

# Socio-cultural theories of crime



The sociological or socio-cultural model provides a macro-level analysis of criminal violence. This model examines criminal violence in terms of socially structured inequality, and social and cultural attitudes and norms regarding anti-social behaviour and inter-personal relations. Besides the two well-known theories, viz. the Structural-Functional Theory and the Theory of Sub-culture of Violence, the Learning Theory, the Exchange Theory, the Anomie Theory, and the Resource Theory also come under socio-cultural analysis.[1]

### **Structural Theory**

This theory asserts that social groups differ in respect to their typical levels of stress, deprivation and frustration and in the sources at their disposal to deal with these stresses. It explains that those individuals would be more violent who combine high stress with low resources. This theory thus explains an individual's action in terms of the ways it is shaped or determined by social forces of one kind or another. Among the possible sources of stress are ' economic conditions, bad housing, relative poverty, lack of job opportunities and unfavourable and frustrating work condition'. Men and women are socialized into particular roles to which are attached a set of socially determined expectations. If structural faction prevents these expectations from being realized, frustration results and violence may ensue. Furthermore, in a variety of ways violence is socially legitimated.

### **Criticism**

One consequence of accepting this position is that the action of individuals has nothing to do with their personalities and values, and that violence cannot be described in terms of conflict, suppression, sublimation, guilt, and so on. The role of rationality also has to be rejected in social action. The

structuralistic perspective, thus, leaves some questions unanswered because of which it is criticized.

It should also be observed, however, that while stress resulting from poverty, inequality and various forms of deprivation may be contributory factors in domestic violence, only a small proportion of those who experience such conditions behave violently and many of those who do behave violently are neither poor nor deprived.

The identification of structural factors gives a more political flavour to explanations of domestic violence. For example, a study by Straus revealed: that there was a lower incidence of domestic violence when the inequalities between men and women were less marked, and that weaker social bonds gave rise to increased domestic violence.[2]

### **System Tension and Feedback System Theory**

This theory was developed by Straus (A General Systems Theory of violence between Family Members, 1973) to explain intra-family violence. Straus accounts for violence in the home by viewing family as a purposive goal-seeking, adaptive social system. Violence is seen as a system product or output rather than an individual pathology. Straus specified positive feedback in the system which can create an upward spiral of violence, and negative feedback which can maintain, dampen, or reduce the level of violence.

According to this theory, violence is precipitated by factors such as stress and inter-individual conflict and is followed by consequences which maintain or escalate violence in family and in society.

## **Criticism**

This theory has been criticized on the basis that there has been little research specifically concerned with the learning of marital violence. It also over-emphasizes the social system and completely ignores the role of individual's personality.[3]

## **Resource theory**

Resource theory was suggested by William Goode (1971). Women who are most dependent on the spouse for economic well being (e. g. homemakers/housewives, women with handicaps, the unemployed), and are the primary caregiver to their children, fear the increased financial burden if they leave their marriage. Dependency means that they have fewer options and few resources to help them cope with or change their spouse's behavior.

Couples that share power equally experience lower incidence of conflict, and when conflict does arise, are less likely to resort to violence. If one spouse desires control and power in the relationship, the spouse may resort to abuse.[4]

## **Criticism**

This theory does not explain all forms of violence against women. Various arguments can be given against this theory when applied to wife battering, dowry deaths, murders, rapes, and so on.

## **Patriarchy Theory**

This theory developed by R. E. Dobash and R. Dobash (Violence Against Wives, 1979) maintains that throughout history, violence has been systematically directed towards women. Economic and social processes

operate directly and indirectly to support a patriarchal social order and family structure. Dobash's central theoretical argument is that patriarchy leads to the subordination of women and contributes to a historical pattern of systematic violence directed against females.

## **Criticism**

Dobash's theory, while perhaps the most macro-level approach to violence against women, has a major drawback of being a theory that is essentially a single factor (patriarchy) explanation of violence (towards women).

