

Sociology as an International Discipline: Observations on Theory

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Introduction

Sociology is an interesting discipline. It allows the student to reflect upon human observation and to offer commentary and insight relative to these observations. At the same time, the discipline of sociology provides one the opportunity to investigate the connections among the components of the social world as observed by others. We see many methodological strategies used by students of sociology to investigate their chosen area of interest. Some use statistical analysis of quantified data to provide information for commentary. Others offer trained observation skills as a method of organizing, presenting and explaining human organizations and patterns of interaction.

Whatever method of investigation or observation we use to understand the social world we see, the clarity and explanatory power of our observations are strengthened by theoretical conceptualization. In this presentation, I am using theory and theoretical construction in a general explanatory framework. Thus, a theoretical construction is a unified collection of assumptions and propositions arranged to provide insight and understanding to observed patterns of human behavior. The importance of theoretical insight

for explanation should not be ignored. One example of this importance comes from the field of criminology. In the 1830s, scholars were organizing observations of crime rates according to geographical distributions (the cartographic school). These studies were conducted primarily in France and Belgium. At that time, however, there were no sociological theoretical bases explaining these observations. Those conducting the studies were trained in other fields, such as law or mathematics. It was not until the 1930s that a theoretical basis for interpreting spatial distributions of crime rates was developed. This theory has become known as the *social disorganization theory*, proposed by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942). Using this theory, Shaw and McKay were able to interpret the urban spatial patterns of crime and delinquency rates *engendered* by forces of immigration and industrialization.

The major focus of my paper is the continuing need for theoretical development in sociology, in particular within the area of crime and delinquency. This theoretical development furthermore, should be sensitive to cross-cultural contexts, and responsive to refinement, modification, or reconceptualization according to cultural variations of human interaction.

Sociological theories

Many well-known social theorists in the 19th century worked in European settings. Scholars such as Comte, St. Simon, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber developed theoretical concepts and propositions derived mainly from European experiences. Early sociological theorizing, therefore, was heavily influenced by European experiences. While many of these conceptualizations transferred to life in America, there were modifications and adjustments necessitated by living experiences in a society based more on social independence and democratic decision making than on legacies and royalty. For example, the impact of the industrial revolution on worker attitudes and organizational strategies is modified by the concept of states' rights in America. Traditionally, right-to-work laws in southern states have affected the strength of unions and the political influence of unions. I have worked in both union and non-union factories and I have witnessed the effect of unions on workers' rights. However, unions were not a significant feature of industrial life in the Deep South in the 1950s and early 1960s. This situation is still reflective of life in the Deep South, such as in college and university settings.

Since the early 1900s, much of sociological theory development has been affected by the American experience. To mention just a few, Parsons, Mills, and Merton have provided major

theoretical conceptualization in sociology, and principally from an American perspective. Certainly, these scholars were (are) well-versed in European history and social development, and many illustrations of their work reveal this knowledge. However, it cannot be denied that the social system, the organizational, and anomie theories have an American influence.

Sociological theories of crime

One of the stronger influences of American sociological theory development is in the field of crime and delinquency. The theory of differential association by Edwin Sutherland (1939), the theory of social disorganization by Shaw and McKay, and Merton's anomie theory (1957), the development of labeling theory by Edwin Lemert (1951) and Howard Becker (1963), Walter Reckless' containment theory (1967) with its emphasis on a positive self-concept as an inhibitor of crime and delinquency, and Travis Hirschi's social bond theory (1969) are all based upon an American perspective. In more contemporary times, Freda Adler's (1975) explanation of female criminality (the liberation or emancipation theory) is based on American patterns of criminality and gender roles and changes in gender norms. Of course, these are only a few examples of the American influence on theoretical explanations of crime and deviance in the 20th century.

Theory testing

Efforts to test these theories, and other explanations of criminal and delinquent behavior, have also largely been conducted in the United States. By now, it has been established that those living in poverty and in slum areas, who have negative self-concepts and weak attachments to parents and/or teachers, and associate with others similarly situated are at greater risk of committing acts of crime or delinquency. Shaw and McKay's theory of social disorganization proposed that instances of court records of delinquency would be highest in the inner city areas and would decline evenly in successive areas of a city located centrifugally from the inner city. This observation is known as the *gradient hypothesis*. Repeated tests of this hypothesis in Chicago and in many other North American cities have consistently confirmed its predictions.

