

University of djlali bounaama khamis miliana

Faculty of social sciences

Master 1 criminology

Dr: Bokreta Farouk

Courses of English in criminology

School season 2022/2023

- **What are the foundations of sociological theories of crime?**
- There are numerous hypotheses as to why people commit crimes. Some may think that committing a crime is rational, with the offender considering the benefits and drawbacks of doing so before the criminal activity. Others may hold the opinion that criminals are different from law-abiding people in terms of biology or psychology.
- However, the one thing these two theories have in common is that they both emphasize the role of the criminal. In other words, they view crime as an individual issue rather than one that affects the entire community. Sociology, on the other hand, argues that society shapes the circumstances in which criminal activity occurs. Put differently, society influences people to commit crimes.
- Let's explore what sociological theories of crime are, and what they address.
- **Sociological theories of crime: meaning, causation and prevention**
- The definition of sociological theories of crime is as follows:
- Sociological theories of crime try to interpret crime through **societal conditions** and explain deviant or criminal behaviour through the **circumstances** in which they occur.
-
- As we have mentioned above, sociologists suggest that societal conditions trigger individuals to commit crime, thus proposing that criminal behaviour is not natural. It is not innate to humans but rather circumstantial. Theories of crime in sociology attempt to explain both the **causation** of crime and how it can/should be **prevented**. We will look at examples of different sociological theories of crime below.

Functionalist theories on crime

Functionalists believe that society needs a certain level of **crime**, as this is **inevitable, and** it also performs significant **positive functions**. Therefore, all crime should not/cannot be prevented. Two influential functionalist sociologists are **Émile Durkheim** (1964) and **Robert Merton** (1949).

Durkheim's perspective on crime

Durkheim stresses that not all members of society can commit to shared norms, values and beliefs and that exposure to different experiences or circumstances is what makes them different to one another. As a result, some end up breaking the law.

The three functions of crime according to Durkheim are:

- **Regulation:** when a person is apprehended for a crime, everyone else in society becomes aware of which actions are socially acceptable and unacceptable. Mass media e.g. newspapers, the courts and other institutions in contemporary society broadcast the boundaries of admissible behaviour.
- **Integration:** when the whole community unites against a crime, protests and expresses their outrage together, a sense of belonging to a particular community is strengthened.
- **Change:** the law clearly states what is or isn't permissible in society, but it isn't fixed. People notice when the laws don't line up with the shared values and beliefs of the majority. Offenders constantly test the boundaries of permitted action, and if their "crimes" reflect the wishes or changing attitudes of the population, this can lead to legal reform. Eventually, this can spur social change.

Merton's strain theory

Strain theory suggests that crime occurs when there are **insufficient legitimate means** or opportunities available to achieve the goals set by society e.g. financial success. This can happen to people from low-income backgrounds, those who were not well-educated, those who lacked social networks and career opportunities, and so on.

People become frustrated that they cannot succeed in life conventionally, such as by obtaining a good job or working hard. Consequently, a 'strain' or tension develops between the goals and the means of achieving them, producing '**anomie**' - a social condition characterised by the dismantling or destruction of the moral principles,

guidelines, or standards that people generally aspire to. Without these moral standards, people turn to crime to achieve their goals.

Social control theory

Social control theory sees crime as an outcome of social institutions, such as family or the local community, **losing control** over individuals. This would also include a breakdown of trust in the government and the police.

Hirschi (1969) suggests that criminal activity occurs when the strength of attachment between the individual and society - **social bonds** - weaken. There are essentially four types of social bonds:

1. Attachment
2. Commitment
3. Involvement
4. Belief

According to social control theory, the 'typical delinquent' can usually be assumed to be a young, single and unemployed individual instead of a married and employed individual. This is because the theory suggests that those who have well-established bonds of attachment and are employed and involved members of social institutions are unlikely to go astray.