6.1 INTRODUCTION: STRUCTURE-BASED EXPLANATIONS

6.2 SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION THEORY
FYI On Social Change
Social Disorganization and Social Change
The Chicago School of Criminology

6.3 STRAIN THEORY
Merton’s Means/Ends Theory
FYI Retreatism, Rebellion, Innovation, and Ritualism
Agnew’s General Strain Theory
FYI Agnew’s Three Types of Strain

6.4 SUBCULTURAL DELINQUENCY THEORIES
Studies of Delinquent Gangs
FYI Cloward and Ohlin’s Three Types of Delinquent Subcultures
Lower-Class Cultural Theory
The Subculture of Violence

6.5 SUMMARY
STUDY GUIDE
READING 6.1: Illegitimate Means and Delinquent Subcultures by Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin
Previous chapters presented the biological and psychological theories of crime. Those theories are based on the assumption of physical, behavioral, or mental defects in the individual offender. In contrast, this chapter focuses on sociological theories, which do not assume that individuals who engage in criminal behavior represent a special class of abnormal or inferior people. Many sociological theories that have been developed to explain crime and delinquency are called social structural theories. Social structural theories focus on how society is structured, and social and environmental
factors, that include both the general society and the impact of social and group factors on individual behavior.

In some cases, criminal behavior may be a normal response to frustration, strain, and tension generated by pressures and conflict within society itself. In other cases, a criminal or delinquent may be conforming to the deviant norms of the subculture to which he or she has been socialized. Still other theories argue that crime and delinquency are an inevitable result of social and economic inequality and that the law is inherently biased toward the interests of the dominant or ruling groups or classes. This chapter begins our analysis of sociological theories with an examination of social-structural theories of criminal behavior, including

- a review of social disorganization theory (section 6.2);
- an analysis of strain theories (section 6.3);
- an assessment of subcultural theories of delinquency (section 6.4).

### 6.2 SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION THEORY

The primary focus of **social disorganization theory** is the wide variety of environmental and urban conditions that affect crime rates. It also focuses on the development of high-crime communities, which are associated with the breakdown of conventional norms and values as a result of increased immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. As a theoretical approach to the study of crime, social disorganization theory has its roots in the process of **social change** and is related to the fact that Americans live in a society characterized by **heterogeneity**, various value conflicts, many subcultures, and rapid social change.

Criminologists have observed that social disorganization sometimes results when people attempt to use traditional guidelines to cope with new social conditions and then experience frustration and confusion because the traditional rules are no longer effective or no longer apply. Social disorganization theory examines crime by analyzing the social disorganization that develops with social change.
SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

One must understand social organization before examining social disorganization, which is a function of social change.

To better understand social disorganization and crime, one must first have a clear conception of what is meant by social organization. Social organization is the actual patterning and regulation of human social interaction, whereas social structure refers to the roles, statuses, and institutions through which societies are organized. Much of what a criminologist terms social organization consists of social norms and expectations that guide human behavior. In all societies,

- people depend on one another for their survival and attainment of goals;
- people develop social organization to regulate their own conduct and the conduct of others, and they develop rules for the use of various resources to meet their needs;
- reciprocal expectations are developed as people come to depend on one another.

In other words, people learn what to expect from themselves, what to expect from others, and what others expect from them. In this way, people develop cultural traditions, customs, and complex systems of rules and regulations to guide them in their various actions and activities.

Society’s laws, which are codified rules of a culture, define which forms of social behavior are acceptable and which are not. The customs, rules, and laws of the society embody social expectations and, to an extent, govern the behavior of society’s members. In this manner, society becomes organized around behavior patterns that contribute to human survival, maintenance, and the fulfillment of socially and culturally prescribed values.

When traditional social guidelines no longer work, or when there is a decline in group unity due to ineffective behavior patterns, social disorganization results. In every society, then, there exist standards of expected behavior (social norms) that guide people in the roles they play. When these norms are functioning efficiently, they go largely unnoticed by most people living in the society. According to social disorganization theory, people internalize the social expectations and rules, facilitating the smooth operation of society. With social change, however, many of society’s norms may no longer function effectively. Society may become disorganized when people’s norms and laws are no longer appropriate for new social conditions.

Social organization is the actual patterning and regulation of people’s interactions in society, including social norms.

Social structure refers to the roles, statuses, and institutions through which society is organized.

Social norms are standards and rules of accepted behavior; laws are the codified rules or norms of a society.

Values are conceptions of worth or desirability, and they make up our judgments of moral and immoral, good and bad, right and wrong, and so forth.
or when social cohesion or unity breaks down because of the ineffectiveness of institutionalized patterns of behavior.

**THE CHICAGO SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY**

In the 1920s, pioneering criminologists at the University of Chicago studied immigrants to learn how social disorganization and social change can cause criminal behavior.

In the 1920s, two scholars from the University of Chicago, **William I. Thomas** and **Florian Znaniecki**, studied Polish immigrant peasants and the difficulties they encountered in the industrialized, urbanized United States. They found that older Polish immigrants were able to maintain many of the old-world cultural ways in the urban slums. However, the second-generation Poles had a much more difficult time in that they maintained some of the old-world traditions, values, and rules, yet were being raised in a new-world urban American community. Not yet assimilated into the new-world norms and not able to transfer the old customs and norms from their homogeneous European folk community to the anonymous, heterogeneous urban community, this second-generation’s rates of delinquency and crime rose. Thomas and Znaniecki attributed this increase to the social disorganization (the breakdown of social controls, bonds, and families) within the second-generation community.¹

Thomas and Znaniecki, then, found the following:

- Social disorganization is a decrease in the influence of existing rules on individual members of a group.
- With social change, there is a breakdown among people in the consensus of social rules, which results in the fragmentation of the social order.
- When people’s actions are not oriented by social values, social disorganization develops: people do not know what kind of behavior to expect from others, and they are not sure what others expect from them.
- When this occurs, people’s cooperative activities diminish, conflict intensifies, and feelings of fear and uncertainty sometimes are expressed in self-destructive, antisocial, or criminal behavior.
- Social disorganization can create personal disorganization and deviant and criminal behavior.²

**Clifford R. Shaw** and **Henry D. McKay** were also from the Chicago school and helped to popularize the social disorganization approach to crime and delinquency.³ They began their research in Chicago during the 1920s, when the city was full of newcomers and foreign-born immigrants. Most of the newcomers congregated in the central city area, occupying old, deteriorated housing with many health and environmental hazards. Shaw and McKay scientifically studied crime within this changing urban environment. Rejecting the then-popular racial and cultural explanations of crime, they believed that crime and criminal behavior are very much the product of urban ecological conditions.

