

CMY3701 essay/summary of the Chicago school for 15 marks

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C. Deyzel

The Chicago school – Social disorganisation (15 marks)

This is a summary of the Chicago school, including my own examples; I used these as my own exam preparation and managed to obtain a distinction. Please do not submit this essay as an assignment, there are direct quotes from the study guide. Use these for exam revision ONLY.

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1. Introduction

In the first half of the 20th Century a group of sociologists at the University of Chicago undertook research into the structure of the city of Chicago and the social and cultural forms that had developed in this city. The social disorganisation theory developed as a result of their findings. Maps were drawn to plot regional patterns of crime, compare rural and urban differences and survey the relationship between crime and other socioeconomic conditions.

2. Definition of a key concept

2.2 Social disorganisation

Social disorganisation refers to the breakdown or serious dilution of the power of informal community rules to regulate conduct in poor neighbourhoods.

3. The Chicago school of sociology

Tierney highlights the assumptions of the Chicago school as follows:

- i. Crime and crime rates were viewed as social phenomena and could not be explained in terms of the individual's biology or psychology.
- ii. Crime was linked to social disorganisation, by which they meant that family and community-based bonds had been weakened. Low levels of social disorganisation were associated with high levels of crime.
- iii. It was the social life of certain neighbourhoods that was seen as pathological and not the people living in these neighbourhoods. *The social structure in poor communities ultimately determines the crime rate.* Criminal behaviour was regarded as a normal response to an abnormal situation.
- iv. There should be government intervention to improve the basis of social organisation in the city's criminal neighbourhoods. *The government can implement prevention strategies such as support groups, community centres and by creating job opportunities*

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3.1 Robert Park

The starting point for the Chicago school was Robert Park's theory of human ecology. Park argued that the development of urban areas was shaped by certain patterns of social processes. Different kinds of human beings share the same environment and are dependent on each other. The urban environment can therefore be examined in a scientific way, through the careful and detailed observation of social life in different parts of the city. *For example in one part of the city certain behaviours may be seen as acceptable, whereas in other parts the same behaviour may not be seen as acceptable.* By comparing the results of such observations, one can establish causal explanations of crime.

3.2 Ernest Burgess

Ernest Burgess produced a model of the city that provided a framework for understanding the social roots of crime. He argued that as cities expand in size the development is patterned socially; cities grow in series of concentric zones. Burgess outlined five different zones and claimed that a competitive process decided how people were distributed spatially. Commercial enterprises were located in the Central Business District, the most expensive residential areas were in the outer zones and the "zone in transition" – containing rows of deteriorating houses and often built in the shadow of ageing factories – was the particular focus of Burgess's study. As the least desirable living area, this zone in transition was the focus for the influx of immigrants who were too poor to reside elsewhere. Burgess observed that these social patterns weakened family and communal ties and resulted in social disorganisation and was therefore seen as the primary explanation of criminal behaviour. *For example the urban areas and informal settlements such as Diepsloot.*

4. Social disorganisation theory

Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay set about statistically testing the assumption that crime was greater in disorganised areas than elsewhere in the city. They focused in particular on delinquents and on the zone in transition, which is characterised by low rents and deteriorating buildings. They argued that the diverse and rapidly changing population led to social disorganisation. *The poor conditions of the environment can't create proper social control (by residents)*

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Shaw and McKay's findings were as follows:

- i. Delinquency rates were highest in run-down inner-city zones.
- ii. Delinquency rates declined progressively the further one moved out into the more wealthier suburbs
- iii. The concentration of delinquents was found to persist over long periods of time, despite the fact that the composition of the population living in the area changed frequently over time.

These findings enabled Shaw and McKay to conclude that delinquency was the product of the sociological factors within the transition zone rather than individual pathology or any inherent ethnic characteristic. For example the poverty and the high immigrant rates are factors that lead to crime/delinquency. They went on to claim that socially disorganised neighbourhoods tended to produce "criminal traditions" that could be passed on in play of groups and gangs. The pro-delinquency system in disorganised environments is more likely to be both conducive to and supportive of delinquent and criminal behaviour.

5. Conclusion

Please provide own conclusion. Remember to indicate that this is your opinion, for example "this student is of the opinion that..." This is what you think about the theory. This is not a summary of your essay.