Explanations of the Causes (Etiology) of Gang Behavior

Introduction: The purpose of this lecture is to discuss the MAJOR explanations of gang behavior. As we work our way through these theories, there are a few things I will like to stress to you. Some of the theories are not presented in your textbook. However you will see the majority of the theories in your textbook. Pay attention to the following introductory statements.

1. That the explanation of the causes or etiology of gang behavior must be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective. Several disciplines like Sociology, Criminology, Law, History, Psychology, Anthropology, and more have influenced the development and formulation of the explanations of gang behavior.
2. Since the study of gang behavior falls within the substantive fields of sociology and criminology, you will find that the bulk of the theories will come from sociology/criminology.
3. That there is no one grand theory of gang behavior. To understand the causes of gang behavior, one must look at several theories and explanations. A theory may be necessary for the explanation of gang behavior but that theory in of itself is not sufficient to explain gang behavior.
4. Each of the explanations of gang behavior should be evaluated for its ability to explain the phenomena of gangs. That is, each theory must be assessed for theoretical and empirical adequacies and sufficiency in explaining gang behavior.
5. That these explanations of gang behavior are not absolute explanations. The theories may apply in some settings but not in others. This does not mean that the theory is inadequate.
6. Theories must explain what we intend them to explain. After all, theories are said to have universal applicability; we must be able to subject the theory to empirical scrutiny to test its efficacy.

Highlights of Chapters 3-5

These chapters are important because they set the stage for you to learn about major theoretical milestones in the development of gang behavior. More importantly, the chapters present you with the major theoreticians, paradigms, and findings related to evolution of key studies in gang behavior.
Let us begin with the main milestones in gang studies. The best was to look these milestones is to see them as baseline, the genesis or beginnings of what is now a full-fledge subfield of sociology called gang studies.

As you work your way through the 3 chapters, please note that there are several theoreticians and paradigms presented. I do not expect you to memorize or have a detailed knowledge about each milestone or development. In most cases, I have tried to highlight the major ones for you. But this does not mean that you should not be familiar with all of these developments in gang studies. In this section, I plan to outline very briefly on the following personalities and their theoretical perspectives: Thrasher, Cohen, Bloch and Niederhoffer, Cloward and Ohlin, Whyte, Yablonsky, Miller, and Robert Merton. Others will include Shaw and McKay, Edwin Sutherland, and the structural-functionalist versus conflict models of gang studies. You will note that most if not all of these personalities were inspired by Thrasher and as such you should expect some repetitions in themes that Thrasher already found when he studied the 1313 gangs in Chicago. More importantly, as you read on these personalities, try and ascertain how relevant their perspectives are today in the explanation and existence of gang activities maybe in your neighborhood or community. Ask yourself: are there any problems with these perspectives?

Frederic Thrasher was one of the pioneers of gang studies. He studied gangs in Chicago almost a century ago. His study of the 1313 gangs in Chicago became a classic. Even though this study is very old, it provided students of gang studies a baseline from which to form preliminary conclusions about the prevalence and extent of gang behavior in the US. From this major milestone study, we know the following about gangs in America.

1. That gangs vary significantly in their structure, organization, and composition. The idea here is that gangs form and spread their activities; are sometimes amorphous, that is constantly evolving, shifting, changing, reinventing itself, and not static.
2. That gangs are usually characterized by close knit formations, highly solidified, with a high degree of complexity in terms of organizational features and well formalized. What this suggests is that there is a high degree of centralization of gangs in terms of the same way that a business or social group is set up today.
3. When gangs begin initially, they start as maybe a play group, a social club of young men and women who simply hang out to shoot the
breeze. At this stage in their formation, they many engage in activities such as pranks, petty delinquent acts, misdemeanors, and so forth. But with time, they may evolve into stable, well organized, non spontaneous, highly formalized, and serious group bent on using crime as a way of life and a marker of their group identity.

4. As it evolves, the gang may become like a family with a strong sense of in-group loyalty, attachment, normative systems, and a commitment to set up a territorial environment which will define and implement their goals. This is the stage when the gang no longer should be considered as a boys club or a social party or recreational entity.