Shaw and McKay used a social-ecological zone model, also called a **concentric zone model**, developed by two earlier University of Chicago sociologists, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, to demonstrate how people were distributed spatially in the urban growth process.⁴ They used this concentric zone model (see Figure 6.1) scientifically to study the relationship between crime rates and the various zones.

Shaw and McKay found higher rates of crime and delinquency in the transitional inner-city zones, where high numbers of foreign-born people had recently settled. The highest crime and delinquency rates persisted in...
Zones I and II. These areas retained these rates, even though the ethnic composition of the zones changed over the years. The crime rates dropped significantly as one progressed from the center of the city outward. This finding refuted the assumption (common at the time) that criminality is the property of a specific ethnic or racial minority group. In stressing that neighborhood structure influences criminal behavior, Shaw and McKay also challenged earlier views that criminals were atavistic throwbacks on the Darwinian scale of human evolution or psychologically maladjusted individuals.

Although flawed by modern standards, Shaw and McKay’s research laid the groundwork for many community treatment programs over the past sixty years. Shaw and McKay were also among the first scholars to introduce the variable of urban ecology into the study of criminal behavior. Their ideas and ecological perspective are still being applied in today’s communities. Studies in the United States, England, and Scandinavia, for example, have reported strong correlations between high crime rates and such social disorganization factors as alienation, poverty, disorder, broken homes, and unemployment, in addition to low organizational participation, unsupervised teens, and sparse friendship networks.
6.3 STRAIN THEORY

Our society places much emphasis on success. We are all taught to want to be successful in many aspects of our lives. The great majority of Americans want wealth and possessions such as nice clothing, cars, houses, jewelry, and other material comforts. They also want a good education, power, prestige, and status. American society also places great emphasis on the attainment of these goals for all Americans regardless of their economic strata. However, because of their structural position in society, people in certain groups (such as those in the lower classes and in groups against which society discriminates) are not able to achieve these goals or symbols of success through the means available to them. The pressures and frustrations people in this situation experience are often so severe that they cause serious strain and lead or induce the people into deviant or criminal behavior.

Strain theory focuses on the structure of society and the limited means of many Americans to achieve desired goals. In other words, strain theory sees crime and delinquency as a result of the anger and frustration people feel because of their inability to achieve the “American dream.” Thus, in this view, socially generated forces and pressures drive people to crime. These “strains,” as they are termed, are not evenly distributed in society but are “most severe among the groups with the highest crime rates.”

Strain theory, then, is based on the breakdowns of social order that can result from unequal access to the means of success. One source of such a breakdown is referred to as anomie, or normlessness. The famous sociologist Émile Durkheim was the first to develop the concept of anomie to explain increased rates of suicide produced by rapid social change in society. He used the phrase “anomic suicide” to refer to acts of self-destruction resulting from an abrupt breakdown of society’s norms, which often occurs during periods of economic depression or political crisis.

Strain theorists view crime as a result of anomie and the anger and frustration that people feel due to their inability to achieve the “American dream.” What might be some sources of anomie, anger, and frustration for the criminal offenders in this scene from an urban riot?
Merton’s Means/Ends Theory

Robert Merton adapted Durkheim’s concept of anomie to develop his strain theory and means/ends theory.

The sociologist Robert Merton modified and adapted Durkheim’s abstract concept of anomie to explain forms of deviant behavior other than suicide, especially crime and delinquency. In 1965, Merton argued that anomie results from a lack of integration between culturally prescribed goals and the availability of legitimate or institutionalized means (norms) for goal attainment. U.S. society places a great deal of emphasis on the attainment of economic as well as material success. However, as a result of their structural positions within society, certain segments of the population (such as the lower classes and certain ethnic and racial groups) have limited opportunities for — and are often denied access to — the legitimate means to achieve this success, such as a good education or a good job. Members of these disadvantaged groups thus experience many pressures, frustrations, and strains, which are often severe enough to cause them to deviate from the legitimate goals and/or means (norms) of the society. Individuals who are restricted in or denied access to the use of these legitimate means tend to become anomic, or alienated from American society; thus, they have a greater tendency to engage in various types of deviant and criminal behavior.11

Merton presented five modes of adaptation in the use of means to attain goals, and for this reason his model is sometimes referred to as the means/ends theory. Four of these methods of adaptation — retreatism, rebellion, innovation, and ritualism — occur when legitimate means to goal attainment are blocked. The fifth method of adaptation is conformity. Conformity results when the individual accepts both legitimate means and legitimate goals and is in a social position that allows access to both means and goals. As Figure 6.2 illustrates, in other combinations, people might reject legitimate means or legitimate goals or both.

Merton contended that much criminal behavior in society can be explained using his means/ends theory, also called his theory of anomie. He argued that offenses such as property crime, robbery, drug selling, and organized crime can all be viewed as forms of anomic response that result when conventional or legitimate means for goal attainment are blocked. Merton also argued that the higher crime rates that exist among particular groups in our society are simply symptomatic of a disjunction between culturally approved goals and opportunities to use culturally approved means to attain them.12

The aim of Merton’s theory is to discover how “some social structures exert a definite pressure” on certain people to engage in nonconformist, including criminal, behavior. The theory of anomie also provides important

**FIGURE 6.2**

Figure 6.2 has been adapted from Merton’s research. In this figure, a plus sign (+) signifies “acceptance”; a minus sign (−) signifies “rejection”; a plus-minus sign (±) signifies “rejection of prevailing values and substitution of new values.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modes of Adaptation</th>
<th>Culture Goals</th>
<th>Institutionalized Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritualism</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreatism</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebellion</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>±</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

insights into the origins and nature of many types of criminal and deviant behavior. However, Merton’s theory is much more useful for explaining crimes against property than crimes against persons, such as aggravated assault, forcible rape, and murder. Also, although this theory provides us with an explanation for crime committed by society’s lower classes, it inadequately explains crimes committed by affluent people, who typically are neither deprived nor denied the use of legitimate means for goal attainment.13

AGNEW’S GENERAL STRAIN THEORY

Robert Agnew has developed a new version of strain theory, called general strain theory (GST). GST focuses on individual-level influences of strain and tries to understand why strained individuals are more likely than nonstrained individuals to commit criminal or delinquent acts. Using sociological, psychological, and mental health research, Agnew has expanded on the various adaptations that a person may make in response to strain in the social environment.14
Agnew believes that many factors influence one’s choice of criminal or noncriminal adaptations to strain, and he focuses on negative interpersonal relationships. GST describes relationships in which people are not treating an individual the way he or she wants to be treated. There are three major types of negative relationships that cause strain:

1. Other people prevent an individual from achieving positively valued goals.
2. Other people remove (or threaten to remove) positively valued achievements or stimuli from the individual.
3. Other people expose (or threaten to expose) the individual to negative or noxious stimuli.

