# "A" Level Sociology

# A Resource-Based Learning  Approach

# Deviance and Social Control

# Unit M5: Ecological Theories

**Introduction**

**Ecological theories**, as with the Functionalist theories to which they are closely-related (see Teachers' Notes: **Unit M4: Functionalism**), are sometimes called "**Positivist**" theories. This is because they seek to locate the causes of human behaviour (in this case, deviance and non-deviance) within some form of **social structure** that exists **external** to the individual.

In the case of ecological theories, the **causes** of crime, for example, are to be found in the way the **physical environment** in which people live and interact socially creates the conditions for criminal and non-criminal behaviour.

Ecological theories also, you might like to note, share a couple of common features with Functionalist subcultural theories (see Teachers Notes: **Unit M6: Subcultural Theories**):

   a. Both, albeit in slightly different ways, place particular stress on the way various cultural / sub-cultural groups develop their own particular **norms** and **values** in a way that reflects both their **physical** and **material** circumstances.

   b. Both are implicitly **structural** in scope and, more-specifically, have developed out of mainstream Functionalist theory. This can perhaps be best seen in relation to the way both forms of theorising emphasise how individual / group values arise as a **response** to an individual's social circumstances / situation.

   To put this another way, both types of theory adopt a **positivist** approach to the study and explanation of deviance.

Where **ecological theories** tend to **differ** from **sub-cultural theories** is in the different stress placed upon the **origin** of **sub-cultural behaviour**. Ecologists, as we will see, have tended to emphasise the significance of the **physical environment** or **geographic area** (hence, such theories are sometimes known as "**area studies**"), while sub-cultural theorists have tended to emphasise the way in which norms and values relate more to material circumstances.

**The Chicago School of Human Ecology**

Ecological theories of deviance developed primarily out of the work of the "Chicago School" of Human Ecology - a group of **criminologists** / human ecologists working together (spookily enough) at the University of Chicago in the 1920's and 1930's. A particular focus of general concern, here, was the effect of **industrialisation** on people's behaviour, both in relation to the work of Ferdinand **Tonnies** and, of course, Emile **Durkheim**.

   **Tonnies** work on **Gemeinschaft** (a concept he used to theorise the nature of social relationships in small-scale, "community-type" (particularly rural) areas and **Gesellschaft** (a concept he used to theorise the nature of social relationships in larger-scale, "association-type" (particularly urban) areas, was particularly influential with the Chicago School ecologists.

   **Durkheim's** ideas about the way **informal social bonds** tended to be weakened once societies began to develop in both size and number of social relationships they contained was similarly influential.

However, aside from the above, one of the main original influences in the early development of ecological theories of crime and deviance was that of "**Social Darwinism**":

In simple terms, **Social Darwinism** involves the idea that it is possible to apply some of **Darwin's** original observations about the nature of animal behaviour / evolution in relation to human social groupings. In particular, since the ecological focus was upon the relationship between people and their physical environment, the work of someone like **Robert Park** ("Human Ecology") naturally tended to focus upon the way  the "struggle for space" within urban environments affected people's behaviour.

**Park**, for example, noted the way in which, in America at least, successive "waves of immigration" into American cities had an unsettling and disruptive effect upon established communities.

This theme was developed and refined by **Shaw and McKay** in their elaboration of "**Social Disorganisation theory**", an early (1920's) attempt by ecological theorists to apply Social Darwinist ideas to the explanation of criminal behaviour.

In "Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas", for example,  **Shaw and McKay** explicitly attempted to link the idea of "**area**" to human **behaviour** (especially criminal behaviour). In this respect, the basic thrust of their study can be outlined thus:

  a. The area in which people live is significant in relation to such things as density of occupation, the stability or otherwise of communal life and so forth.

  b. People's behaviour is conditioned by reference to the behaviour of others and, in this respect, people take their guide-lines for behaviour from the way in which the people around them appear to behave.

  If, for example, this behaviour is conditioned by non-criminality, this will be the prevailing ethos; if, on the other hand, people suspect that "everyone" is involved in deviant / criminal behaviour, then they will also involve themselves in this kind of behaviour.

The logic of this form of argument is quite explicit,  in that it involves the basic assumption that people develop guide-lines about their behaviour through their perception of the prevailing norms and values within a particular area. This, in turn, links into the idea that people become attached to the particular area in which they live, since it is in their immediate neighbourhood that they develop a sense of communal living, rights and responsibilities.

Shaw and McKay applied these ideas (some of which resemble Functionalist ideas and others which appear to have been incorporated from an Interactionist perspective called "Symbolic Interaction"), through an analysis of what they termed "**Concentric Zones**" – the theory of Social Disorganisation is, accordingly, frequently referred-to as "Concentric Zone" theory.

In basic terms, they argued that any city (in this instance they cited **Chicago**) could be divided into various **concentric zones** emanating from the centre of the city.  You can visualise these zones by thinking about an archery target, for example, with the centre of the target (the Bulls-eye) being Zone 1 and each successive ring being named successively.

