

## **The Gang Phenomenon The Cultural Dimensions of Crime**

### **Introduction**

Among criminologists and others, there are two primary explanations for why people behave the way they do. The free will or choice theorists believe people behave the way they do because they choose to. On the other hand, the determinists believe people behave the way they do as a result of forces acting upon them over which they have little or not control.

The forces to which the determinists are referring are one's biological or psychological make up and the influence of one's society or culture. Clearly, Taft is a determinist. As the title of his work notes, it is the "cultural dimensions" of a society that may generate criminality.

I should note that Taft was using his notion to explain *crime* not gangs. Extrapolating his ideas and applying them to gangs is something I am trying to do in an effort to gain a better understanding of gangs and to be able to more clearly communicate what I've learned in my research.

Finally, there is the matter of solutions. I am concerned about why people join gangs. I want to find solutions to the gang phenomenon so that fewer people join them. Towards that end, I will identify examples of solutions which suggest themselves according to each of Taft's six cultural dimensions.

### **Taft's Cultural Dimensions of Crime**

#### **1. American society is dynamic.**

By this, Taft means that American society is in a constant state of change. The Europeans that settled in this new land created, for the most part, a rural society. Few cities were large and most people (nearly 80%) lived on farms.

Over time, things have changed and, in response to the Industrial Revolution of the mid-1800s, we have become an urban society with nearly 80% of our people living in cities. We have also become mechanized. More about these technological changes in a moment.

These changes, accompanied by mass immigration during the latter part of the 1800s and the early 1900s, resulted in producing an environment in which opportunities for conflict between different peoples increased.

Not only did they share divergent values, beliefs, and opinions, even today it seems that these things are in a constant state of change. That which was wrong yesterday is right today. How is one supposed to act? Which behaviours are legal and which ones are not? One day a given behaviour is immoral and unethical and the next it is not, and *visa versa*. In a society experiencing so much change, where are its roots? What impact may this condition have on the society's youth? Which set of values are they to embrace?

I use this concern of Taft's to explain much of what I have been learning about gangs and their members. Gangs form, sometimes, in response to the changes of which Taft speaks. Gangs are an island of stability in a sea of change. They are in control of their own destiny (or at least they believe that). As people move in and out of neighbourhoods, gangs offer a "home," a

"family" for children and adolescents in the neighbourhood who see nothing but life passing them by.

**Technology:** Think about all the changes taking place in our society (as in most). Technological changes (i.e., computers and the communications revolution) can have a significant impact on our youth. If our youth are not prepared to participate in an increasingly technological society/work place, what are they to do? How will they get bread on the table? Earn respect? Have power? Gangs can offer all those things and you don't have to be a rocket scientist to join one! We shouldn't be surprised that technological change impacts our youth - and everyone else. Back in the mid-1800s it was the onset of the Industrial Revolution that brought about radical changes in our society....and the role children have to play in it.

You may recall that, in the early stages of the Industrial Period, children were worked very hard. They were not required to go to school but were, instead, pressed into labour - and under the most terrible of conditions (poor pay, poor ventilation, long working hours, dangerous work settings, no protection, etc.). As a result, the "Child Saving Movement" was started and two of the most significant outcomes of that movement were the new Child Labour Laws it spawned and the creation of the first juvenile justice system in the western world (back in 1899 in Cooke County, Illinois [Chicago]).

But that meant that children were removed from the world of work and had to go to school until they were at least 16 years of age. The resulting extension in the period of adolescence is, by some, blamed for the irresponsibility of youth and some of their deviance (including delinquency and gang behaviour).

And don't forget about automation - sometimes referred to as robotization and its impact on manufacturing. Where the manufacture of a car (washer, dryer, refrigerator, television, radio, etc.) once took many people, it now takes very few - most of them operating the computers that direct the robots in their work of wiring, welding, moving materials, etc.

**Globalization:** The impact of globalization has also been significant and places individuals with scarce resources in an even more precarious position. With globalization comes the need to lower prices in order to better compete overseas. Lowering prices often means mechanizing production lines, once the shelter for unskilled labour and one of the lower rungs on the ladder up to success. The underprivileged and outcast now find it even harder to make the leap from gang activity to being a normal working Joe.

As the minimum level of skill needed to enter the work force rises we find a concomitant reduction in the number of youths completing high school. The gap between the two results in more and more youth being left behind. What do they do in their desperation?

