

The contribution of the chicago school of criminology criminology essay



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To understand the contribution of the Chicago School of criminology is to understand how the confluence of geography, urbanisation, economics, immigration and the exchange of social theory between Europe and America combined to create new ways of looking at society. This essay will critically evaluate the contribution of the Chicago School, touching on these contributing factors to its development, prestige and influence. This essay will also note the limitations of the Chicago School that arise from the specificity of its location and its reliance on certain ideologies and research methods. In conclusion, this essay will argue that the same combination of factors that created the school's dominance in the field of criminology makes it vulnerable to social change.

The Chicago School had its basis in the University of Chicago sociology department, which is the oldest in the United States and was established in 1892 (Lilly et al, 2007, p. 36). D'Eramo & Thomson (2003) note this was a period of rapid social transformation. Chicago was a major railroad hub and became a huge industrial centre in its own right, notably its meat-packing industry (D'Eramo & Thomson, 2003, p. 7). Chicago was an excellent place to carry out sociological fieldwork because it exemplified the post-industrial concentration of population in urban areas. The city grew from one million to two million people between 1890 and 1910 (Lilly et al, 2007, p. 34) providing a perfect Petri dish for the Chicago School's study of human behaviour. The concentration of industry and therefore economic opportunity prompted an influx of immigrants and led to rapid changes in living patterns. Urbanisation was a major characteristic of the Industrial Revolution, and many cities grew

very rapidly, so criminologists in other cities could easily generalise from the work of the Chicago School (Fine, 1995, p. 300).

The most significant contribution of the Chicago School is the idea of social ecology. It holds that crime is a response to unstable environment and abnormal living conditions (Treadwell, 2006, p. 47). This is no longer a particularly radical idea, which is an indicator of the continued prominence of the Chicago School. For centuries, crime was viewed as a moral failure (ibid.) in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Criminals were sinners. What the Chicago School recognised was that urban life was distinct from rural life and its hectic, anonymous nature influenced people's behaviour (Carrabine, 2004, p. 51). Chicago School criminologists were quick to draw a link between juvenile delinquency and the economic and geographic patterns of urban development. Thanks to the population boom they were able to study in detail, over a short span of time, the shifts from inner city to suburbs, and the differences in crime rates between affluent suburbs and the inner city poor (Treadwell, 2006). It is still possible to read first-hand observations in the Chicago School monographs written by sociologists such as Beirne and Thomas, on topics including hobos, prostitutes, dance halls and organised crime (Carrabine, 2004, p. 50). These books are a permanent testimony to the influence of the Chicago School, as well as offering a contemporary historical account of the development of criminology.

Theories developed by the Chicago School are still central tenets of criminology - whether modern researchers agree or are trying to discredit them. One of their primary assertions was that disruption, e. g. immigration, economic shifts and family instability, tends to cause crime, which has been

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affirmed by modern studies showing that social disorder, weak friendship networks and low community involvement produce higher crime rates (Lanier & Henry, 2004, p. 214). Underlying the focus on identifying where crime is located – geographically and socially – is the influence of Emile Durkheim, who believed crime is an inevitable and necessary part of society (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 2000, p. 97). This ideology naturally tends towards identifying crime and its causes, rather than believing it can be eliminated. The ongoing influence of the Chicago School prompted further sociological studies with a similar ethos of identifying where crime would come from. In the 1930s and 1940s sociological social psychology, a study of group behaviour that emphasises group dynamics and socialisation (Siegel, 2008, p. 9), developed based in part on the School's social ecology principles.

Treadwell (2006) remarks that one of the Chicago School's main contributions to criminology are its qualitative research methods. Robert Ezra Park, chair of the Department of Sociology, “ had a passion for walking the streets of the world's great cities, observing the full range of human turbulence and triumph... he led a group of dedicated sociologists in direct, systematic observation of urban life” (Carrabine, 2004, p. 50). Park taught his methods of direct observation to generations of students in his thirty-year career at the University, ensuring the future study of criminology would be grounded in first-person observation. This seems axiomatic, however, it marked a shift from morally-determined ideas about crime that made assumptions based on belief, rather than observation. Sociologists such as Thresher and Shaw took to the streets, bars and juvenile courts of Chicago to observe people going about their daily lives (Treadwell, 2006). This pattern

of study offered marginalised people to report their own lives (ibid.).