**Concentric Zones**
(diagrammatic view)
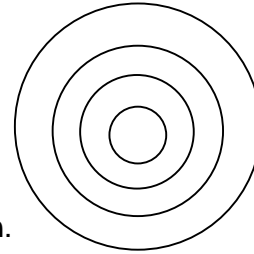
The **middle** zone (**Zone 1**) is the **central business district** in any city.

The **next** is the **inner city** (**Zone 2**),
sometimes called the **Interstitial Zone** or **Zone of Transition**.

This Zone is surrounded , respectively, by:

- Respectable working class housing (**Zone 3**)
- The (middle class) suburbs (**Zone 4**)
- The city fringe (rural / semi-rural areas) inhabited by the rich (**Zone 5**)

In examining crime rates in relation to each zone, Shaw and McKay found that one zone in particular (**Zone 2**) exhibited higher rates of crime than any other zone. This zone (which Shaw and McKay termed a "zone of transition" because it was to this area of cheap housing that successive waves of immigrants - Irish, Italian, Polish and so forth - came), had a consistently higher rate of crime than any other zone, regardless of which immigrant group dominated the cultural life of the area.

This lead Shaw and McKay to argue that the high crime rates were **not** a consequence of the behaviour of any one particular ethnic group (since it didn't really seem to make much difference which ethnic group was dominant at particular times).

Rather, they argued that something about the fact of **living in a such a zone** was the root **cause** of the high levels of crime. This "something" was, according to Shaw and McKay, the fact that **no settled community** could establish itself in this zone because of the repeated waves of immigration into - and emigration out of - the zone.

In effect, the high turnover of people in the "**zone of transition**" resulted in the idea of "**social disorganisation**" - the idea that a **lack** of clear, moral, guide-lines deriving from a settled, stable, community structure resulted in a lack of informal social controls and hence a high rate of crime.

**How might the concept of "social disorganisation" explain high rates of crime?**

We can identify at least two major **problems** with this kind of theoretical explanation:

**Firstly**, while the idea of social disorganisation seems, on the face of things, to be a useful concept, it is difficult to see how the idea of "disorganised human behaviour" can be sustained - no form of human behaviour can, in effect, be disorganised for the participants (although it may appear disorganised to outsiders...).

Secondly, as a form of causal explanation, social disorganisation is both a cause and an effect (which is, of course, logically impossible). This follows because:

a. Social disorganisation creates high rates of crime.

b. High rates of crime create social disorganisation.

In effect, we have no logical way of knowing which comes first...

**Cultural Transmission Theory**

Partly as a response to such criticism, **social disorganisation theory** gave way to the development / refinement of **Cultural Transmission theory**, whereby the emphasis passed from a focus on disorganisation to a focus on the way groups become **criminally organised** in such areas as the zone of transition.

> In this respect, what we are starting to see is the development of a much more explicitly **sub-cultural** form of theorising, where the explicatory emphasis shifts onto the socialisation process.

> In these terms, "criminal behaviour" is seen to be "normal behaviour" for some social groups and, hence, criminal norms and values are transmitted, through the socialisation process, from one generation to the next.

The major **problem** here, however, is the question of why, if cultural transmission is such a powerful form of socialisation for some people, it does not seem to apply to others in an apparently similar social position:

> In short, it doesn't explain why some people commit crime ("because they have been socialised to see it as normal") while others do not.

As a way of resolving this problem, therefore, what was needed was a theory that applied more-specifically to peoples' actual behaviour - and such a theory developed out of the work of **Sutherland and Cressey** ("The Principles of Criminology").

**Differential Association**

Using the idea of "**Differential Association**", Sutherland and Cressey argued that a criminal is likely to develop if he / she:

> "**...receives an excess of definitions favourable to violation of the law over definitions unfavourable to violation of the law**".

Thus, this was a more-explicitly **sub-cultural** form of theorising because it started to locate people's behaviour within a **cultural framework** of **rules**, **roles** and **responsibilities** - the people you associated with were basically responsible for whether or not you broke the law, depending upon how "normally" they viewed criminal behaviour.

However, it was **not** simply a case of:

> "if you associate with criminals you will become a criminal",

mainly because Sutherland and Cressey realised that it was not likely to be an "either / or" situation.

> For example, your family may stress non-criminal behaviour while your peers are heavily involved in crime - in this instance, the individual receives contradictory socialising messages.

This idea, in itself, was something new, insofar as the **socialisation** process could be seen as **contradictory**, rather than a relatively simple process of teaching in which the individual being socialised appears to play little actual part.
Sutherland and Cressey argued that there were **four main variables** involved in the creation of a criminal:

## 1. Frequency of definitions:

That is, the number of times that criminal definitions (for example, the belief that stealing from the rich is okay) occur.