These three strains increase the probability that an individual will experience a range of negative emotions from fear and frustration to anger (see Figure 6.3). The emotions the individual feels may then create pressures or tensions that require corrective action. Criminal behavior is one of the possible responses.

Individuals who have little power to control or deal with negative stimuli experience more strain than those who have higher degrees of power. This strain increases the probability that individuals will experience various negative emotions. The emotions may then create pressures for corrective action such as delinquent behavior. Anger, for example, may be especially conducive to delinquency, according to Agnew and his associates, “because it energizes the individual for action, lowers inhibitions, and creates a desire..."
Delinquency may be used to reduce or escape from strain (e.g., stealing money, running away from abusive parents), seek revenge against those who have inflicted the strain (e.g., assault, vandalism), or reduce the negative feelings that result from strain (e.g., illicit drug use).  

Agnew points out that only some strained individuals turn to delinquency and crime. This means that there must be conditioning factors affecting strain through internal or external constraints on behavior. 

**Agnew’s Three Types of Strain**

(i) The first major type of strain results from the failure to achieve goals. For example, many people in our society aspire to the goals of wealth and status. However, not having the appropriate educational, political, and financial resources, they assume the goals are unachievable. Strain may then result from the disjunction between aspirations and achievements or expectations and achievements. The amount of strain between expectations and achievements may not be as great as between aspirations and achievements, in that most people’s expectations are not as lofty or inflated as their aspirations. 

(ii) The second major type of strain results from the removal (or denial) of previously valued stimuli and positive achievements. For example, the loss or death of a close friend or relative, the loss of a job, and a move to a new community or school are all stressful life events that produce strain in individuals. Losing positive stimuli may lead some individuals to delinquent or criminal behavior as they attempt to salvage their losses, find replacements, or seek revenge against those believed to be responsible for their strain. 

(iii) The third major type of strain is the presentation of or exposure to negative or noxious stimuli. Abusive and criminal victimization are such negative stimuli. Children who are assaulted at home, adolescents picked on at school, and individuals experiencing violent or property crimes in their communities are all examples of this type of strain.

that influence an individual’s reaction to strain. Conditioning factors that Agnew identifies include the following:

- The importance an individual attaches to threatened values, goals, or identities
- The individual’s coping skills
- Resources available to the individual, such as money, self-esteem, social supports, level of social control, and association with delinquent or non-delinquent peers
- The individual’s access to alternative (sheltering) values, goals, and identities
- Other coping resources available to the individual, such as intelligence and problem-solving skills

Conditioning factors constitute internal or external constraints that greatly influence individual responses to strain. For Agnew, then, criminal or delinquent behaviors are not inevitable outcomes of strain. Strain produces only pressure toward crime and deviance. There are many ways people adapt to pressure. Some individuals accept responsibility for it; others downplay or ignore it; still others become substance abusers, or they take revenge on those they feel may have caused their anger or strain.

Various studies support general strain theory and report that exposure to strain increases delinquency. Angry and stressed individuals appear to be more likely than other people to interact with delinquent peers and to commit crime. Other studies indicate that strain increases the probability of delinquency but play down the significance of conditioning factors. Paul Mazerolle and Jeff Maahs, for example, report that only three conditioning factors appear to have a significant impact on delinquent behavior outcomes when controlling for strain level: having a disposition toward delinquency, exposure to delinquent peers, and holding deviant beliefs.

Although much research has supported GST, some studies have had trouble explaining why some people are more likely than others to react to strain with criminal behavior. Agnew, Timothy Brezina, John Paul Wright, and Francis T. Cullen have recently used data from the National Survey of Children to address this issue. In their complex study of strain, personality traits, and delinquency, they predicted that juveniles high in negative emotionality and low in constraint would be more likely to react to strain with delinquency and criminal behavior. Their data and results supported their prediction.

**After reading this section, you should be able to**

1. explain the basis of Merton’s strain theory in Durkheim’s concept of anomie;
2. list and define Merton’s five modes of adaptation to strain in his means/ends theory;
3. describe Agnew’s general strain theory in terms of his three major sources of strain and the conditioning factors that determine individuals’ reactions to strain;
4. evaluate the contributions of the strain theory to understanding deviant and criminal behavior.
Robert Merton’s strain theory, which focuses on strains caused by differential access to societal goals and means, has been applied to explain lower-class crime and urban-gang delinquency. Subcultural theories, such as those developed by Albert Cohen and by Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, are based on similar assumptions. Subcultural theories focus on the nature and origins of criminal and delinquent groups within society and help to explain variations in rates of delinquency and crime in the United States. When criminologists write about subcultures, they are referring to the variety of subgroups (in complex societies such as the United States) that, for the most part, are similar to or share the general culture but that also maintain some unique norms (patterns of expected behavior) that distinguish them from the wider culture. For example, there is a wide variety of ethnic, religious, and occupational subcultures in American society.

The subcultural explanation of deviance stresses that some subcultures contain norms that deviate from and conflict with those of the general society. Conformity to subcultural norms therefore involves deviance from those of the society at large. In this sense, rates of crime and delinquency can be viewed simply as products of deviant subcultures. Subcultural theorists assume that individuals learn deviant or criminal behavior in association with others and that variations in the rates of crime and delinquency reflect the existence of deviant subcultural norms that are learned, shared, and perpetuated over time.

Criminologists have reported on the existence of many types of criminal subcultures, such as those related to professional theft, racketeering, organized crime, prostitution, and the selling of drugs. However, much criminological attention has been focused on analyzing the nature and origins of delinquent subcultures. It is within a delinquent subculture that young people, through participation and gradual absorption into group life, become socialized to a variety of norms, beliefs, and skills necessary for committing delinquent acts.

Albert Cohen noted relatively high rates of delinquency on the part of working-class youths, and developed a widely respected subcultural theory on delinquent gangs. In his book Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang, (1955), he reported the following:

- The delinquent subculture exists because it offers a solution to the status problems and frustrations that working-class boys experience in their efforts to achieve middle-class success.
- Although these boys typically aspire to middle-class lifestyles and goals, their early life experiences leave them unprepared to successfully compete in school and other areas necessary for upward mobility.
- Working-class boys are constantly evaluated by “middle-class measuring rods.” However, their working-class background does not adequately equip them to practice the middle-class standards necessary for success, such as suppression of aggression, deferral of gratification, self-reliance, self-discipline, ambition, and academic achievement.
Given this discrepancy, such boys often experience status frustration, which they deal with by developing a delinquent response: the youths reject middle-class standards and turn to the delinquent subculture of the gang. This subculture provides them with new forms of status achieved through gang membership.

