American And Subcultural Theories On The Cause Of Juvenile Criminality

Within cultures, there are small groups of people that share similar norms, values, and interests which make up subcultures. A definition of the subculture is the lower and deviant status of social groups labelled as this. These labelled groupings are distinguished by their class, ethnicity, language, poor and working-class situations (Cutler, 2006); age or generation (Maira, 1999). In both America and Britain, the concept of subculture is an extremely important tool for sociologists and criminologists to understand and deter deviant behaviour. The term ‘subculture’ was coined in America by the Chicago school in the 1940; and expanded by Albert Cohen where he developed a ‘deviant subculture’. The study of subculture was widened to Britain in the 1970’s where Birmingham University used it to engage with youth culture. Subculture theories seek to explain why groups of young people commit and participate in crime. There are a variety of different theories on the cause of juvenile criminality. As well as significant difference between American and theories on subculture and the cause of delinquency. In this essay I will compare the American and subcultural theories on the cause of juvenile criminality.

American subcultural theorist Albert Cohen (1955) developed the deviant subculture in his work, ‘Delinquent boys’. Cohen notices that delinquent subcultures offer a solution for many youths. Cohen saw juvenile criminality as a reaction formation to status frustration, which emerges when youths reject the values of mainstream society and develop a counter-culture. This occurs as a result of lower socio-economic families struggling to gain success and statues within society. Cohen focuses on working class boys due to most delinquents being male. In which he identified disadvantaged backgrounds, resulting is academic failure. Working class boys have an inability to achieve status and success, which in order to achieve these bring them to be involved in juvenile criminality. Society produces tension and frustration which results in the breaking of cultural norms that may lead to deviance (Merton, 1968). Deviant subcultures see crime as praiseworthy and a positive way of recognition rather than accepting the mainstream values that crime is a negative. Within delinquent boys, Cohen identifies several main characteristics of delinquent subcultures. These include non-utilitarian, malice, negativism, short term hedonism, versatility and group autonomy . By determining these characteristics Cohen argued delinquent subcultures challenged dominant middle-class values; values such as deferred pleasure, ambition and achievement. The irrational, malicious, non-utilitarian behaviour of delinquent boys is a case of reaction formation; they reject in an exaggerated fashion any remnants of middle-class values (Cullen and Wilcox, 2010). Therefore, Cohen sees the cause of juvenile criminality as a youth’s reaction to the lack of success and status they have within society.

On the other hand, sociologist Peter Wilmott (1967) used Cohens status frustration theory to conduct his own research into Adolescent Boys in East London. Wilmott rejects Cohens theory as he found that these adolescent boys were not unhappy with their lives and there was no sense of status frustration. There is limited evidence of Cohen’s subcultural values within the East London Adolescents, rather Wilmott related delinquency to having fun and a shared sense of belonging. Wilmott theorised that these adolescents partake in juvenile criminality as they looked for pleasure and excitement. These deviant behaviours do not correlate to the norms

and values that the adolescent boys follow. As Wilmott identifies a clear value system amongst them, for example they do not steal from friends. He found that they are able to identify between right and wrong behaviour and know which behaviours are deemed morally wrong, however endeavour in these activities out of boredom. Adolescent boys can follow norms and values of mainstream society, however, can disobey them when they find themselves bored. In which, adolescents use criminality as a cure. In the American Subcultural theory, Cohen strongly suggests that juvenile criminality in the US is due to being unable to achieve status and success. Thus, criminality is a way that these can be achieved. However, in contrast Wilmott argues that juvenile criminality in the UK is due to boredom among youths. Wilmott argues that juvenile criminality is seen to be more of a hobby for fun and excitement (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1993) rather than to achieve success and recognition which opposes the American subculture theory.