Sociology Crime And Deviance Essay, Research Paper

CHARACTERISE BIOLOGICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF CRIME AND DEVIANCE GIVING EXAMPLES OF EACH EXPLAINING THE USEFULNESS AND LIMITATIONS OF EACH “APPROACH”.

There are three main theories of why crime and deviance exists in society. There are biological, psychological and sociological explanations for this occurrence. First of all deviance, in the simplest view is “essentially statistical, defining as deviant anything that varies too widely from the average” (Becker, 1963, p.4). A deviant person is one who can be described as violating the written and unwritten laws of his society.

One of the first biological theories was proposed by Paul Broca, a French anthropologist, who claimed that there were differences in the skulls of criminals when compared to the mainstream population. In the 1870’s, Cesare Lombroso, an Italian criminologist, believed that people were born with criminal tendencies. These people were regarded as a primitive form of human, a “genetic throwback” and were classed as homo delinquens (Bartol, 1980, p25?). This theory held that while social environment and learning influenced these types of people, the main factor was a biological one (Giddens, 1993, p.122).

Criminologists decided to look into family trees to find any influence of heredity. This search proved nothing as it was impossible to separate inherited from environmental influences. William Sheldon, in the 1940’s, was certain that there was a correlation between a person’s physique and their inclination toward crime and deviance. The three types of physiques were muscular, active types – mesomorphs, those with thin builds – ectomorphs and those with more flesh were endomorphs. He claimed that mesomorphs were more inclined to deviance, this may be because of the fact that gang activities usually were displays of athleticism (Giddens, 1993, p.123). This view was criticised because it was believed that if there was a causal effect between physique and deviance then it relationship had nothing to do with heredity.

Other researchers believed that criminal tendencies, in men at least, was connected to chromosomes, that is a genetic inheritance. This view stated that violent criminals were more likely to have an extra Y chromosome. Again, this was another theory that proved to be inconclusive mainly due to the small samples available for testing. Another branch of this theory was that certain types of crime may be influenced by natural tendencies to be irritable and aggressive. This is not hard and fast because researchers are not convinced that personality traits are inheritable and that even if they were then the only connection would be a remote one (Giddens, 1993, p.123).

In the end most criminologists and researchers agreed that “Genetics may play a role in criminality, but it is only an insignificant one…” (Bartol, 1980, p.25). This theory being at the forefront of investigations of crime and deviance was going to be important no matter what the final outcome was because it was going to point the way that new research would take.

The next theory to look at is the psychological theory which holds that crime and deviance are associated with particular types of personalities. Freud’s views on morality and that they stem from self-restraints learnt in childhood was applied to this theory in that people who failed to learn these self-restraints lack a fundamental morality which is more likely to lead them on a path to delinquency. This view of lack of morality prompted an important question is this trait, or lack of trait, criminal? Most of the studies have been carried out within the prison system and so all evidence is from a negative perspective. A positive outlook on the same trait might be described as adventurous, carefree and impulsive (Giddens, 1993, p.124). People might consider a life of crime or they may opt for the experiences in a socially acceptable way if they lack this fundamental morality.

Many criminologists have come to the conclusion that most criminals have much the same characteristics as the mainstream population. It is also far-fetched to believe that all criminals would share the same traits as each crime is surrounded by different circumstances.

The sociological theory takes a different view and says that any definition of crime depends on the perspective and institutions of a society. In each sub-culture the norms will be different from another in which it will be classed as deviant. Edwin Sutherland determined that the environment in which some people lived was conducive or encouraging of criminal activities and that these people because of their associations would be more susceptible to the delinquent path.

Robert Merton believed that anomie was the cause of most crime. Anomie takes place where the traditions and norms of a society are being eroded but not being succeeded by new norms. Anomie then comes into play as there are no clear “standards to guide behaviour in a given area of social life” (Giddens, 1993, p.126). This type of situation places an enormous burden on behaviour when the given norms clash with reality. An example of this is the fallacy that material success is possible for anyone no matter what their background. Unfortunately, those that do not succeed are put down for their inability to progress and are therefore there is a lot of strain on them to gain material success by any means, legitimate or not.

There are five main types of people or reactions to this sort of pressure. The first type are conformists who accept the values and norms and goes about garnering success by conventional means. The second group, innovators, accept the values but gain through illegal procedures. The next set who adhere to ritualism, conform but often lose sight of the end goal and follow the ritual of gaining material possessions for their own sake. Retreatists cut themself of from society and its values sometimes in a physical sense such as joining a self-supporting commune (Giddens, 1993, p.127). The last group is probably the most recognisable of the five being the rebels who reject the values and vigorously try to change the existing values and social system.

Cloward and Ohlin in the 1960’s linked association with anomie. This meant that where gaining wealth through legal means was almost non-existent, the temptation existed to go from petty “part-time” crime to a full-blown career in crime and deviance.

A theory that was quite influential was the labelling theory. For people who were caught for the first time it was labelled the primary deviation. It was believed that the secondary deviation occurred when the individual accepts the label of delinquent and then purposely “lives up” to the label. An uncertainty still exists with this theory in the fact that it is not known if labelling in itself causes an increase in deviant behaviour. This theory takes the stance that no act, in and of itself, is intentionally criminal which is not necessarily true in the case of murders, thefts and rapes. Most of the theorists agree that there is a rational choice to make whose stand is that the risk is worth it. Every crime also has a situation interpretations such as opportunities that are too good to miss (Giddens, 1993, p.131). This view of crime is one of action not reaction.

Labelling theory has been applauded as being the most efficient and useful in interpreting facets of crime and deviant behaviour (Giddens, 1993, p.132). However most researchers will agree that the “different theories are useful to explain certain deviant activities” (Roach-Anleu, 1995, p.45) and that understanding the social environments and context in which the crime takes place is of paramount importance.