Cohen describes this delinquent subculture as malicious, nonutilitarian, and negativistic. It is organized around the need to openly renounce anything suggesting middle-class values, because such lifestyles are largely beyond the hope of attainment.23

Cohen’s analysis of delinquent gangs has been subject to a number of criticisms and modifications. For example, although agreeing that gang membership is often rooted in status problems, Gresham Sykes and David Matza argued the following in 1957:

- The delinquent subculture does not totally reject middle-class standards.
- Instead, delinquent boys tend to have ambivalent attitudes toward middle-class standards and conformity to law.
- The delinquent subculture solves this dilemma through its use of “techniques of neutralization,” which permit youths to neutralize, or rationalize, their delinquent acts.
- Thus, the boys may deny that their acts really caused anyone harm, or claim that they only “borrowed” rather than stole a car, or assert that the victim of an attack actually deserved it.24

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin reported in 1960 in their research on delinquency that three distinct types of delinquent subcultures exist: the criminal, conflict, and retreatist subcultures. From their perspective, even illegitimate means may not always be available to lower-class youths. Thus, the particular type of delinquent subculture that forms depends in large part on whether the youths have access to deviant or criminal opportunities and to adult criminal role models within their neighborhoods. Cloward and Ohlin used the term differential opportunity to refer to relative access to criminal role models and opportunities for crime.25

Subcultural Delinquency Theories
LOWER-CLASS CULTURAL THEORY

According to Walter B. Miller, ideas themselves, not social conditions, directly cause criminal behavior. Crime and delinquency stem from lower-class culture with its own values system that evolved in response to living in urban slums.

Subcultural theories, such as those of the researchers in the preceding section, focus on the role of ideas in causing criminal behavior. These theories “may explore the sources of these ideas in general conditions, but they are characterized by the argument that it is the ideas themselves, rather than the social conditions, that directly cause criminal behavior.” In contrast, “the strain theories of Cohen and of Cloward and Ohlin both use the term subculture, but both locate the primary causes of criminal behavior directly in social conditions. There are common thinking patterns that arise among delinquents, but the thinking patterns are not the cause of criminal behavior. In strain theories, both the thinking patterns and the criminal behaviors are caused by the same structural forces.”

Another theorist who maintained that ideas themselves, rather than social conditions, directly cause criminal behavior was Walter B. Miller. In his lower-class cultural theory, he focused on gang delinquency and argued that the lower class “has a separate, identifiable culture distinct from the culture of the middle class.”

As you have read, many theorists explain crime and delinquency in terms of subcultural values that have emerged, developed, and been perpetuated from one generation to the next in lower-class urban communities. For Walter B. Miller, however,

- the values of lower-class culture produce crime because they are “naturally” in discord with middle-class values;

Walter B. Miller believed that crime and delinquency stem from lower-class culture, which has its own values system that evolved in response to living in urban slums.

Lower-class cultural theory focuses on gang delinquency and argues that the lower class has a separate, identifiable culture distinct from the culture of the middle class.

Cloward and Ohlin's Three Types of Delinquent Subcultures

(a) Criminal subcultures develop in areas where opportunities for exposure to adult criminal models are present. It is likely that youths within this type of subculture will learn a variety of criminal roles and will progress to adult criminal careers.

(b) Conflict subcultures (gang fighting) arise when access to both illegitimate opportunities and criminal role models is unavailable.

(c) Retreatist, or drug-using, subcultures exist for those who are "double failures"; they cannot adapt to legitimate conventional means or to illegitimate means and criminal role models.

• a young person who conforms to lower-class values automatically becomes delinquent;
• crime and delinquency are not based on the rejection of middle-class values; instead, they stem from lower-class culture, which has and maintains its own value system, one that has evolved in response to living in urban slums.28

Thus, Miller disagreed with Cohen’s contention that lower-class delinquents care about middle-class values and act out their stress and frustration in negativistic crime. Rather, a delinquent subculture stands independently from middle-class culture and draws its ideas from lower-class ways of living.

In his 1958 article “Lower-Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency,” Miller developed a set of focal concerns, or characteristics of lower-class culture, that tend to foster criminal and delinquent behaviors. He listed six areas that lower-class Americans focus their attention on: trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate, and autonomy. The middle-class, in contrast, has “values,” such as achievement. Specifically, Miller’s focal concerns are as follows:

1. **Trouble**: getting into and staying out of trouble
2. **Toughness**: masculinity, endurance, strength, physical prowess, skill, fearlessness, bravery, and daring
3. **Smartness**: ability to dupe, con, or outsmart “the other guy”; shrewdness; ability to gain money by “wits” and street sense rather than by having a high IQ
4. **Excitement**: constant search for thrills, danger, and change as opposed to no risk or just “hanging around”
5. **Fate**: being lucky and favored by fortune — the perspective that most things that happen to people are beyond their control and nothing can be done about it — as opposed to being “unlucky” and ill-omened
6. **Autonomy**: resentment of rules and authority; freedom from external constraint and superordinate authority; independence rather than dependence and the presence of external constraint.29

Support for Miller’s perspective was found in Oscar Lewis’s 1960s study of the culture of poverty. Lewis’s perspective stresses the idea that the values of the poor are substantially different from the values of people in poverty.

Miller proposed six focal concerns that characterize lower-class culture: trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate, and autonomy.

The culture of poverty concept, which is widely criticized today, claims that the shared experience of poverty leads to the development of a unique way of life that actively opposes middle-class beliefs and values.
the mainstream of society. His purpose in developing this perspective was
to form a conceptual model of a set of interrelated traits, poverty being the
unchanged one.30

There are, according to Lewis, seventy traits that characterize the culture
of poverty. Examples are

- powerlessness feelings;
- unemployment;
- difficulty to defer gratification;
- lack of privacy;
- gregariousness;
- a predisposition to authoritarianism.

