crime as a consequence of the transition from traditional to industrial life, it does serve explanation in the lives of the two brothers John Edgar and Robby Wideman. The brothers grew up in an area similar to Parks and Burgess' concentric zone theory. Their area was poverty stricken with high unemployment and crime rates.

John states in the book that it is no wonder that Robby turned to a life of crime; there were few other choices. His influences were the street gangs that prevailed in his neighborhood. Reason for John to have escaped the life of crime may lay in his departure from the area. With his move to university and later Laramie, Wyoming, he was able to be positively influenced by the new social environment that did not have high unemployment or crime rates. Like most theories, prevention/intervention programs have arisen from the social disorganization theory. Most notable was the Chicago Area Project (CAP).

The CAP philosophy required that the collective community took part in the prevention of delinquency and crime. Community organizers participated with the local residents to exert more control over the youths and " to

facilitate activities among community groups for the solutions of common problems" (Berger et al. , 2001: 118). The program was run by a board of directors that raise and distributed money to the various local programs set up. All decisions were officially made by the local residences however the CAP organizers offered advice. The main point of the organizers was to get the local residents to be active in the prevention of delinquency by working together in various community organizations such as churches, schools, the justice system and such other community groups.

When possible, CAP intervened in school-related matters to better the experience for the students in hopes of keeping them from being delinquents. Examples of such interceptions would be a change in the curriculum, placing student sin appropriate programs and helping student reintegrate into the school system after being expelled. The program served a simple position in the justice system; the organizers helped recently released parolees back into the community and in deflecting youths to the correct community agencies. The CAP program originated many activities that were later employed in other prevention programs that offered community involvement and gave the youths something to do other than involve themselves in criminal and delinquent activities. Such activities are recreation and camping programs, youth clubs and hobby or discussion groups (Berger, 2001). These activities are widely in use today even in area not designated as high crime-risk areas.

CAP organizers, called ' detached street workers,' worked in the streets to be more accessible to troubled youths and to attempt to bring gang leaders into the program, because the gang leader had much influence over the youths.

Critiques of the CAP program are that it is difficult to get whole communities actively participating and in agreement to the appropriate activities for their youth. Had this program been in effect in the area to which Robby lived, it may have deterred him to the life of crime. His mother always said that the moment Robby woke up, he was looking for a party (Wideman, 1984). Had the party been organized by the community, Robby might have had a chance of escaping the temptation of criminal life. The social disorganization theory missed several important factors in its explanation of the two brother's separate life outcome.

The theory is, at times, too individualistic. Communities are the scapegoats for the crime in their area, something they may not have control over. In the case of the two brothers, both were raised in the same community and yet one was a criminal and one was not. The theory does not adequately explain why John Edgar was not a criminal if he had the same social environment as Robby up to the day he left. The theory relies too heavily on the power the poor are believed to have.

It is ironic that the social environment the communities are in are not caused by them but believed capable to being changed by them. Several other theories may provide insight into the differing lives of the Wideman brothers. The labeling theory, in terms of crime, states that people are labeled as criminal and thus, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, end up being criminals. Robby, as a Black man in the urban streets of America, is automatically perceived by law enforcement officials as a criminal. If already labeled as a criminal, Robby may as well be a criminal because he won't receive the

same opportunities as those ascribed to white people. Social learning theory can be insightful to the story of the two brothers.

Robby's influences came from the urban streets riddled by crime. When John left, he attempted to hide his 'blackness' and taught himself to be 'white.' In society, acting 'white' is the desired. In doing so, John was able to leave his 'hood' and be accepted by the general society.

There is no one adequate theory to explain the lives of the Wideman brothers and why they are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Like most phenomenon, there are so many factors to take into consideration. There are individualistic viewpoints to explain it or using societal influences can also give reason. Each person lives his own life and thus chooses his own course. Yet society and its environment play a pivotal role in which decisions are made.