Subsequently research has tended to gravitate around methods pioneered by the Chicago School, such as direct interviews with subjects. This has also been construed as a weakness of the school, though, with critics arguing that the qualitative nature of its studies can result in the undue influence of the researcher's personal bias (Fine, 1995, p. 139). While this inspired other sociologists to devote more attention to research techniques the subjectivist Chicago school method (ibid, p. 139) is still widely used in criminology.

The structure of research in criminology has been shaped by the Chicago School in other ways, as well. It was home to some of the most influential voices in early criminology including urban sociologists such as W. I. Thomas, Robert Ezra Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Louis Wirth (Siegel, 2008, p. 7) who pioneered social ecology. Significantly, Park, Burgess and Wirth were sociologists, teaching and conducting criminological research as part of the sociology department. As a result most criminologists have been trained in sociology, and many sociology departments are home to criminology courses (ibid. p. 162) This is more than an academic coincidence. To place criminology in the realm of sociology is to implicitly accept as a starting point the idea that criminal behaviour is rooted in society, not personal morality. This represents a radical shift from almost two thousand years of Judeo-Christian belief. In order to understand how important it is, imagine, for example, that criminology developed as an offshoot of economics. Not only would the style of research be vastly different, it seems likely the types of crime it studied would be different. White collar crime, such as fraud and embezzlement, might well be considered more serious and worthy of study

than crimes against persons, such as assault or burglary. However, because criminology started with sociology the relationships between individuals, and between individuals and the larger culture, remain the primary subject of study.

By focusing on relationships between people, and their environmental interactions, the Chicago School tended towards certain conclusions. Shaw & McKay found that certain areas had consistently high delinquency rates despite rapid turnover of the population, this tended to support the idea that the environment itself was at least partly responsible for generating crime (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 2000, p. 123). Furthermore, Shaw and McKay were the first to identify what became known as "white flight" - the phenomenon of well-off, well-educated (usually white) people moving out of urban centres to more affluent suburbs, leaving cities with concentrations of poor, less-educated citizens, often concentrated in ethnic or racial groups (ibid, p. 122). This pattern of movement and separation helps explain the observation that certain areas are more crime-prone. It is not the result of more criminals flocking to certain areas, but rather that the bad living conditions and poor infrastructure create barriers to community, and offer opportunities or even incentives for criminal behaviour. However, because of the sociological focus, what subsequent studies looked at were social concerns, rather than economic.

Sutherland put forth the theory that criminal behaviour is learned, just like any other kind of behaviour (Hagan, 2007, p. 159). The learning takes place within groups, and includes learning how to commit criminal acts, and developing justifications for doing so (ibid.). This is based on the idea that if <https://assignbuster.com/the-contribution-of-the-chicago-school-of-criminology-criminology-essay/>

people are concentrated in areas with limited opportunity and/or close proximity to criminals, they are more likely to learn deviant behaviour. However, an equally valid line of reasoning would be - all the people in a particular area are equally poor, so they turn to crime not as a learned behaviour but as an individual response to the economic conditions. Thanks to the Chicago School, though, the notion of learned criminal behaviour gained primacy. This can be seen in entertainment, like the film *The Usual Suspects* and TV drama *Prison Break*, whose plots involve groups of criminals brought together in prison who then plot and commit more crimes together.