5. In essence, what we learn from Thrasher is that gangs grow incrementally. Gangs acquire and become sophisticated over time in terms of their activities and organization. In the end the view of gangs that we learn from Thrasher is that gangs may start as a mob, not usually engaging in crime, may become a secret society, a ring, a crowd, and eventually with time become hardened criminally.

6. One of the findings in Thrasher is also that he pointed to way to indicate that gang activities may be more common in urban settings than in rural settings; that most places where gangs form are characterized by population density, poor housing, economic depression, absence of role models, community deterioration, school failure, breakdown in social norms, and places with a large concentration of underclass, underprivileged, and minority subpopulations.

Cohen

Albert Cohen was a sociologist whose work emphasized the role juvenile subcultures. According to Cohen, one way to understand gangs is to look at gangs as means whereby youths react or respond to the frustration and status deprivations that they experience. In other words, Cohen is saying that usually, youths may turn to gang activities to symbolize their anger, hostility, frustration, and inability to achieve middle class goals or become successful. Their inability to achieve socially desirable goals such as doing well in school is what makes them form a subculture which is based on a rejection of the core values of society. In essence, they become anti-society, anti-institutions, disrespectful of authority figures such as parents, teachers, and law enforcement agents. They become anti-conventional. They hate school and may drop out because they view education as a middle class
institution which contradicts the realities of the lives they live as mainly lower class, poor, and uneducated youths. For most of these kids, Cohen points out that they develop a hatred or disdain for society, they become hedonistic, always seeking to have fun even if it means harming others in the process. They may drop out of school and eventually develop a negative attitude toward the core values of society. Joining a gang therefore is a way for these youths to assert their and venge their frustration and anger at the rest of society. Delinquent and gang behavior become a way of reacting to or responding to the frustrations of life.

Whyte

To Whyte, we need to distinguish between what he called a street corner society from a gang. In a street corner society, you may find a group youths who simply hang out socially and engage in a variety of legitimate and illegitimate acts. Recreational pursuits dominate their activities. Hence, the notion of a clique. With time, however, the group may change. Old members leave. The group may disintegrate or re-form with new members or even merge with another clique. The members may associate with each other over a long period of time. Some group members may leave for college, others may find a way out of the street corner society by joining the military, others may marry, and some may stay and become the core members.

Bloch and Niederhoffer

Their perspective is that gangs exist to provide their members with social and psychological nurturing families have failed to provide to the youth of today. In other words, gangs exist for a function: they provide support for youth who have been rejected by their families. In joining a gang, the youths are able to have a resemblance of a family because the members are supportive of each other, may provide the youth with economic sustenance, psychological support, and so forth. In this respect, the gangs form in response to failures in key social institutions such as family and education. That gangs take on the form of a ritualistic organization which youths may join as a normal aspect of the process of dealing with the uncertainties regarding childhood and adolescents; a form of rites of passage to bridge the gap and poorly defined expectations of childhood and adulthood in modern as opposed to traditional societies. In the traditional societies, the roles and statuses of children are predetermined and well defined and kids simply conform. But in the modern society, things are fuzzy. Kids feel they are
adults. Society feels they are children. This difference in expectations sometimes may cause a gap between youth and parents and society at large.

Cloward and Ohlin: Differential Opportunity

Three main delinquent gangs: 1) the criminal gang subculture, 2) the conflict gang subculture, and 3) the retreatist gang subculture.