#### **Related theorists/theories:**

#### **Shaw and McKay and the Ecological Theory of Crime:**

The composition of neighbourhoods are changing as the centre city expands to accommodate a growing business sector. The old residential areas adjacent to the centre city are overrun by commercial growth.

That area, that "zone," if referred to by Shaw and McKay as the *interstitial zone* (*the "zone in transition" from residential to commercial use*). It is a zone that exhibits the greatest amount of transience and a breakdown of the social institutions which used to provide informal social

control. They refer to it as a zone which exhibits a great deal of social disorganization (its social institutions are weak).

The interstitial zones show the highest degree of social disorganization exhibiting a rise in crime and delinquency as well as infant mortality and other measures of social pathology.

You can see that, in the context of the concept of social disorganization, and realizing that most human beings want to be in a social organized environment, gangs provide the social organization that is missing in a social disorganized neighbourhood (like in the interstitial zone - sometimes called the "inner city").

## **2. American society is complex.**

We aren't just male and female, young and old. We are Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Jewish, African-American, Asian, First People (Indians), Caucasians, etc. And there are many conflicting values in our society (those in favour of abortion and those against it, those who favour the death penalty and those who don't, etc.) Taft believed this diversity may lead to conflict ... and that conflict may lead to criminality.

Turning our attention to gangs, one may suggest that if we were to talk about "gang war" we may understand that it may be the result of two gangs conflicting with one another - one gang Asian the other Hispanic, or one Afro-American, the other Hispanic, or one Caucasian and the other Afro-American and the list goes on and on.

My experiences in the field support the notion that much that is called gang activity is, in effect, one group attacking another group due to the differences between them (differences ethnicity, race, religious belief, etc.).

Not all conflicts between gangs are about drugs, sexual relations, and personal vendettas. Some are genuine expressions of the racial, ethnic, and other differences they exhibit and their desire to defeat those who are different.

### **Related theorists/theories:**

#### **Albert Cohen:**

Albert Cohen and the clash, in our schools, of middle- and working- class populations and their respective values. In a nutshell, Cohen believed that schools are run primarily by people from the middle-class. He was referring to the administrators, teachers, and counsellors.

Some of the children who attend those schools, he says, are not from the middle-class and do not exhibit the kinds of behaviours which the middle-class expects to see and approves. This is done by use of a "middle-class measuring rod" whereby all children are measured to determine their social class standing.

Children who do not measure up to the middle-class standards may, Cohen posits, develop "status frustration" and, as a result, may begin acting out. He believed that the acting out takes the form of reversing the very middle-class values against which the working-class children were measured.

For example, if middle-class children are to be polite, working-class children, acting out due to their status frustration, will be impolite (i.e., be loud, rude). If middle-class children are supposed to respect the property of others, the working-class children who are acting out will show no respect (i.e., vandalize, steal, and destroy others' property).

Were we to apply Cohen's notion to gangs we might suggest that, due to being rejected by the school, working-class children may devalue school, become truant and/or vandalize the school (among other things) and, as a consequence may be attracted to gangs. Gangs through which they will find acceptance, share their frustration/anger, and find support for their acting out. Quoting Yablonsky in *Gangsters* (p. 171): "In the gang the norms of the larger (middle-class) society are reversed so that non-utilitarian deviant behaviour...becomes a legitimized activity. The gang thus provides a legitimate 'opportunity structure' for working-class boys to strike back at a larger society that produces their status-frustration problems."

### **Walter Miller:**

Walter Miller and the clash of middle- and lower-class values as a natural outcome of life in the inner city. For Miller, being lower-class simply means that one's values will be different than those of a middle-class person. He posits that the values of the lower-class are functional and make life in lower-class neighbourhoods possible.

He talks about such lower class values in terms of being "focal concerns." Among them are being tough, having street smarts, accepting fate, and seeking excitement, to name a few. The middle-class, on the other hand, has its own set of focal concerns, most of which are diametrically opposed to those of the lower-class. Street smarts are looked upon as crude and below a middle-class person. Instead, book smarts are admired.

Being tough is looked down upon by the middle-class where "brains over brawn" is admired. And so it goes. Of course, if the middle-class has the greater likelihood of creating law, they will criminalize toughness (assault, battery, etc.), street smarts (con men, etc.) and, as a result, will criminalize being lower-class. That's how the theory goes.