## 2. Duration of definitions:

The longer the individual is exposed to various definitions, the more likely they are to incorporate them.

### 3. Priority of definitions:

This basically relates to stage in the life cycle of the individual. A young child, for example, may experience the primary socialisation of the family more forcefully than any other socialising influences.

## 4. Intensity of definitions:

The prestige / status of the person making the definition will be important, since if we are impressed by someone we are more likely to be receptive to what they are saying.

If you think about it for a moment, one of the big advantages of this type of theorising is that it is not culture or class specific (unlike earlier forms of sub-cultural theory which tended to focus upon the working class criminal). Anyone, from any social class, is liable to become involved in crime if enough definitions exist which tell him / her that their behaviour is basically okay and it is perhaps to Sutherland's credit that, possibly for the first time, the possibility that the **middle and upper classes** could (indeed must) be involved in criminal behaviour was addressed by sociologists / criminologists.

However, Differential Association does involve a number of  problems, some of which can be outlined as follows:

a. Firstly, how is it possible to empirically measure any of the above (how long, for example, does an individual have to be exposed to various behavioural definitions?).

b.  If our behaviour is conditioned by such things as whether or not people condone our involvement in crime, it seems logical to assume that the wives and husbands, for example, of criminals would be necessarily involved in criminal behaviour - but this does not seem to be the case (at least, not for all types of crime).

c. Notwithstanding the idea of contradictory definitions, criminal behaviour appears to be different from non-criminal behaviour - you either become a criminal or you do not - and this simply may not be the case (as we shall see when we look at Interactionist theories).

Finally, it might be useful to note the work of **Terry Morris** ("The Criminal Area") in relation to various forms of ecological theorising.

Morris, for example, doubted that such things as "social deprivation" could actually be considered as a cause of crime (for the simple reason that not everyone who is poor, unemployed or whatever is necessarily a criminal), in themselves.

On the contrary, Morris argued that it tends to be those who are the poorest and most socially-deprived, those who gravitate towards cheap (slum) housing, low rent areas of a city that tend to be involved in the most visible forms of crime - types of criminal behaviour that carry the greatest risk of detection and criminalization.

## ECOLOGICAL THEORIES:

### Key Sociologists:

Robert Park: Human Ecology, 1936
Shaw and McKay: Juvenile Delinquency in Urban Areas, 1942
Sutherland and Cressey: Principles of Criminology
T. Morris: The Criminal Area (critical of ecological theories).
West and Farrington: The Delinquent Way of Life.

### Key Concepts:

Area / neighbourhood (theories sometimes called "area studies")
Urbanisation ("corrupting" influence of on behaviour).
Industrialisation.
Concentric Zone theory (Shaw and McKay)
Social disorganisation (as cause of criminal behaviour).
Socialisation (especially in relation to Cultural Transmission theory).
Differential Association.

### Key Ideas:

### Social Order is based on:

Norms and values that bind people together (cf. Functionalist theories).
Existence of stable, homogeneous cultural base.

### Social Control based on:

Socialisation - basic argument revolves  around the idea that people are socialised into conforming behaviour (informal social controls).

Legal norms - in a similar way to Functionalist theories, legal norms exist to control behaviour caused by:

Social disorganisation.
Cultural transmission of "deviant" norms.

**Social Conformity:**

Basically follows the Functionalist argument in this respect:

Social disorganisation theory focuses specifically upon the way in which (rapid) urban development weakens the social bonds that tie people to one another. Once these bonds are weakened, informal controls cease to have an effect and this results in an increase in crime and deviance (note the similarity to the concept of anomie - rapid social change means that people no-longer fully understand where the boundaries of acceptable / unacceptable behaviour lie).

Cultural Transmission and Differential Association theories argue that the sub-culture within which people live may lead them to develop "deviant" norms and to transmit them to others through a socialisation process. Thus, in one sense, people are conforming to sub-cultural norms; in another, wider cultural sense, they are deviating from norms of behaviour established in society as a whole.

**Non-Conformity:**

People's behaviour is seen as a reaction to external (structural / cultural) stimulation.

Urbanisation, for example, creates social disorganisation which, in turn, creates deviant behaviour (since people do not have clear moral guide-lines for their behaviour).

Differential association theory offers a more sophisticated explanation, insofar as it states that people are socialised into particular cultural patterns of behaviour. Thus, if deviance (as defined by wider cultural factors - laws, for example) is considered sub-culturally "normal" then an individual will grow-up adhering to norms of behaviour that conform to sub-cultural expectations but which, in a wider sense, represent non-conforming behaviour.

**Power:**

Like the Functionalist theories they resemble, ecological theories are not particularly concerned with questions of power (who decides what is criminal / non-criminal behaviour, the process of law creation and so forth).

Power certainly plays a part, but it is implicit in such things as the socialisation process (as a form of social control. for example), rather than being explicitly used as a concept that explains how deviance is defined, how and why certain forms of behaviour are proscribed and so forth).