Many of these traits inhibit the poor from adjusting to a success-
oriented, middle-class society and from having upward mobility in that soci-
ety. Proponents of this viewpoint argue that the poor “do not share the mid-
ble class abhorrence of consensual unions, sexual promiscuity, illegitimacy,
and violence in interpersonal relations.”31 From this perspective, the values
of the poor reflect both a lack of desire to be a part of or to advance in soci-
ety’s social institutions and a desire to condone behavior regarded by the
middle-class as deviant.32

The culture of poverty concept summarizes a view of poverty that is
shared by consensus theorists. The consensus approach believes a major
cause of poverty is the ongoing creation by the poor of a “consensus pattern
at odds with the dominant culture,” in which the poor adapt to poverty
through illegal activities legitimated by their subculture.33

Contemporary social scientists who have reacted negatively to the cul-
ture of poverty perspective are called situationalists. They believe that the
patterns of behavior among the poor are simply a means of adapting to the
environment, and they reject the point of view that the poor have a unique
set of values. Situationalists such as Lee Rainwater, Elliot Liebow, Hylan
Lewis, and Charles Valentine claim that lifestyles among the poor are not
mechanically transmitted from one generation to the next; rather, each gen-
eration of the poor recreates distinctive lifestyles, ways of thinking, and
behaviors as a reaction and an adjustment to living in poverty.34

THE SUBCULTURE OF VIOLENCE

The subculture of violence, a concept developed by Marvin Wolfgang and
Franco Ferracuti, is a set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that
support the use of violence in a variety of social situations.

The subculture of violence, a perspective developed by Marvin Wolf-
gang and Franco Ferracuti in the 1960s, has its roots in Merton’s theory of
anomie and Sutherland’s theory that criminal behavior is learned behavior.
The subculture of violence hypothesizes a subculture that condones violent
behavior and claims that recourse to aggressive and violent behavior may be
considered acceptable within certain groups, particularly lower-class men,
African Americans, and Southerners, when such qualities as honor,
courage, and manhood are challenged by threats, insults, or weapons.35
Such views are greeted with skepticism today.

According to Wolfgang and Ferracuti,

- violence is a learned form of adaptation to particular problematic life cir-
  cumstances;
learning occurs in a subcultural environment that supports the advantages of violent behavior over other, nonviolent responses or forms of adaptation;

the subculture of violence is basically a set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that are supportive of using violence in various situations;

included in the subculture of violence is a person’s willingness to be involved in violent behavior, expectation of violence from others, and readiness to violently respond to others;

to maintain one’s image and status, one who is insulted or “put down” needs to respond quickly and aggressively;

disagreements are settled by fighting.

In other words, subcultures of violence expect their members to be violent. Violence is considered necessary and legitimate; violence is the norm. A person who is highly integrated into a subculture of violence is more likely than one who isn’t to be violent in his or her responses toward others.36

Wolfgang and Ferracuti based their theory of the subculture of violence on their study of homicide between racial groups in Philadelphia. They reported that nonwhite men had a homicide rate twelve times higher than that of white men (and the rate for nonwhite men was twenty-three times higher than for nonwhite women). Most of the homicides studied were committed by a homogeneous group of young, nonwhite, lower-class males. The researchers believed that the value system of this group constituted a subculture of violence.37
Critics of the subculture of violence theory cite recent research showing that race does not play a role in violence. Liqun Cao, Anthony Adams, and Vickie J. Jensen reported in 1997 that their own research does not support the notion of a black subculture of violence. They found that white males were actually more likely than black males to respond violently when they encountered defensive situations. No racial differences were observed in responses to offensive situations.38

After reading this section, you should be able to

1. define the concepts on which subcultural theories of delinquency and crime are based;
2. compare and contrast Cohen’s theory of delinquent subcultures with Sykes and Matza’s theory of delinquent subcultures;
3. describe Cloward and Ohlin’s three types of delinquent subcultures and the role that differential opportunity plays in the formation of those types;
4. critique Miller’s lower-class cultural theory and Wolfgang and Ferracuti’s subculture of violence theory in relation to Lewis’s culture of poverty concept;
5. evaluate subcultural theories overall as explanations for criminal behavior.

6.5 SUMMARY

This chapter covers several of the most important social-structural theories of criminal behavior. Social disorganization theory focuses on the wide variety of environmental and urban conditions that affect crime rates. A firm foundation for this theory lies in the analysis of social organization and social disorganization. The social disorganization perspective of William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki examined how social disorganization can create criminal behavior. Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay examined crime in the changing urban environment using their concentric zone model (pp. 129–133).

Strain theory argues that socially generated forces and pressures drive people to crime. Building on Émile Durkheim’s concept of anomie, Robert Merton supported this approach in his means/ends theory, stressing that much crime in U.S. society — especially property crime, robbery, and drug dealing — can be viewed as an anomic response that results when conventional or legitimate means for goal attainment are blocked. Robert Agnew’s general strain theory focuses on the negative relationships that an individual has with others. Agnew believes that many factors influence one’s choice of criminal or noncriminal adaptations to strain (pp. 134–139).

Subcultural delinquency theories also attempt to explain crime and delinquency. Albert Cohen’s subcultural theory proposed that the delinquent subculture exists because it offers a solution to the status problems and frustrations that working-class boys experience in their effort to achieve middle-class success. Gresham Sykes and David Matza’s response to Cohen’s theory argued that the delinquent subculture does not reject middle-class standards and attempts to “neutralize” delinquent acts. Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin identified three types of delinquent subcultures and argued that the type of subculture that forms depends on members’ differential opportunities for deviance (pp. 140–142).

Walter Miller’s lower-class cultural theory maintained that a delinquent subculture stands independently from middle-class culture and draws its ideas from lower-class ways of living. Oscar Lewis’s study of the culture of poverty supported Miller’s perspective. Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti developed the idea of a subculture of violence, which is a set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that support the use of violence (pp. 142–146).
CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Write an explanation of the social disorganization approach to crime.
- Briefly describe social change.
- Briefly explain what is meant by social organization.
- Briefly describe what is meant by social disorganization.
- Briefly explain Thomas and Znaniecki’s contribution to the social disorganization approach to criminal behavior.
- Describe Shaw and McKay’s views on neighborhood structural influences on criminal behavior.
- Briefly explain Merton’s means/ends theory.
- List and explain Merton’s modes of adaptation.
- Briefly explain Agnew’s general strain theory.
- Evaluate the contributions of strain theory to understanding deviant and criminal behavior.
- Describe Cohen’s theory of delinquent subculture.
- Briefly explain Sykes and Matza’s “techniques of neutralization.”
- Describe Cloward and Ohlin’s types of delinquent subcultures.
- Evaluate Cloward and Ohlin’s concept of differential opportunity.
- Describe Miller’s lower-class cultural theory.
- Describe what Lewis meant by the “culture of poverty” and its relationship to criminal behavior.
- Briefly describe Wolfgang and Ferracuti’s “subculture of violence” theory.