The gist of all three gang types is that in every community, according to Cloward and Ohlin, there are both legitimate (legal) and illegitimate (illegal) opportunities for youths. For youths who experience or perceive that the use of illegitimate modalities are available to engage in criminal or delinquent behaviors, that will be the course of action or the choice that the youth will make. For those kids who do not have access and opportunity to engage in illegal behavior, one will expect those kids to stay out of trouble, that is behave legally or legitimately. In essence, what Cloward and Ohlin are telling us is that the opportunities available for youths to engage in different types of behavior (criminal or otherwise) are not randomly distributed within the population; that some youths have a greater access to the performance structures for engaging in illegitimate acts. Those same performance structures or opportunities may not be available for other youths even if they are desirous of engaging in illegal acts. That is why the theory is commonly known as differential opportunity theory: the idea that opportunities to engage in bad behavior are not evenly distributed and hence available to everyone. In the criminal gang referred to above, crime is seen as a way of life. That crime is legitimate business. That its outcome is economic, that is to fulfill and meet economic goals. That gang behavior is a legitimate outlet for success in American life. This group of youths may become hardcore offenders, sometimes very lethal, and serious about their gang activities. The conflict gangs are youths who may have a difference in value and normative expectations. They have a conflict with society whose norms and values they may not associate with. They may not necessarily end up in gang activities but if the opportunity to do so presents itself, they will do so. The last group, the retreatists describes those youth gang members who withdraw from society and immerse themselves in various types of illicit activities such as drugs. Like Robert Merton’s retreatist (more about this later) Cloward and Ohlin’s retreatists rejects both the institutionalized and culturally prescribed means or ways of doing things. They dropout of society, form their own deviant lifestyles and subcultures, and basically end up becoming anti-conventional.
Yablonsky

The contributions of Yablonsky to gang theory was that he introduced typologies of gangs as a way of unraveling the characteristics of gangs. For example, he believed that gangs should be approached from 3 perspectives:

1. The delinquent gang
2. The social gang
3. The violent gang

The explanations of these gang types are fairly straightforward. Of the three gang groups, the most serious from the sociological point of view is the violent gang. To a large extent, this group of gang members are similar to Cloward and Ohlin’s criminal gang subculture.

The violent gang may have the following characteristics.

1. Tightly and or loosely organized
2. A leadership structure that may or may not be static
3. Core members
4. Evidence of sociological and psychological maladjustments
5. Power-oriented
6. Uses violence occasionally to affirm a turf
7. May engage in a wide variety of petty or serious criminal acts
8. Some of the members are core. Others are marginal or periphery

From Yablonsky we also learn that gangs can be described as near groups. These are groups that form in interstitial areas, natural areas, areas that are blighted economically, poor, socially disorganized, densely populated, with high rates of unemployment, sub-standard housing, socially disorganized communities, income disparities among minorities and non-minorities, urban decay, communities undergoing rapid transitions and neighborhood changes.

Walter Miller

Your textbook only had a paragraph on Miller. Miller’s contributions were significant to the study of delinquent youths. He developed a theory called Focal Concerns Theory. The key aspect of his theory was that lower-class youths tend to be preoccupied with certain focal concerns. These focal
concerns can be found in the ways that lower class youths especially conduct themselves. Living in a culture where power, violence, crime, and drugs pervade, some of the youths may come to form some ideas and conceptions about urban life. And the reality of urban life sometimes is that one has to form or belong to a subculture if one is to survive.

Among lower class youths, Miller contends that there are certain features of that group’s subculture which may predispose some of them to acts of deviancy, criminality, or gang behavior. The forms of focal concerns that Miller mentioned include the following:

1. seeking or looking for trouble
2. display of toughness
3. smartness, autonomy
4. short-run hedonism, pleasure seeking
5. belongingness
6. affirmation of masculinity

Like some of the theories we have examined so far, you may notice that a major flaw with this theory is its race and class bias and the difficulties involved in trying to provide an empirical testing of the theory. More on this issue later.

The Racism-Oppression Thesis of Gang Analysis

Is there a relationship between racism, discrimination, ethnocentrism and gang behavior? Do gangs form in response to perceptions of racial and ethnic conflicts in America? Does racism and discrimination exacerbate gang activities in America? To what extent is the alleged discrimination in the criminal justice system toward minorities and poor people in general a cause of gang activities in this country? Can the surge in bias crimes such as those committed by fringe groups (KKK, Crips, and Skinheads) related to gang activities?