## **Conflict and Control Theories**

Scholars like Foucault (1975), Thompson (1977), and Rothman (1980) have presented a domination model of deviance. They have talked of rules imposed on the powerless by the powerful. Radical and conflict sociologists like Quinney (1977) have argued that the purpose of controlling deviance is to protect the interests of the dominant classes and to prevent access to their resources by outsiders. In other words, the control apparatus is created to prevent the powerless from pursuing their interests, particularly if that pursuit involves gaining access to resources monopolized by the powerful. Imposing varied restrictions on women and compelling them to remain dependent on men economically, socially and emotionally to make them realize that they are 'weak' and powerless in all respects, stands as an example of this argument. To the extent that the agents of control belong to the dominant group, an overall system of devaluation of the 'powerless group' (women) can easily be implemented. Schurz (1983) contends that male control of deviance labelling results in their continued dominance in most spheres of life.

The constraints on women's rights can be interpreted as function of the successful definition of women as different from and inferior to men. " Man talks of woman not in herself but as relative to him. She is not regarded as an autonomous being. She is differentiated with reference to man and not him with reference to her. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute; she is the other."

Sex role norms clearly differentiate men from women. When these norms become internalized, they are accepted as facts and seldom questioned. Millet (1970) has said: " Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different. Women live in such a different economic, cultural and social world from men that their reactions cannot be understood from a master model developed in male society.

## **Criticism**

What is in question is not the existence of gender differences but the extent to which such differences justify restrictive role assignments to each gender. There is little disagreement regarding the cultural construction of gender, but there are conflicting views on the role biological factors play in such development.

Thus women are:

declared as different,

defined as inferior, and

women stereotypes are justified, and

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they are systematically deprived of rights, and

all attempts at change are restricted.

## **Inter-actionist Deviance Theory**

This theory, exemplified by theorists such as Erikson (1964), Becker (1963)

Schurz (1971), and Lemert (1978) has three characteristics:

it cites sex roles as causal factors of why engage in crime and deviant behaviour,

it maintains that societal expectations about appropriate sex role behaviour influence the diagnosis and labelling of certain actions as deviant or criminal, and

it holds that gender affects the response to such (deviant) behaviours by society (Wisdom, 1984). Since women tend to be less powerful and of lower social status than men, they are easily labelled as deviant in cases of domestic violence.

This theory explains family violence in terms of sex role or gender norms, i. e., differential expectations for values, attitudes and behaviours as a function of one's gender. These norms serve as important standards against which women and men are evaluated through application of various sanctions (Schur, 1984).

According to the prevalent sex role norms, a husband expects a 'good wife' to behave in a certain manner. She has to run the household smoothly, ensure children's well-mannered behaviour, avoid assertiveness and remain

submissive to elders in family. Any show of independence on her part would violate sex role expectations for female behaviour. According to deviance theory, norm violations tend to trigger forces aimed at making the violator conform to expected standards of behaviour. Thus, when women do not behave like the male's ideal of wife, husbands use violence against them to make them conform to norms.[5]

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory while still concentrating on individual perpetrators, introduces a social element by attempting to explain men's violence towards women as learned behaviour. This phenomenon is seriously referred to as 'intergenerational transmission of violence'. What it purports to demonstrate is that those who witness violence between their parent, or who themselves experience abuse as children are likely to resort to violence in adulthood.[6]

This theory asserts that human aggression and violence are learned conduct, especially through direct experience and by observing the behaviour of others. According to this theory (Albert Bandura, *Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis*, 1973) the individual learns violence through imitation. Individuals pick up the behaviour patterns of those they are taught to respect and learn from. Whether observed in the flesh or via visual media, the behaviour of aggressive models is readily imitated by individuals. Aggressive behaviour patterns learned through modelling and imitation remain part of our repertoire of social responses over time. Rewards and punishments also play a crucial role in the learning and expression of behaviour patterns. One might think that physical aggression directed against one's fellows could hardly have any rewards, actual or anticipated.



