Evaluation of Neoclassical Theories

Critics of neoclassical theories complain about the overemphasis on the rationality of human beings and criticize the theories for ignoring the social conditions that may make it rational for some to engage in crime (Curran & Renzetti, 2001, p. 21). We do need to understand what turns some people into “motivated offenders,” that is, what it is that makes some of us willing to expend one resource (our potential loss of freedom) to attain another (the fruits of crime). Many of us don’t spend our resources all that wisely because of a tendency to favor immediate gain over long-term consequences, and we would like to know why some of us more strongly favor immediate gain than others.

In response, neoclassical theorists might insist that they do not assume a model of “pure” rationality; rather, they assume a limited rationality constrained by ability, knowledge, and time (Cornish & Clarke, 1986, p. 1). These theories do not claim to explore the role of outside forces in producing criminals, but rather they explore criminal events with the purpose of trying to prevent them. They seek to deny the motivated offender the opportunity to commit a crime by target hardening. Additionally, the notion that individuals are responsible for their own actions meshes well with American values. If this assumption “grants society permission” (Williams & McShane, 2004, p. 242) to punish criminals who make purposeful decisions to flout the law, then so be it, for the act of punishment presupposes free human beings and thus dignifies them.

Policy and Prevention: Implications of Neoclassical Theories

If you were the kind of motivated rational criminal assumed by neoclassical theorists, what sorts of questions would you ask yourself at the potential crime site before you made your decision to commit the crime or not? We bet that among them would be “Is there a quick way out of the area after the job is done?” “How vulnerable are the targets (is the car unlocked, is the door open, is the girl alone)?” “What are my chances of being seen by people in the area?” “If people in this area do see me, do they look likely to do something about it?” The policy implications of neoclassical theories boil down to trying to arrange things to make criminals’ choice structuring as difficult as possible, such that criminals will dissuade themselves from committing crimes.

Rational choice and routine activities theories thus shift the policy focus from large and costly social programs, such as antipoverty programs, to target hardening. They shift attention away from policies designed to change offenders’ attitudes and behavior toward making it more difficult and more costly for them to offend. Examples of target hardening include antitheft devices on automobiles, the use of vandal-resistant materials on public property, improved city lighting, surveillance cameras in stores and at public gathering places, check guarantee cards, banning the sale of alcohol at sporting events, neighborhood watches, and curfews for teenagers.

Environmental design is primarily concerned with defensible space, defined as “a model for residential environments which inhibit crime by creating the physical expression of a social fabric that defends itself” (Newman, 1972, p. 3). It endeavors to bring people together into a tribe-like sense of community by designing the physical environment so as to awaken the human sense of territoriality. The best possible physical environment for the growth of crime is the large barracks-like blocks of apartments with few entrances, few private spaces, and few demarcation barriers that say, “This space is mine.” Families must be given back a sense of
ownership, for if everything is “owned” in common (elevators, walkways and staircases, balconies, grass and shrubberies), then no one takes care of it and it deteriorates rapidly. Streets must be blocked off, both to generate a sense of belonging to “my special little neighborhood” and so that criminals cannot easily access or escape them.

**Summary**

- The classical school of criminology began during the Enlightenment with the work of Cesare Beccaria, whose aim was to reform an arbitrary and cruel system of criminal justice.
- Jeremy Bentham, best known for his concept of the hedonistic calculus, was another leading figure. The hedonistic calculus summarized the classical notion of human nature as hedonistic, rational, and possessing free will.
- The positivist school aimed at substituting the methods of science for the armchair philosophizing of the classicists; i.e., they sought measurable causes of behavior.
- The cartographic criminologists such as Geurry, Quetelet, Mayhew, and Fletcher were among the first positivists. These scholars studied maps and statistics to pinpoint where and when crime was most likely to occur.
- Cesare Lombroso is widely considered the father of criminology. His work was much influenced by evolutionary thought as he understood it. Lombroso saw criminals as atavistic “throwbacks” to an earlier evolutionary period who could be identified by a number of bodily stigmata.
- Other early positivists included Raffael Garofalo and Enrico Ferri. Garofalo was interested in developing a “natural” definition of crime and in generating categories of criminals for the purpose of determining what should be done with them. Ferri was instrumental in formulating the concept of social defense as the only justification for punishment.
- Neoclassical theories reemerged in the form of rational choice and routine activities theories in the 1970s. These theories assume that humans are rational and self-seeking, although rationality is bounded by knowledge levels and thinking abilities. They downplay personal and background factors that influence choices in favor of analyzing the processes leading to offenders’ choices to offend.
- Routine activities theory looks at a criminal event as a motivated offender meeting a suitable target lacking a capable guardian. These ideas show how crime rates can go up or down, without a change in the prevalence of motivated offenders, by increasing or decreasing suitable targets and capable guardians.

**EXERCISES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. If humans are primarily motivated by the hedonistic calculus, is simple deterrence the answer to the crime problem?
2. What advantages (or disadvantages) does positivism offer us over classicism?