So, why, according to Miller, do gangs form? Quoting Yablonsky, in *Gangsters*, (p. 174),

"...lower-class youths who are confronted with the largest gap between aspirations and possibilities for achievements are most delinquency-prone. Such youths, according to Miller, are apt to utilize heavily the normal range of lower-class delinquent patterns of 'toughness, shrewdness, cunning, and other devices in an effort to achieve prestige and status...toughness, physical prowess, skill, fearlessness, bravery, ability to con people, gaining money by wits, shrewdness...seeking and finding thrills, risk, danger, freedom from external constraint, and freedom from ... authority.'" [quoted from Miller, see p. 226 of the text, note #10].

Yablonsky believes that a youth's efforts to achieve status in a gang is a consequence of the dynamics Miller identifies. What do you think?

Gangs may also form as a result of the middle-class labelling behaviours of lower-class youth as delinquent (smoking cigarettes, having sexual intercourse, being truant from school, running away from home, etc.). Once labelled as delinquent, a youth may seek out others who have been similarly labelled. Gangs may form.

### **3. American society is materialistic.**

That which is most valued in American society is that which is material - personal possessions, objects. Taft, and others, believed) that this breeds consumption and greed ... there is concern more for one's "self" than for "others."

Those who would be the primary beneficiaries in such a society would also have the greatest stake in maintaining the status quo. They may criminalize some groups (i.e., poor, homeless, vagrant) to eliminate them. From another perspective, if having things is what is valued, and if a

person can not gain access to those things legitimately, is it not possible that this person would attempt to obtain those valued things illegitimately?

**Related theorists/theories:**

**Robert Merton and Strain Theory:**

When a significant portion of the population is denied access to the culturally legitimated means for reaching the culturally legitimated goal, one may expect some of the excluded to utilize innovative (sometimes criminal) means for achieving the goal.

The culturally legitimated means are getting an education then working hard in a job. Through these means one achieves the culturally legitimated goal of financial success (and all the trappings like a home, cars, fine clothes, jewellery, having a family and sending one's children to college, etc.).

Merton would say that everyone in the culture has the goal thrust in their face several times every day of their conscious lives (in TV, radio, magazine, newspaper ads, etc.). The problem is that not everyone has equal access to the culturally legitimate means. And those who, out of sheer will power, try to work their way up in a job, often hit a glass ceiling (they can see that there are positions above them - better paying ones, but they can not reach them).

Merton tells us that the barrier to a good education and a good job is discrimination. All kinds of discrimination including racial, ethnic, religious, gender and age.

**Cloward and Ohlin and the Illegitimate Opportunity Structure:**

There exists a structured opportunity of illegitimate means for the disenfranchised to use in order to reach the culturally legitimated goal. Organized crime, theft rings, trafficking in drugs and other forms of structured illegitimate opportunities/means are, perhaps, more accessible to the lower class while legitimate opportunities/means are more readily available to people in the middle class.

A concern more for material things than for values such as fairness, humanity, generosity, caring, may result in an undue emphasis on "making it," and making it any way necessary. If the legitimate path to success is denied or made too difficult, perhaps a youth will choose an illegitimate path to the same goal. In so doing, he or she may join up with others in order to increase the likelihood of their success. Gangs may form.

**4. American society is becoming increasingly depersonalized.**

Taft believed that many individuals in American society are not known to the larger group and are, therefore, not persons - they've become numbers, titles, statistics. They are not socially "connected." Because humans are inherently social animals, it is believed that the resulting depersonalization and isolation may lead to depression, anger, anxiety, and attacks upon one's self (i.e., suicide, substance abuse) and/or others or property.

In studying gangs, it's conceivable to believe that this condition of being stripped of or not having a unique identity may result in looking for someplace to be recognized as the individual that one is. A gang may be able to do this. In a gang the individual may be given recognition and may achieve status, prestige, power and all the other trappings provided people who are known.

## **Related theorists/theories:**

### **Social Control Theory:**

Some theorists posit that crime is the result of a loss of social control normally imposed through social institutions such as the family, faith, education, and the community or one's neighbourhood. If such informal social control is weakened, formal means of social control may be imposed - the juvenile- and criminal justice systems.

