

## 5.12: Other Criminological Theories

### Social Reaction Theories

Initially a response to popular theories at the time, social reaction theories change the focus. Instead of focusing on the offender, social reaction theories concentrate on those people or institutions who label offenders, react to offenders, and want to control offenders. Grounded in symbolic interaction, social reaction theories emphasize how meanings are constructed. Words carry power and meaning. Thus, if someone is labeled as a criminal, it carries a connotation by other people. How will others view him or her with that label? How will society? People will act towards thing by the meanings attached. These meanings can be culturally created through interactions with peers. Perhaps it is why some of us like to wear certain name brand clothes or drive certain name brand vehicles. Those names have “meaning”; they can be cool, reliable, etc. They have status and meaning.

Not everyone who commits a crime is caught. Additionally, not all those who are caught are labeled as a criminal. Why? Labeling theories sought to explain this phenomenon. In general, labeling theorists point to the social construction of crime, which varies over time and place. For instance, marijuana use is federally prohibited, but more and more states are legalizing recreational use. The same behavior can be legal in Oregon but illegal in New York.

Furthermore, labeling theorists emphasize the process of being labeled and treated as a criminal; it can have deleterious effects. If a person is bombarded with a particular label, he or she may adopt that label. If a person was told over and over again that he or she was funny, that person might try to be funnier. What if a person were told over and over again he or she would amount to nothing? Perhaps, he or she would internalize that label and become nothing since others expect that.

Braithwaite (1989) applied some of these ideas in his reintegrative shaming. Not all social reactions are ruthless; in fact, some of them are beneficial.<sup>[1]</sup> Hence, it is the quality of social responses that is significant. We shame individuals to show disapproval. According to Braithwaite, shaming can be reintegrative or stigmatizing. Reintegrative shaming centers on forgiveness, love, and respect. Ideally, we want to reintegrate the person back into the community by removing the label. However, in some societies, like the United States, stigmatizing shaming reigns supreme. Stigmatizing shaming uses formal punishment, which degrades a person’s bond to his or her community. It is counter-productive and tends to shun the offender. For example, in some states, convicted offenders are required to self-identify as a felon on job applications. Do you think this helps their cause to reintegrate successfully into society? Perhaps not. Even though they may have “served their time,” they are still labeled as a criminal and punished further. Stigmatizing shaming propels people towards crime whereas reintegrative shaming seeks to correct the behavior through respect and empathy. Critical Theories

### Critical Theories

Critical theories originated during the 1960-1970s in the United States. Immediately following World War II, Americans expected the United States to thrive economically, culturally, and politically. Massive political turmoil inside and outside of the country created a generation of scholars who became “critical” of society and more “traditional” theories of crime. According to Cullen, Agnew, and Wilcox (2018), critical theories share some five central themes. First, to understand crime, one must appreciate the fusion between power and inequality. People with power, political and economic, have an enormous advantage in society.<sup>[2]</sup> Second, crime is a political concept. Not all those who commit crime are caught, nor are those who are caught punished. The poor are injured the most by the enforcement of laws, while the affluent (i.e., powerful) are treated leniently. Third, the criminal justice system and its agents serve the ruling class, the capitalists. As Jeffrey Reiman’s (2004) book titled it, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*.<sup>[3]</sup> Fourth, the root cause of crime is capitalism because capitalism ignores the poor and their atrocious living conditions. Capitalism demands profits and growth over values and ethically considerations. Perhaps this is why crimes of the streets are punished more severely than crimes of the suites. Finally, critical theories believe the solution to crime is a more equitable society, both politically and economically.

It is beyond the scope of this book to delve into all of the possible explanations of crime. Some theories try to explain the differences between male offending and female offending through feminist theories of crime. Other theories have integrated or combined concepts from other theories to create a newer model of explanation. Why do you think people commit crime?

### Gender and Crime Exercise

Write about how you were raised and how sex/gender roles were reinforced through school, family, culture, etc. Do you think men/boys/males are more criminal because of their biology or because of cultural expectations of men/boys/males versus women/girls/females? You should support your claims with personal, vicarious, or well-known examples.

1. Braithwaite, J. (1989). *Crime, shame and reintegration*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. ↩
2. Cullen, F.T., Agnew, R., & Wilcox, P. (Eds). (2018). *Criminological theory: Past to present* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. ↩
3. Reiman, J. (2004). *The rich get richer and the poor get prison: Ideology, class, and criminal justice*. New York, NY: Pearson. ↩

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