Despite making its main focus sociology the Chicago School does acknowledge that economics is the root of a great deal of criminal behaviour. Siegel (2008) argues the "culture of poverty" leads to apathy, cynicism and a sense of (p. 163) - though again that is a sociological analysis of an economic situation. Nevertheless, the extensive Chicago School studies involving marginalised classes such as prostitutes and gangs (Carrabine, 2004, p. 52) offered rich data and established patterns for further study. The methodology, if not the ideological starting point, remains extremely relevant to thinking on the causes of crime. That is not to overstate the importance of the Chicago School. As previously noted, Chicago in the early twentieth century underwent rapid change thanks to a combination of geographic and economic factors that is unlikely to ever be repeated. The result is that some of the conclusions of the Chicago School, while interesting, are clearly limited in their usefulness. For example, the "concentric rings" theory of urban growth (Hagan, 2007, p. 154), which is based observations about Chicago's development with an industrial centre

with layers of the poor, and then the increasingly affluent, around it. That development pattern applies to many American cities but, Beirne & Messerschmidt note, is not equally valid in Europe (2000). Major European cities such as London, Paris, Barcelona and Amsterdam have extremely rich, desirable neighbourhoods close to the heart of the city, with poorer neighbourhoods scattered randomly around the outskirts. The Chicago School, working from its specific historical vantage point, failed to take into account different urban growth patterns.

Even more critical is the consideration of innovations in technology and communications, which has important implications for how environment is defined. The Chicago School “ offered a strong counterpoint to explanations that blamed individuals for their criminality” (Lilly et al, 2007, p. 34) and focused on the influence of environment. However, they were studying an urban area before the age of mass communication. Contemporary application of Chicago School ideas has to take into account that the nature of technology – and therefore the social ecology – has changed. Urbanisation is still a powerful driving force and there is still extensive economic migration, but it does not occur at the same rate as in turn-of-the-century Chicago. Modern technology allows people to constantly network and communicate with people outside their physical environment which necessarily changes the definition of what constitutes their community. A migrant living in London might be isolated from their own cultural group – which the Chicago School would argue is a risk for increased criminal behaviour – but they can go to an internet café and video-chat with friends in the country of origin. So in an important way they are maintaining a

community bond, and they are not disrupted in the same way a 1930s immigrant would have been. Where the influence of the Chicago School can still be felt is that it continues to define terms of study, such as “environment”, even if the nature of what is being studied has changed.

Another area where the Chicago School is less useful is in terms of drawing up plans for preventing crime. Based on the belief that crime is a learned behaviour, caused by environment, it argued that it can in large part be prevented by social programmes (Carrabine, 2004, p. 52). However, Lanier and Henry (2004) note the Chicago School observed that one of the factors in social disorganisation, and therefore crime, was a lack of respect for authority and little faith in social organisations. This presents a catch-22. Social organisations cannot effectively combat crime if people them. The Chicago School does not offer any firm solutions for this problem. Informal social organisations such as churches, parent-teacher associations and sports programmes suggest one way of reaching communities, and these groups are seen to play a major role in reducing criminal behaviour (Lanier & Henry, 2004, p. 218). Lanier & Henry (2004) note, however, that formal social control in the form of policing is also essential to prevent crime, however this is observational rather than prescriptive.

In conclusion, Chicago was a powerhouse of social and intellectual study throughout the twentieth century. Cassidy notes “ Chicago thinking greatly influenced policymaking in the U. S. and many other parts of the world” (Cassidy, 2008, p. 28) however he is talking about the Chicago School of economics, rather than criminology. Cassidy writes about the upheaval within the economic school due to the global recession, and the discrediting

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(ibid). This shows that even the most respected, established schools of academic thought can be critically undermined by social changes. By definition, it is only possible to study what already exists. Though the theories drawn up by the Chicago School regarding criminology make important observations and predictions those are subject to revision based on changes in society. The usefulness of theories and ideologies is ultimately rooted in the real-life. When a culture undergoes radical changes there are inevitably challenges to accepted ways of thinking and to long-standing academic disciplines. For almost a century the Chicago School has held its place in criminology, but as society changes and its needs change this long tradition could also be displaced.