### **Walter Reckless and Containment Theory:**

Reckless believed that people are kept from violating the law in several ways. If properly socialized by their parents and peers, the individual will control him- or herself. That is, the individual provides their own containment (containing their natural impulses which may lead to law violations).

If individuals fail to contain themselves, their families and or peers may try to contain them (talk with them, try to counsel them, etc.). If that fails, the other social institutions of informal social control may provide containment - schools, the faith institutions, and the community or neighbourhood residents.

If all of those fail, the criminal justice system, as a social institution of formal social control, may attempt to contain the individual (through arrest, confinement, etc.).

Reckless also suggests that everyone is exposed to various "pushes" and "pulls," forces that push or pull an individual into law violation. We can see such pushes when children are threatened by other children to join a gang. An example of a pull may be when a child sees that, in order to get money to buy things, he or she can join a gang and reach their objective. They are pulled into the gang by its attraction as a way of earning status and making money.

### **Travis Hirschi and Control Theory:**

People refrain from violating the law because they have a *stake in conformity*. They know that, if they follow the society's rules, they will be rewarded with success.

According to Hirschi, when a member of society's *bond* to that society is weak or broken they may become criminal. Attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief in the values and goals of the society are what keep people from offending.

But what of children born into situations in which the bond to the larger society is already weak? Perhaps the parents are law violators. Maybe, if we look at things the way Miller and Cohen do (see above), being born into the working- or lower-class presents some real challenges in terms of bonding with the larger society. A lower-class person can suffer rejection and discrimination (see Merton, above).

What is the response of those children? Is it possible that some of them might join a gang because, lacking a bond to the larger society, they believe they will find a bond to the gang? Will they develop attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief in the gang culture? I think it's interesting to turn Hirschi's notion inward as a way of explaining a gang member's relationship to his or her gang (having a *bond* to the gang).

In summary, without informal social controls - from families who care about their children, schools that educate and prepare local youth for success in making a legitimate living, faith institutions that teach acceptance and learning to live with diversity, business communities that offer meaningful work and opportunities for advancement in pay and responsibility - who controls our youth? No one? Gangs? The criminal justice system?

If, in fact, our youth respond by simply satisfying their self interests (have fun, sex, gain power, etc.), they may resort to gang life where such attributes of "making it" are more readily available and acceptable.

### **5. Depersonalization leads to limited group loyalties.**

Taft believed that depersonalization leads to an erosion of ties to the larger society and fosters restricted group loyalties. That is, feeling unattached from society, some people may seek out a group or groups within society to be loyal to rather than be loyal to the larger community.

Application of this concept to gangs may help us understand why it is that some gang members can violate the laws of the society with no remorse. After all, wasn't the behaviour in accordance with what the gang expected of the gang members? Isn't that more important to them than what the rest of society thinks of their behaviour? The gang members are loyal to the gang, not to society. Their depersonalization from the larger society has resulted, according to Taft, in their loyalty to the gang.

### **Related theorists/theories:**

#### **Graham Sykes and David Matza and the Techniques of Neutralization:**

One becomes free to commit crime by using one or more techniques of neutralization (denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties). That is, if the individual feels any guilt over breaking the law (feeling guilty about stealing something from someone, etc.), the offender can neutralize their guilt by using any one or more of the techniques identified above.

I highlighted "appeal to higher loyalties" because this is the link I make between Sykes and Matza's notion and gangs. Some individuals will find it easy to violate the law because doing so is approved of by their fellow gang members. In fact, violating the law takes precedence over law violating behaviour. Some offenders remove feelings of guilt (which normally would limit their deviance) by appealing to what the gang expects of them.

Matza also wrote about the subterranean value system. It is not uncommon, he believed, for parents and other such authority figures to tell children that behaving one way or another is "wrong." They tell children they shouldn't do "that" (i.e., smoking, drinking, using recreational drugs, assaulting other people).

He also believes that it is not uncommon for those same authority figures to be involved in behaving in the very same ways they've told their children (or other youth) not to behave. Matza, therefore, suggest that there is a subterranean value system in our culture ... a value system that exists just below the level of the "right" value system. Adults tell the youth that something is wrong but then the adults behave in those wrongful ways (smoking, drinking, using recreational drugs, assaulting other people, etc.).