KEY TERMS

Agnew, Robert (136)  General strain theory (136)  Shaw, Clifford R. (132)
Anomie (134)  Heterogeneity (130)  Social change (130)
Cloward, Richard (141)  Innovation (135)  Social disorganization theory (130)
Cohen, Albert (140)  Laws (131)  Social norms (131)
Concentric zone model (132)  Lower-class cultural theory (142)  Social organization (131)
Conditioning factors (138)  Matza, David (141)  Social structure (131)
Conflict subculture (144)  McKay, Henry D. (132)  Strain theory (134)
Criminal subculture (141)  Means/ends theory (135)  Subcultural theories (140)
Culture of poverty (143)  Merton, Robert (135)  Subcultures (140)
Delinquent response (141)  Miller, Walter B. (142)  Subculture of violence (144)
Delinquent subculture (140)  Ohlin, Lloyd (141)  Sykes, Gresham (141)
Differential opportunity (141)  Rebellion (135)  Thomas, William L. (147)
Durkheim, Émile (134)  Retreatism (135)  Values (131)
Ferracuti, Franco (144)  Retreatist subculture (141)  Wolfgang, Marvin (144)
Focal concerns (143)  Ritualism (135)  Znaniecki, Florian (147)

SELF-TEST

SHORT ANSWER

1. Define social organization and social disorganization.
2. List Thomas and Znaniecki’s findings in regard to social disorganization.
3. Briefly list the major points of Shaw and McKay’s study of urban juvenile delinquents.
4. Define anomie according to Durkheim.
5. Define anomie according to Merton.
7. Define general strain theory.
8. List Agnew’s three major types of strain.
10. List Cohen’s contributions on gang delinquency.
12. List Cloward and Ohlin’s types of delinquent subcultures.
13. Briefly describe Miller’s lower-class theory.
14. List the focal concerns that foster criminal behavior, according to Miller.
15. Define the culture of poverty.
MULTIPLE CHOICE

1. Social disorganization theory has its roots in the process of social change and is related to the fact that Americans live in a society characterized by
   a. heterogeneity
   b. value conflicts
   c. many subcultures
   d. all of the above

2. The social disorganization approach to the study of crime focuses on
   a. the role of social reactions in creating deviant or criminal behavior
   b. the impact of value conflicts on social structure
   c. social change and the breakdown of social norms and rules
   d. the discrepancy between goals and the means to achieve them

3. Which of the following pairs of scholars used a concentric zone model to scientifically study the relationship between crime rates and various community zones?
   a. Shaw and McKay
   b. Sykes and Matza
   c. Cloward and Ohlin
   d. Thomas and Znaniecki

4. According to Robert Merton, the innovator is one who
   a. rejects legitimate means and turns to illegitimate ones in order to achieve approved goals
   b. rejects only the approved goals
   c. rejects both approved goals and legitimate means
   d. rebels against the social order

5. Robert Merton's theory of anomie is most useful in explaining crimes such as
   a. murder
   b. theft
   c. forcible rape
   d. aggravated assault

6. Which of the following is a source of strain in Agnew's GST?
   a. Prevention from achieving goals
   b. Removal of positively valued stimuli
   c. Exposure to negative stimuli
   d. All of the above

7. Which of the following are negative affective states according to Agnew's GST?
   a. Innovation, retreatism, and conformity
   b. Rebellion, ritualism, and stimulation
   c. Frustration, fear, and anger
   d. None of the above

8. According to Albert Cohen,
   a. every working-class youth develops a “delinquent response”
   b. working-class youths do not typically aspire to middle-class lifestyles
   c. the delinquent subculture provides a solution to the status problems that working-class youths experience
   d. working-class youths do not typically experience status frustration

9. For Sykes and Matza, techniques of neutralization are
   a. stereotypes
   b. subcultures
   c. delinquent acts
   d. rationalizations for delinquency

10. For Cloward and Ohlin, which of the following is not a distinct type of delinquent subculture?
    a. Criminal
    b. Consensus
    c. Conflict
    d. Retreatist

11. According to Cloward and Ohlin’s subcultural analysis,
    a. conflict subcultures typically become involved in drug use
    b. criminal subcultures arise where opportunities for exposure to adult criminal models are present
    c. both legitimate and illegitimate means are always available to lower-class youths
    d. consensus subcultures usually become involved in violent activities

12. Which of the following theories is not a social-structural explanation for criminal behavior?
    a. Labeling theory
    b. Theory of anomie
    c. Subcultural theory of delinquency
    d. Differential opportunity theory

13. Which of the following is not one of Walter B. Miller’s focal concerns?
    a. Trouble
    b. Dependence
    c. Excitement
    d. Autonomy

14. Proponents of the culture of poverty perspective argue that the poor
    a. do not share the middle-class abhorrence of consensual unions, sexual promiscuity, illegitimacy, and violence in interpersonal relations
    b. have values that are substantially the same as middle-class Americans
    c. will always be with us
    d. none of the above
15. According to Wolfgang and Ferracuti,
   a. violence is a learned form of adaptation to
      particular problematic life circumstances
   b. the subculture of violence is basically a set of val-
      ues, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that are sup-
      portive of using violence in various situations
   c. in the subculture of violence, violence
      is considered to be necessary and legitimate
   d. all of the above

TRUE–FALSE

T F 1. The primary focus of social disorganization the-
    ory is the wide variety of environmental and
    urban conditions that affect crime rates.
T F 2. No society is free from change.
T F 3. When people use traditional guidelines that con-
    tinue to be appropriate for new social conditions,
    they have social disorganization.
T F 4. Shaw and McKay believed that crime and crim-
    inal behavior are very much the product of urban
    ecological conditions.
T F 5. For Merton, the retreatist form of deviant response
    is typical of various radicals or revolutionary
    groups who desire serious change in the society.
T F 6. For Merton, crime rates are symptomatic of
    anomie.
T F 7. Merton’s theory of anomie provides us with a
    much better explanation for crime committed by
    the more affluent classes in society.
T F 8. According to Agnew, individuals who have high
    degrees of power to control or deal with negative
    stimuli experience more strain than those who
    have lower degrees of power.
T F 9. Agnew believes that virtually all strained
    individuals eventually turn to delinquency
    and crime.
T F 10. According to Cohen, the “delinquent response”
    is an attempt to cope with status frustration on
    the part of working-class youths.
T F 11. Sykes and Matza argued that the delinquent sub-
    culture totally rejects middle-class standards.
T F 12. For Cloward and Ohlin, criminal subcultures
    develop in areas where opportunities for expo-
    sure to adult criminal models are present.
T F 13. For Miller, crime and delinquency are based on
    the rejection of middle-class values.
T F 14. The culture of poverty perspective stresses the
    idea that various social strata manifest distinct
    cultures, and that there exists among the poor a
    “culture of poverty.”
T F 15. For Wolfgang and Ferracuti, violence is learned
    in a subcultural environment that supports the
    advantages of violent behavior.

