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Sociology of crime and deviance
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5. Social Ecology

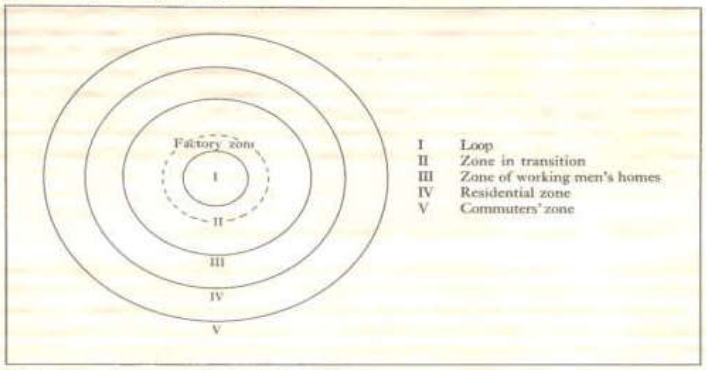
5.1 Introduction

In the 1930s, a branch of urban sociology, often referred to as the Chicago School of human ecology, opened up a new approach to explaining crime. This school grew from the ideas of Robert Park, who suggested there were parallels between communities of humans and those of plants and animals. Park adopted some of his central concepts from biology. A city comprised several natural areas with characteristics blended from their ethnic composition, socio-economic make-up, and physical surroundings. A web of symbiotic relationships operated within and between these areas, and together they represented a super-organism, the city.

Patterns of change in the city paralleled changes in the balance of nature. They were influenced by economic competition for space, and the urban environment was affected by a process of invasion, dominance and succession. Park viewed the human population in American cities as being migratory, rather than fixed. New immigrants would move into the poor areas, replacing the previous inhabitants who were moving out. The latter were leaving partly because their economic standing had improved, enabling them to afford better accommodation, but also to escape the increasing dominance of the newcomers.

Burgess found that the city showed a tendency for radial expansion, in which a pattern of concentric circles moved outward. He described the areas within the circle as 'zones' and illustrated them in the form of a chart (see Fig 2).

Fig 2: *The growth of the city*



(Source: Park, Burgess and McKenzie (1925:51))

Zone I was the central business district, where heavy industry and commerce were situated. Zone II was seen as a zone in transition, being invaded by industry and commercial usage from the core. Housing in this zone was allowed to deteriorate and the poorest city dwellers would be drawn there. The names given to the other zones are self-explanatory.

The notion of concentric city growth was challenged by some contemporaries of the social ecologists. However, even supporters of the ecological approach accepted that the zonal hypothesis represented an ideal scheme to which no city would quite conform. Physical barriers, whether natural (eg rivers) or man-made (eg railway lines) would affect the growth pattern of a particular city.

5.2 Research by the Chicago School

Two members of the Chicago School, Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay developed the ecological model, using it as the basis for a wide-ranging study of juvenile delinquency in Chicago and other American cities. For Chicago, they divided the city into 140 areas of one square mile each, and mapped the residences of recorded delinquents. They also divided Chicago into concentric zones and calculated the percentage of the juvenile population resident in the areas and zones.

The findings of Shaw and McKay suggested that community problems were concentrated close to the centre of the city. The highest rates of delinquent residence were found close to the city's central core, and rates declined radially. The highest rates occurred in areas where buildings were in decay, where economic status was lowest, and where there were greater concentrations of recently arrived families. Similar results were found in other American cities, and subsequent research in Chicago indicated that delinquency areas persisted over time .

Racial factors, taken independently of area, were not considered to be significant. Even when the population changed, crime remained concentrated in the same areas, at a similar level to before.

5.3 Social disorganisation and cultural transmission

In addition to the role of urban form, social ecology has another important element, in which levels of delinquency are influenced by social disorganisation. The process of invasion, dominance and succession is said to lead to a breakdown of social equilibrium. There is an absence of control over the behaviour of the young. At the same time, however, criminal attitudes and behaviour are said to be passed on through cultural transmission. Opportunities to steal preponderate. There is a continuity of contact with other delinquents and a tendency to pass down criminal techniques. The effectiveness of such contact is enhanced by an absence of training and encouragement towards lawful activity.

A major weakness of the ecological stance is that, having suggested that social disorganisation and subcultural methods of transmitting behaviour can co-exist, Shaw and McKay do not describe how this is possible. Furthermore, they do not explain how these two apparently conflicting concepts interact. Surely cultural transmission demands a degree of social organisation if it is to be successful? That paradox is all the more unfortunate since Brantingham and Jeffery suggest that by concluding that 'proximity to industry and commerce was really a proxy for the less directly measurable social variable, social disorganisation', Shaw and McKay placed too little emphasis on the spatial factors in their own findings .