Assessments of peer associations with delinquent or criminal peers have also confirmed the significance of such groupings in the etiology of delinquency, in particular, drug use and gang activity.

Reckless' own studies and those of his students have repeatedly demonstrated that delinquency is more common among those who display or indicate low self-concepts.

Hirschi's social bond theory has also been tested, and supported, in

numerous studies. Broken family relationships (not necessarily broken homes – with one or both parents permanently absent from the home) are significantly associated with delinquency. In addition, we know that those who are not doing well academically in school are at greater risk for delinquent behavior than those who are high academic achievers.

Certainly, all of these theoretical explanations of crime and delinquency have deficiencies and just as certainly no one theory of criminality can adequately explain all categorical examples of crime and deviance. For example, there are many good students from wealthy families who, despite these advantages and opportunities become involved in drug use, youth gangs, and other criminal activities. Also, despite the relative pervasiveness of Merton's anomie theory, there is the existence of considerable white-collar crime in corporate, industrial and professional sectors of society.

Cross-cultural contexts

In the next several decades, a major challenge to students of social deviance, in fact to sociologists in general, is the continued testing and refinement-modification of theories in cross-cultural contexts. I use the word "continued" because cross-cultural studies of crime and deviance, descriptive and analytical, have been conducted for years. I am arguing for

more intensive and systematic theory testing, in order to more fully understand patterns of deviance in general.

When calling for more extensive and systematic theory testing, I am reminded of examples of theory testing which have failed to confirm sociological explanations of deviance generated from a Western perspective. For instance, Lois DeFleur's analysis of social disorganization theory (1967) in Argentina found that the highest rates of delinquency were found on the outskirts of the city where poorer neighborhoods were located. In Nigeria, Ebbe (1989) found that the highest rates of delinquency were found in neighborhoods described as "high-and-medium-grade" residential districts (p. 760), mainly because it was in these areas where domestic labor was employed. In lower-income neighborhoods, informal social controls were considered to be stronger and rates of delinquency were lower. Both of these studies failed to support the gradient hypothesis, but for different reasons. Thus, it is not enough simply to fail to confirm a sociological theory in cross-cultural contexts. It is more important to consider why the theory is not supported and what socio-cultural patterns exist in a particular setting which affect deviance and its explanation.

In the Philippines, I have encountered examples of theory application (not true theory testing) which challenge the wisdom of Western explanations of crime and deviance. In several

instances of instruction, the presentation of Robert Merton's anomie theory has been met with skepticism and doubt, not so much because the competitive spirit is lacking in the Philippines. Rather, it is often observed that social patterns of cooperation and familial support tend to countermand the potentially damaging effects of competitive loss. I have not put this theory to a strict test, but I am persuaded that comments from students and colleagues have some merit (although I am aware that some accounts of sexual relationships involving women from impoverished backgrounds may be interpreted from an anomie theory perspective; Takabata 1995).

Even such relatively common concepts as the "broken home" sometimes have to be reconceptualized according to socio-cultural locations. Again, in the Philippines, the broken home, as it is defined in the United States (the permanent absence of one or both natural parents in the home) may not apply because there are school youth living with relatives or caretakers other than their parents. However, this living arrangement may be considered temporal and conditional (for the purpose of finishing school) and not indicative of strained or "broken" family relationships.

Conclusion

Sociology has historically been characterized by theoretical development. Initially, the bulk of this

conceptualization emanated from European experiences. In the 20th century, theoretical work in sociology particularly in the field of crime and deviance has often originated in the United States. However, a critical need for the continued development of theory in the sociology of crime and deviance is systematic and intensive testing of theories in cross-cultural settings. While crime and deviance are universal phenomena, the patterns and explanations of this activity are not universal. In particular, theoretical explanations of behavior, deviant or otherwise, should be more thoroughly examined in developing countries, characterized by more informal and extended systems of social control, as opposed to bureaucratic, institutional

systems of control and state-sponsored health and welfare programs. Neither system of societal control should be implied in this paper as inherently superior or inferior. Rather, the simple argument being proposed is that more complete understanding, explanation, and management (if that is desired) of crime and deviance are to be accomplished by more expanded theoretical development, and theory-testing in diverse, cross-cultural settings. Sociology has historically proven to be an effective discipline for international research and development of theoretical constructs. Sociology in the 21st century should continue to pursue this international dimension of scholarship and I expect that to happen particularly in developing countries.

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