FILL-INS

1. ____________ theory focuses on the develop-
   ment of high-crime communities, which are associ-
   ated with the breakdown of conventional norms and
   values caused by such factors as increased industriali-
   zation, immigration, and urbanization.
2. People create social ____________ to regulate their own
   conduct and the conduct of others, and to provide vari-
   ous resources to meet their needs.
3. The famous sociologist ____________ was the first to
   develop the concepts of anomie to explain suicide.
4. Merton argued that ____________ results from a lack of
   integration between culturally prescribed goals and the
   availability of legitimate or institutionalized means for
   goal attainment.
5. According to Merton, ____________, as a form of anomic
   or deviant response, occurs when a person rejects legiti-
   mate means and substitutes illegitimate means to
   achieve culturally approved goals.
6. ____________ focuses on individual-level influences of
   strain and tries to understand why strained individuals
   are more likely than nonstrained individuals to commit
   criminal or delinquent acts.
7. ____________ may result from a disjunction between aspira-
   tions and achievements or expectations and achievements.
8. The ____________ explanation of deviance stresses the
   fact that, given the multitude of subcultures, some
   invariably contain norms that deviate from and conflict
   with those of the general society.
9. For Cohen, the delinquent subculture exists because it offers a solution to the ____________ problems and frustrations that working-class boys experience in their efforts to achieve middle-class success.

10. For Sykes and Matza, “techniques of ____________” permit youths to rationalize their delinquent acts.

11. According to Cloward and Ohlin, ____________ subcultures develop in areas where opportunities for exposure to adult criminal models are present.

12. For Cloward and Ohlin, the ____________, or drug-using, subculture exists for those who are “double failures”; they cannot adapt to legitimate conventional means or to illegitimate means and criminal role models.

MATCHING

1. Innovation
2. Differential opportunity
3. Theory of anomie
4. Conformity
5. Cohen
6. Social disorganization
7. Shaw and McKay
8. Retreatist response
9. Rebellious response
10. Sykes and Matza
11. Agnew
12. Anger
13. Miller
14. Lewis
15. Wolfgang and Ferracuti

A. Result of using traditional guidelines no longer appropriate for new social conditions
B. Drug addiction or alcoholism
C. Substitution of illegitimate means to achieve legitimate goals
D. Introduction of new means and new goals
E. Techniques of neutralization
F. Cloward and Ohlin
G. Acceptance of legitimate means and goals
H. Studied urban ecology of newcomers to Chicago
I. Merton
J. A delinquent subculture is malicious, nonutilitarian, and negativistic
K. General strain theory
L. Negative affective state
M. Culture of poverty
N. Lower-class cultural theory
O. Subculture of violence

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. After reviewing the principles of social disorganization theory, do you believe that it is applicable to the study of crime in today’s U.S. urban communities? Explain your answer.

2. Do you believe that Merton’s or Agnew’s theory adequately explains why people are deviant and/or criminal in U.S. society? In explaining your answer, assess the fact that many Americans today have received a good education and might even have experience in their respective fields, but they have not been able to find jobs in the fields for which they have been trained.

3. After reviewing the subcultural theories presented, do you believe that any of these theories adequately explains gang delinquency in a community with which you are familiar? Explain your answer.

4. Delinquent gang behavior can be found in many U.S. communities. After reviewing Miller’s focal concerns, select a community or neighborhood with which you are familiar and assess whether or not Miller’s concepts, ideas, and explanations apply to that community or neighborhood. If they apply, explain how they apply; if they do not apply, see whether any of the other theories (those of Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin, or Sykes and Matza, for example) apply, and explain why.
The Availability of Illegitimate Means

Social norms are two-sided. A prescription implies the existence of a prohibition, and vice versa. To advocate honesty is to demarcate and condemn a set of actions which are dishonest. In other words, norms that define legitimate practices also implicitly define illegitimate practices. One purpose of norms, in fact, is to delineate the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate practices. In setting this boundary, in segregating and classifying various types of behavior, they make us aware not only of behavior that is regarded as right and proper but also of behavior that is said to be wrong and improper. Thus the criminal who engages in theft or fraud does not invent a new way of life; the possibility of employing alternative means is acknowledged, tacitly at least, by the norms of the culture.

This tendency for proscribed alternatives to be implicit in every prescription, and vice versa, although widely recognized, is nevertheless a reell upon which many a theory of delinquency has stumbled. Much of the criminological literature assumes, for example, that one may explain a criminal act simply by accounting for the individual’s readiness to employ illegal alternatives of which his culture, through its norms, has already made him generally aware. Such explanations are quite unsatisfactory, however, for they ignore a host of questions regarding the relative availability of illegal alternatives to various potential criminals. The aspiration to be a physician is hardly enough to explain the fact of becoming a physician; there is much that transpires between the aspiration and the achievement. This is no less true of the person who wants to be a successful criminal. Having decided that he “can’t make it legitimately,” he cannot simply choose among an array of illegitimate means, all equally available to him. . . . It is assumed in the theory of anomie that access to conventional means is differentially distributed, that some individuals, because of their social class, enjoy certain advantages that are denied to those elsewhere in the class structure. For example, there are variations in the degree to which members of various classes are fully exposed to and thus acquire the values, knowledge, and skills that facilitate upward mobility. It should not be startling, therefore, to suggest that there are socially structured variations in the availability of illegitimate means as well. In connection with delinquent subcultures, we shall be concerned principally with differentials in access to illegitimate means within the lower class.

Many sociologists have alluded to differentials in access to illegitimate means without explicitly incorporating this variable into a theory of deviant behavior. This is particularly true of scholars in the “Chicago tradition” of criminology. Two closely related theoretical perspectives emerged from this school. The theory of “cultural transmission,” advanced by Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay, focuses on the development in some urban neighborhoods of a criminal tradition that persists from one generation to another despite constant changes in population. 1 In the theory of “differential association,” Edwin H. Sutherland described the processes by which criminal values are taken over by the individual. 2 He asserted that criminal behavior is learned, and that it is learned in interaction with others who have already incorporated criminal values. Thus the first theory stresses the value systems of different areas; the second, the systems of social relationships that facilitate or impede the acquisition of these values.