5.4 Methodological limitations of the Chicago School

research Shaw and his colleagues relied quite heavily on officially recorded data, especially court records, and they have been criticised for this (eg Robison, 1936). As we have seen, the reliability of

official statistics has long been questioned. Hence, Shaw's results may reflect inaccuracies in his data. Robison also questioned the use of a legal definition of delinquency, as sociologists often regard this as an inadequate test of deviant behaviour. A straightforward response to both criticisms is that official statistics and definitions represent an important starting point and a 'practical source' in the absence of more reliable data. Robison pointed out that the mile square areas studied by Shaw and others were not necessarily related to natural neighbourhoods. This is a fair comment. Shaw and McKay recognised the difficulties of using such large areas, but adopted them to reduce 'fluctuations resulting from chance'. However, some British research suggests that such an approach might also hide real differences. Rather than adhere to a city-wide analysis, some researchers have taken a more microscopic view of particular areas, and discovered notable differences in delinquency levels between apparently similar council estates (Jones, 1958; Baldwin, 1975), and even between neighbouring streets (Jephcott and Carter, 1954). British research has also provided a new perspective on various aspects of the Chicago School's work.

5.5 British area studies

Research in Britain has given rise to a certain amount of reserved support for the Chicago School's central theme. For example, in his survey of Croydon, Morris (1957) found that the central business district was a black spot, with 25 per cent of crimes occurring within a quarter of a mile of the town centre. Three of the four wards with the highest concentration of offenders' residences and the worst housing, bordered on the central business district. However, the support given is qualified. Morris questions the significance of his own findings, and suggests that an area's physical characteristics are relevant only insofar as they indirectly determine its social status. Thus a deteriorating area may attract, rather than breed, individuals with social problems. The London study of Wallis and Maliphant (1967) found a high correlation between delinquency, and poverty and overcrowding but, on the other hand, these areas of high delinquency did not correspond significantly with areas plagued by other social problems, such as high rates of divorce and suicide. The 'delinquency areas' were substantially the same as those in a study 40 years earlier.

More recent research has indicated a failure by the Chicago School to fully exploit two important factors. For example, Shaw (1931) recognised that some delinquents travel to commit offences but this tendency was left unexplored. Furthermore, the ecologists did not differentiate between areas of crime commission, and areas of criminal residence. They also seem to have underestimated the importance of opportunities for crime. The differential distribution of criminal opportunities might explain the high concentration of crimes within the central business district.

Throughout the Chicago literature, the areas of highest delinquent residence are found in decaying, inner-city areas. In keeping with the ecological analogy, this is accepted as a natural phenomenon. British research again suggests the need for modification. Although such research has found delinquency areas within the inner city it has also revealed a different feature, that is, high concentrations of delinquent residents in council-owned housing estates. Building patterns throughout much of the United Kingdom have meant that new estates are frequently built on the edges of towns rather than on cleared slum sites in the heart of the city. To a degree, the problem estate has replaced the ghetto as a crime area. The zonal hypothesis needs to be altered, or possibly forgotten.

The picture drawn in Britain indicates the importance of housing policy. Clearly, moving tenants from slum areas to satellite estates does not cure delinquency. Indeed, there is some suggestion that a policy of segregation by some housing authorities perpetuates the existence of delinquency areas. A

study in Glasgow suggested that delinquency follows the migrating residents rather than staying in an area as Shaw had suggested .

The phenomenon of selective migration clouds the picture further. Put simply, it appears that 'birds of a feather flock together', thus creating pockets of delinquency. Migration will not always be a matter of choice, since some families will be drawn to poorer areas by low rents. Thus the overall picture may be affected by policy, personal preference, and economic necessity.

British research has provided a mixed assessment of the relevance of social disorganisation in contributing to levels of delinquency. Wallis and Maliphant (1967) thought it was significant, but considered that social disorganisation varied in the distribution of its factors and its effects between communities. Jones (1958) argued that the higher the mobility of residents on housing estates, the greater the degree of social disorganisation because opportunities to establish effective relationships and control were diminished. He claimed to find a positive relationship between mobility and delinquency.

Bagley (1965) claimed that the lack of social facilities increased delinquency. Baldwin and Bottoms (1976) have pointed out that neither Jones' nor Bagley's claims were corroborated by empirical data. Their own research, in Sheffield, found no significant link between social disorganisation and delinquency, except (and this was unexplained) on private housing estates.

Morris questions whether social disorganisation exists in working class areas, arguing instead that the working class have their own culture and an alternative organisation. Morris is right in suggesting that erroneous findings of social disorganisation can result from applying middle class norms to working class areas, but seems at times to fall into a similar trap by relying on stereotypical images of the working class.

5.6 Concluding comments about area studies of crime

The discussion above indicates that British research shows a need to modify the conclusions drawn by the Chicago School. Some difficulties reflect variations in urban composition between the two countries but, as we have seen, others are of greater significance.

Certain criticisms concern inadequacies of theory. In defence of the Chicago School, it is submitted that some of these criticisms are unfair. For example, Davidson (1981) describes the ecologists as being weak on theory. It appears, however, that Shaw and his collaborators never set out to be strong on theory.

Ecological analyses do not purport to provide a causal explanation in themselves. Morris stresses their importance 'as a method of calculating the contingency of delinquency'. Area studies present the sociologists with 'information but not explanation'. It is important to recognise them as providing a means to an end, by highlighting the areas in which a researcher might profitably pursue more sophisticated enquiry.