What is a child to believe? Which value system is relevant to their lives? Should they refrain from doing what they are told is wrong or should they behave the way they see the adults behaving? Matza believes that the existence of the subterranean value system confuses youth and often results in the mimicking of the inappropriate adult behaviour. Understandable, isn't it? Monkey see, monkey do.

Matza also wrote about drift. For Matza, drift is the tendency of some youth to drift in and out of delinquency. This characterizes many of today's gang members who only participate in gang activity occasionally and, when not doing so, behave in "normal" or non-criminal ways.

### **Edwin Sutherland and Differential Association:**

We learn to become criminal from other people and from the media.

During the first 10 years of life, who does a child come into contact with earliest, most frequently, and maintain a relationship with over the longest period of time? And who do they typically hold in the highest regard? You're probably thinking about their parents .... and you would likely be right.

But what about the at-risk youth we think about when we think of gangs? What about their parents? Do they live with them? Is there both a father and mother? Is there substance abuse and child abuse in the home? What values do their parents have? Would Sutherland's notion suggest that what some of these children learn is that gang-banging is O.K.?

Who might these children learn this from? Parents who are involved in gangs? Peers who are involved? And so the notion goes.

### **Labelling Theory:**

If a person commits a crime (primary deviance), he or she may be labelled as a delinquent or criminal. The person being labelled may accept that label (secondary deviance) and begin to consistently behave in ways that confirm the appropriateness of the label. In effect, the labelling process may condemn an individual who may have otherwise remained non-committal to a life of crime, to that life of crime.

I have included Labelling Theory under this category in Taft's model because, one rejected by society at-large, the individual may join a group/gang and, once recognized as a member of that group/gang, will be labelled as a member. The individual may even do certain things to assure that s/he is recognized as a member (wear appropriate clothing, colours, throw signs, wear identifying tattoos, etc.).

Edwin Lemert developed the concept of primary deviance and secondary deviance. The primary deviance refers to the act of delinquency or criminality committed by the individual. If caught, the individual may face the labelling process and, at the end of that process, may accept the label of "delinquent" or "criminal" as a part of their personality.

Lemert called the adoption of a label as secondary deviance. The delinquent or criminal now perceives of him/herself as a delinquent or criminal and begins behaving in that manner on a more consistent basis.

My field research alerted me to the fact that police sometimes label the friends of gang members as gang members whether they are or not. If they are associating with a know/documented gang member, then the police are likely to label them as gang members.

At the very least, they will document the "friend" as an "associate," and the label often sticks. If it's used often enough by police, Lemert would suggest that we run the risk of changing the friend/associate into a real and active gang member through the labelling process. See how it works?

In summary, human beings are, above all else, social animals. They appear to be healthiest when they have opportunities for social interaction with other human beings. If depersonalized

by society, they seek out attachments in other ways, perhaps to a smaller group. And, once attached to that group, they are more likely to support the values and norms of that group than of the larger society.

If that group is a gang, it is easy to understand how a gang member can prey upon the larger society and do so without remorse. Who cares about the larger society?! It's my gang members to matter - they care about me!

#### **6. The survival of the frontier ethic.**

According to Taft, the frontier ethic of American society is that people may take the law into their own hands to right a wrong committed against them by other people. The relationship between this dimension of American society and gangs is clear. When a gang member offends another gang member (either in the same gang or in a different gang) it is not uncommon for the offended member to settle the matter personally through an attack of some sort.

No appeal is made to the legitimate authorities (police). The matter is *taken into one's own hands*. In fact, the police are not viewed as legitimate authorities. Fellow gang members are the legitimate. If you couple that thought with Taft's notion of restricted group loyalties (#5 above) then you are beginning to see how the six dimensions are interrelated. The offended gang member views his/her gang as the group to be loyal to, not the larger society.

I'm not sure what theory or theorists apply here. But I do know, from personal experiences gained in the field and from secondary research, that gangs are a good example of a society run amok where the members of the gang feel compelled to take matters into their own hands if things go astray. To rely upon "the authorities" is a sign of weakness.

Could it be that one of the reasons for the formation of gangs is that they are a response to neighbourhood incidents of assault, theft, rape, and other crimes against the neighbourhood residents? Gangs may form as a way to get revenge on the alleged perpetrators.

Are gangs a way in which youth, who feel they are being victimized, can get back at their attackers? Could it be that some poor, inner-city, minority youth, feeling oppressed by the middle-class, gather together in gangs to defend themselves from such victimization?