But it is not so. Violence offers abundant rewards and one learns it very early in life. This theory explains both the variations of persons and situations in their tendency to respond aggressively by reference to prior experience, reinforcement patterns, and cognitive processes. Steele and Pollock (1974) and Bennie and Sclare (1969) have maintained that abusive male adults are likely to have been raised in abusive homes. In fact, this 'family determinism' approach maintains that all victims of childhood violence will grow up to be violent adults.[7]

## **Criticism**

Such and Flit craft reject the notion that violence is transmitted from one generation to the next; they argue that the studies which claim to show this are methodologically flawed and base their conclusions on inadequate evidence and unsound interpretation. Widom points to methodological weaknesses in the research, including in retrospective nature and the lack of an adequate control group.

Dr. Ram Ahuja applied this theory in studying a wife-batterer's history of abuse as a child and found that about half of the batterers (55%) had faced conditions of manifest physical brutality or severe emotional rejection in their childhood. The data thus supported the social learning theory. Yet, violence which is the result of victim's provocation or victim's complicity, etc., cannot be explained on the basis of this simple theory.

## **Cognitive Behaviour Theory**

The cognitive behaviour theory postulates that men batter because:

They are imitating examples of abuse they have witnessed during childhood or in the media,

abuse is rewarded,

it enables the batterer to get what he wants, and

abuse is reinforced through victim compliance and submission.

This theory is same as social learning theory.

### **Advantage and Criticism of the Cognitive Behaviour models**

One advantage of the cognitive behavioural model is that its analysis of battering and its intervention strategy are compatible with a criminal justice response to domestic violence. The approach holds the batterer fully responsible for his violence and fully responsible for learning and adopting nonviolent alternatives. Without trying to solve larger issues of social inequality on the one hand, or delving into deep-seated psychological issues on the other, the cognitive behavioural approach simply focuses on the violent acts themselves and attempts to change them.

The feminist perspective criticises the cognitive behavioural approach for failing to explain why many men with thought patterns or skills deficits that allegedly explain their domestic violence are not violent in other relationships, how culture or sub-cultures influence patterns of violence, and why some men continue to abuse women even when the behaviour is not rewarded.[8]

## **Exchange Theory**

Richard J. Gelles feels that the Exchange Theory is the best theory of violence because it integrates the elements of the diverse theories of human violence. According to the Exchange Theory, interaction is guided by the pursuit of rewards and the avoidance of punishment and costs. In addition, an individual who supplies reward services to another obliges him to fulfil an obligation and thus the second individual must furnish benefits to the first. The exchange does not pertain to concrete or tangible things; rather, it involves intangibles such as esteem, liking, assistance and approval. If reciprocal exchange of rewards occurs, the interaction will continue, but if reciprocity is not received, the interaction will be broken off. Thus, actors expect rewards to be proportional to the investments (distributive justice). The costs and rewards are judged in the light of alternatives.[9]

This theory explains the growth of resentment, anger, hostility and violence when the principle of distributive justice is violated. In applying the principles of the Exchange Theory to explain violence in a family (in our case wife beating, dowry death and rape by a family member), we expect that people will use violence in a family if the costs of being violent do not outweigh the rewards. Goode suggests that force is used more by those in the poorer classes partly because they have less alternative resources and partly because their socialization experiences teach them to depend more on force. However, all researchers do not agree that the poor classes do use more force, though statistics show more violence in poor classes are there because of the fact that greater proportion of the population belongs to

lower classes or it may be that middle classes have more resources or have greater motivation to hide their offences.

## **Criticism**

Intra-family relations are more complex than those studied by Exchange Theorists. A wife cannot break-off interaction with her husband and parents cannot break-off interaction with their children, even if there is no reciprocity. Goode (1971) however, believes that violence is used as a last resort to solve problems in the family. But Nye (1979) does not accept Goode's viewpoint. In applying this theory to intra-family violence, we find some costs for being violent. First, there could be the chance of the victim hitting back; second, a violent assault could lead to an arrest and/or imprisonment; and finally, using violence could lead to loss of status. Thus, since the cost greater than the reward, how does the reward, how does the Exchange Theory explain violence against women?