As your textbook indicated, for us to understand this chapter, we have to be willing to have an open mind about race and ethnic relations in America, about the black-white divide in America, and to free our minds of preconceived notions and prejudice and stereotypes so that we can discuss this honestly and openly.
This section deals with the issue of race relations in America and the gang problem. The gist of this chapter is that America’s minority groups form gangs to register their disgruntlement and the perceived oppression that they feel from the white control political and economic establishments. From this perspective, gangs are seen as forming to confront and resist political and economic oppression that America’s racial minority groups confront in their daily lives.

One of the main features of gangs in America is that historically, gangs have formed along racial and ethnic lines. This is what is known as ethnic homogeneity in American gangs. In short, that gangs form strictly across racial and ethnic categories (black, white, Asian, Hispanic gangs) and that there is little or no mixing along race and ethnicity. In this regard, the formation of gangs in America is a manifestation of the continuity of racial polarization and ethnic conflicts in America which pitches black against white, white against Asian, Hispanic against white, and so on. The racial fragmentation of America is the reason some join the gangs to resist the oppression of their group by other ethnic groups. The argument is also made that these same ethnic and racial conflicts are re-created along racial and ethnic lines in the correctional systems and prisons across the country where you have the black white, Asian, Hispanic gangs operating separately in the prison environment and offering protection to its members.

One can also look at the gang problem along racial and ethnic lines in terms of political resistance and the fight against oppression (political and economic). In the case of blacks, the gang is seen by some as a means to free black people politically and economically from the yoke of white oppression; to set up the black nation. On the part of white gangs, the center of their belief is to resist the central government’s attempts to integrate and include blacks and other minorities into the society by expanding welfare and affirmative action programs. This may explain why the KKK, Aryan Brotherhood, Vice Lords, Latin Kings, Black gangster and the Skinheads will sometimes march against blacks during black history month and the celebration of Martin Luther King holiday. In the end, what we glean from the chapter is that the pervasiveness of social injustice, racism, and discrimination can all be linked to gang activities in America. That when a group perceives a sense of oppression, it can mobilize itself to fight and ward off that oppression and injustices by establishing a gang to enable them deal with the subjugation, alienation, and marginalization.
Certainly, this thesis will argue that the period of the 1960s and 1970s that saw an increase in gang activities across urban America also coincided with the agitation by blacks, immigrants, Asians, and women for social justice in America. It was also during this time that the white supremacists also organized their members to fight the government and its plans to integrate schools, the workplace, and promote equity in all aspects of American life. For white groups, the affirmation of blacks, immigrants, and minority groups including women meant the loss of white privilege and power.

Gangs and the Urban Underclass and the Notion of Surplus Population

This is a general explanation of gang/crime behavior. Rather than give you a specific theorist associated with this perspective, I will simply describe the general gist of the theory.

The idea of underclass is not a new concept in Sociology. The concept of permanent urban underclass as some sociologists use that term may refer predominantly to America’s urban poor, mainly minorities who live in the core centers where they are confronted with a host of social, cultural, economic and political problems. These problems include the following:

1. living in substandard housing, densely crowded, mainly minority
2. high rates of youth and adult unemployment above national average
3. rapid neighborhood changes and transitions; population transient
4. lack of a sense of community, lack of a sense of belongingness
5. father-absence; high levels of welfare dependency, single parenthood
6. hi levels of crime, gun violence common, gang behavior common
7. poor social services, including recreational facilities
8. for a majority of the underclass, the American dream is an illusion
9. school dropout is common, drug proliferation
10. Most of the people are locked out of the American dream
11. The out-migration of jobs have decimated the urban economy
12. Jobs that provided middle class wages in the 1960-1990 have been replaced by service oriented jobs in these areas

Some sociologists argue that it is the confluence of these factors that have caused the high rate of gang and crime behavior in America during the past 3 or 4 decades. The crux of the issue is that there are remnants of social and economic inequality in the urban areas of America. When there have been periods of economic boom, some of these large
predominantly minority communities have been by-passed. They don’t get to share in the wealth creation on Wall Street. During economic downturns, these groups of Americans are the first to lose their jobs, become homeless, or suffer from chronic discrimination. These persons occupy the lowest strata of American society and as such are usually not given the same kind of political attention that other more powerful groups receive.