Scholars in the Chicago tradition, who emphasized the processes involved in learning to be criminal, were actually pointing to differentials in the availability of illegal means—although they did not explicitly recognize this variable in their analysis. This can perhaps best be seen by examining Sutherland’s classic work, The Professional Thief. “An inclination to steal,” according to Sutherland, “is not a sufficient explanation of the genesis of the professional thief.” 3 The “self-made” thief, lacking knowledge of the ways of securing immunity from prosecution and similar techniques of defense, “would quickly land in prison; . . . a person can be a professional thief only if he is recognized and received as such by other professional thieves.” But recognition is not freely accorded: “Selection and tutelage are the two necessary elements in the process of acquiring recognition as a professional thief. . . . A person cannot acquire recognition as a professional thief until he has had tutelage in professional theft, and tutelage is given only to a few persons selected from the total population.” For one thing, “the person must be appreciated by the professional thieves. He must be appraised as having an adequate equipment of wits, front, talking-ability, honesty, reliability, nerve and determina-
aspiring youth: skills and values are transmitted by established practitioners to those who aspire. However, access to these roles is limited by both social and psychological factors. We shall here be concerned primarily with socially structured differentials in illegitimate opportunities. Such differentials, we contend, have much to do with the type of delinquent subculture that develops.

Learning and Performance Structures

Our use of the term “opportunities,” legitimate or illegitimate, implies access to both learning and performance structures. That is, the individual must have access to appropriate environments for the acquisition of the values and skills associated with the performance of a particular role, and he must be supported in the performance of the role once he has learned it.

[Frank] Tannenbaum, several decades ago, vividly expressed the point that criminal role performance, no less than conventional role performance, presupposes a patterned set of relationships through which the requisite values and skills are transmitted by established practitioners to aspiring youth:

It takes a long time to make a good criminal, many years of specialized training and much preparation. But training is something that is given to people. People learn in a community where the materials and the knowledge are to be had. A craft needs an atmosphere saturated with purpose and promise. The community provides the attitudes, the point of view, the philosophy of life, the example, the motive, the contacts, the friendships, the incentives. No child brings those into the world. He finds them here and available for use and elaboration. The community gives the criminal his materials and habits, just as it gives the doctor, the lawyer, the teacher, and the candlestick-maker theirs.4

Sutherland systematized this general point of view, asserting that opportunity consists, at least in part, of learning structures. Thus “criminal behavior is learned” and, furthermore, it is learned “in interaction with other persons in a process of communication.” However, he conceded that the differential-association theory does not constitute a full explanation of criminal behavior. In a paper circulated in 1944, he noted that “criminal behavior is partially a function of opportunities to commit specific classes of crime, such as embezzlement, bank burglary, or illicit heterosexual intercourse.” Therefore, “while opportunity may be partially a function of association with criminal patterns and of the specialized techniques thus acquired, it is not determined entirely in that manner, and consequently differential association is not the sufficient cause of criminal behavior.”5

To Sutherland, then, illegitimate opportunity included conditions favorable to the performance of a criminal role as well as conditions favorable to the learning of such a role (differential associations). These conditions, we suggest, depend upon certain features of the social structure of the community in which delinquency arises.

Differential Opportunity: A Hypothesis

We believe that each individual occupies a position in both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures. This is a new way of defining the situation. The theory of anomie views the individual primarily in terms of the legitimate opportunity structure, it poses questions regarding differentials in access to legitimate routes to success-goals; at the same time it assumes either that illegitimate avenues to success-goals are freely available or that differentials in their availability are of little significance. This tendency may be seen in the following statement by [Robert] Merton:

Several researchers have shown that specialized areas of vice and crime constitute a “normal” response to a situation where the cultural emphasis upon pecuniary success has been absorbed, but where there is little access to conventional and legitimate means for becoming successful. The occupational opportunities of people in these areas are largely confined to manual labor and the lesser white-collar jobs. Given the American stigmatization of manual labor which has been found to hold rather uniformly for all social classes, and the absence of realistic opportunities for advancement beyond this level, the result is a marked tendency toward deviant
behavior. The status of unskilled labor and the consequent low income cannot readily compete in terms of established standards of worth with the promises of power and high income from organized vice, racketeering, and crime. . . . [Such a situation] leads toward the gradual attenuation of legitimate, but by and large ineffectual, strivings and the increasing use of illegitimate, more or less effective, expedients. 9

The cultural-transmission and differential-association tradition, on the other hand, assumes that access to illegitimate means is variable, but it does not recognize the significance of comparable differentials in access to legitimate means. Sutherland’s “ninth proposition” in the theory of differential association states:

Though criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values since non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values. Thieves generally steal in order to secure money, but likewise honest laborers work in order to secure money. The attempts by many scholars to explain criminal behavior by general drives and values, such as the happiness principle, striving for social status, the money motive, or frustration, have been and must continue to be futile since they explain lawful behavior as completely as they explain criminal behavior. 7

In this statement, Sutherland appears to assume that people have equal and free access to legitimate means regardless of their social position. At the very least, he does not treat access to legitimate means as variable. It is, of course, perfectly true that “striving for social status,” “the money motive,” and other socially approved drives do not fully account for either deviant or conforming behavior. But if goal-oriented behavior occurs under conditions in which there are socially structured obstacles to the satisfaction of these drives by legitimate means, the resulting pressures, we contend, might lead to deviance.

The concept of differential opportunity structures permits us to unite the theory of anomie, which recognizes the concept of differentials in access to legitimate means, and the “Chicago tradition,” in which the concept of differentials in access to illegitimate means is implicit. We can now look at the individual, not simply in relation to one or the other system of means, but in relation to both legitimate and illegitimate systems. This approach permits us to ask, for example, how the relative availability of illegitimate opportunities affects the resolution of adjustment problems leading to deviant behavior. We believe that the way in which these problems are resolved may depend upon the kind of support for one or another type of illegitimate activity that is given at different points in the social structure. If, in a given social location, illegal or criminal means are not readily available, then we should not expect a criminal subculture to develop among adolescents. By the same logic, we should expect the manipulation of violence to become a primary avenue to higher status only in areas where the means of violence are not denied to the young. To give a third example, drug addiction and participation in subcultures organized around the consumption of drugs presuppose that persons can secure access to drugs and knowledge about how to use them. In some parts of the social structure, this would be very difficult; in others, very easy. In short, there are marked differences from one part of the social structure to another in the types of illegitimate adaptation that are available to persons in search of solutions to problems of adjustment arising from the restricted availability of legitimate means. 8

In this sense, then, we can think of individuals as being located in two opportunity structures—one legitimate, the other illegitimate. Given limited access to success-goals by legitimate means, the nature of the delinquent response that may result will vary according to the availability of various illegitimate means. 9


3. All quotations on this page are from The Professional Thief, pp. 211–13. Emphasis added.


7. For an example of restrictions on access to illegitimate roles, note the impact of racial definitions in the following case: “I was greeted by two prisoners who were to be my cell buddies. Ernest was a first offender, charged with being a ‘hold-up’ man. Bill, the other buddy, was an old offender, going through the machinery of becoming a habitual criminal, in and out of jail. . . . The first thing they asked me was, ‘What are you in for?’” (Shaw, The Jack-Roller, op. cit., p. 101).