Urban renewal schemes have helped significantly in changing the landscape of many large urban communities across the USA. Programs to revitalize and re-gentrification of dilapidated urban structures have helped a lot. In addition, neighborhood revival and refurbishment of abandoned structures also helped. A multi-agency approach involving government and private resources are helping to rejuvenate some of these areas. Tax free zones, job training, welfare reform, housing schemes, creation of healthy recreational programs for the youth, and stay-in-school programs have reduced the number of drop outs in most these communities.

The question that some have raised is that this group we are talking about constitute a surplus population. From a conflict sociologists’ point of view, the plight of the underclass is caused by the economic policies of the propertied and capital class. The idea here is that the policies of the politically and economically well connected have left the underclass impoverished by the low paying wages that poor people receive for their labor, denial of credit for home improvements in these areas due to high crime rates and bank redlining policies that withholds investments in these communities.

Robert Merton’s Theory of Anomie (Means-Goals Theory)

Merton’s theory posits that the explanation of crime can be found in the disharmony or the gap between culturally prescribed goals and culturally prescribed means for their attainment. Criminal and by extension gang behavior may be attributed to the perceived sense of deprivation and inability to meet socially desirable goals or ends. When people form goals and discover that they lack the institutionally or culturally prescribed resources or avenues to attain those goals, they may innovate, improvise or find alternate albeit socially unapproved ways and means to obtain or achieve those goals. In so doing they violate the normative belief system of
society as to people ought to conform. One way to look at this explanation then is to say that for people who join gangs, one possibility might be that they have failed in the legitimate or legal culture of society. They have failed to use institutionally prescribe means or ways to reach their goals because of their perception that they lack the resources or opportunities to make them realize their goals or dream. From a Mertonian perspective, a gang culture is merely an illegal way or means utilized by gang members to reach economic goals and/or the achievement of the American dream. Merton distinguished among what he called five modes of adaptation. These are conformist, innovation, ritualist, rebellion and retreatist. Take any standard sociology or criminology textbook and you will find these adaptations mentioned and discussed. Look it up on your own, including a critique of anomie theory.

Differential Association Theory (Learning Theory) and Gang Behavior

The theory of differential association (DA) was developed by Edwin Sutherland. The theory uses a social learning approach to explain the causes of delinquent, deviant, criminal, and by extension gang behavior. The gist or central thrust of this theory is that crime is a learned behavior which we learn the same way we learn other types or forms of human behavior. According to Sutherland, the learning of criminality occurs within intimate human social groups through the processes of communication, interaction, and exchange. That the learning of criminality consists in the learning of the skills, values, skills, motives, drives, urges, rationalizations needed to commit the crime. Differential association theory states further that the learning to become a criminal may vary according to frequency, intensity, duration, and priority. Criminals, Sutherland believed, define the legal norm or the legal code either as favorable or unfavorable. The main principle of the theory is that a person becomes delinquent or criminal due to an excess of definitions favorable to law violation over definitions unfavorable to violation of law.

When applied to gang behavior, we can see that DA theory has some relevance. DA theory will argue that gang members teach their criminal values to the youth of society. That they culturally share with the gang recruits the values and rationalizations that are associated with a criminal lifestyle. To some gang members, knowledge about criminal behaviors are culturally transmitted and learned among the peer group subculture that youths function in. That is where they learn the performance structures and the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting within the contexts of gang
subculture. Knowledge about how to carry out specific gang crimes are actually taught to new members or as the new members associate with more seasoned gang leaders and members. In some cases, DA theorists will argue that in some families, gang proclivities are inter-generational transmitted from one generation of siblings to the next. For youths who are impressionable, the status, roles, economic benefits, and psychological support that they derive from gang organizations can be said to be a learned trait that is acquired through associational interactions.