URBAN DECAY AND EXISTENTIAL CHOICE: SARTRE'S PHILOSOPHICAL EXPANSION OF SOCIAL DISORGANISATION THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Studies are never left with one final conclusion as to why an individual commits a crime. For criminology theories are bound to explore all the circumstances of how one decides to do an unlawful act. Very much so, that the most prominent factor is the external factor. This would include the conditions and routines of its neighbourhood. Consequently, it is to be argued that dysfunctions in society such as poverty and discrimination would result in a high crime rate. This is due to the fact that the existence of inconsistency and instability on the condition of the neighbourhood had put strain which caused a collapse of social control. As Shaw and Mckay (1942) emphasised that delinquency is a normal response by normal people to abnormal social conditions in disorganised neighbourhoods. While so, some philosophers would argue that this criminology theory may be resolved or even debunked. Numbers of philosophical theory, one of which is existentialist, argued that individuals are prevented from following society's behaviour by acknowledging that they are a free man. But what is a free man? How does it explain social disorganisation theory? How could existentialists develop the social disorganisation theory? This paper will explore arguments as well as rendezvous towards Shaw and Mckay's social disorganisation theory with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism philosophical view.

Keywords: *Society, Free, Crime, Existentialism*

INTRODUCTION

During the early 1920s, two leading sociologists, Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess proposed the understanding on the foundations of deviant and criminal behaviours. They believed that individuals are likely to engage in illegal activities when living in or near to densely populated urban areas through an ecological framework which they called the concentric zone theory (Park and Burgess, 1925). The zone of transition, to which are designated for industrial manufacturing purposes and low house income residents particularly to those of the African American race were concluded to have a high crime rates related to alcoholism, prostitutions, and violence (Park, Burgess & McKenzie, 1925). However, Park and Burgess' concentric zone model failed to inquire into a deeper analysis as to why the transition zones are dominated with a high crime rate. They did not identify the conceptual importance of operationalising and measuring macro-level social controls. This founding thus contributed to the study of Shaw and

McKay in which they developed the Social Disorganisation Theory (1942).[1] The social disorganisation theory is a criminology theory that explains how when once a crime is spread throughout the neighbourhood, criminal norms and values that compete with normative values are thus automatically transmitted through culture and routines. This theory suggests that individuals are influenced by society to commit crime, as if they are determined to do so because they live in such an area. However, a philosophical view put forward by Jean Paul Sartre (1943) would argue that humans are free mankind. With that being said, an existentialist submits an understanding that individuals are bound to make their own choices in actions, let alone being determined to commit crime due to being culturally influenced by the society which surrounds them. Yet it is a misconception to say that Sartre's existentialism does not believe in the existence of the correlation between crimes and society. In his work, No Exit (1946), it is depicted that 'the others' may take the power away from individuals to live life as they wish. In short, humans are controlled by society ('the other')'s doings and views on them under the circumstances that these individuals are not aware of how free they are to completely ignore 'the others'. [2]

DISCUSSIONS

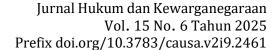## PHILOSOPHY AS AN INTERDISCPLINARY SUBJECT TO CRIMINOLOGY

Over the years, legal scholars have discovered that criminal law was not merely a set of rules but rather a reflection of collective moral beliefs and on how one perceived their life to be. As so, criminology further noted that criminal behaviour is often the complex result of personal, social as well as psychological factors to which relates to how one requires a philosophical reflection on their morality. Furthermore, Beccaria (1764) mentioned that the role of free will and rational choice, which is tied closely to philosophy, becomes the basis of punishment in the legal system. For instance, with the philosophical theory of determinism (Sapolsky, 2023), punishment must focus more on rehabilitating people than vengeance. This would also relate to how the state must establish a criminal justice system to which upholds utilitarianism for the purpose of 'the benefit for all', in this case the society.

JEAN PAUL SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM

One of Sartre's most significant ideas is "existence precedes essence" which simply means first man exists and then he can explain himself. Unlike other existentialist philosophers who pursue religious matters such as Kierkegaard, Sartre's atheistic existentialism asserted that there is no human nature in the world because there is no God to which sets human nature. Initially, mankind is born empty, but soon seeks and obtains things through actions that make himself according to his own will. Despite the freedom a man holds in their life, Sartre reminds them that free people must also take responsibility for their own existence and for all their actions. Freedom is unarguable, but must our action be done with the basis of universal human condition; consequently, virtue. As said, "Rightness is never wholly subjective: it is not a matter of mere arbitrary opinion or conviction; it is the revelation in consciousness of the superior moral worth of one of the two competing impulses. But for the presence of moral quality, there would be no moral estimate; and superior moral worth always carries with it

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[1] Steenbeek, W., & Hipp, J. R. (2011). A longitudinal test of social disorganization theory: Feedback effects between cohesion, social control and disorder. *Criminology, 49*(3), 833-871. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5vm4z6kd

[2] Sartre, J.P. (1952) In: Stuart, G., (ed). *No exit or in camera*. London: Hamish Hamilton Press.

authority or command, which is objective and not merely subjective. And 'Objective Rightness' is also misleading. There is no rightness in an act *per se* or its result, apart from the motive of the agent" (A.C. Mitra; Elements of Morals).[3] In other words, an act must be seen right subjectively by the people; and must produce the right result in terms of conditions.

Furthermore, Sartre also adds upon the concept of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) or factitious.[4] Sartre uses this term to describe the condition when mankind tries to deceive themselves in acknowledging that they are free. Subsequently, Sartre's bad faith has two principal forms: 1) when one denies freedom or any transcendence factor; and 2) when one ignores the factual dimension of every situation. For instance, the excuse of "I have no other choice" is one way to establish a bad faith. Although Sartre once mentioned that "in a time of helplessness, murderous rampage is the collective unconscious of the colonised" (Sartre *Preface* 52), there is no true definition of helplessness.[5] Instead, it was clear that Sartre said even in times of overwhelming external circumstances, freedom can never be abolished. Additionally, Sartre's view emphasises that radical freedom must be paired with radical responsibility—even in war, where choices are extremely constrained, freedom cannot be entirely escaped.[6]

 Lastly, Sartre discusses the issue of 'the others'. Sartre mentioned "over and over how other people can condemn us, define us, withhold love from us, murder us – in short, take the power away from us to live life as we wish" (Bentley, 1962, p. 76).[7] In Sartre's work, *No Exit* (1946), the story depicts that there was an absence of mirrors. This absence is significant as it tries to give a situation of how the characters are not able to see themselves with an object. Thus, they are forced to see themselves through other people's impressions about them. Consequently, this psychological view tries to describe how when others look at them, the meaning of oneself may be completely different. This makes man to be an object through the look of others (Gerassi, 1989, p. 22).[8] In this play, the others refuse to see the image that each character wants to be noted. Therefore, the look becomes the instrument of torture for each one. As such, the experience of torture makes people realise that they are completely alone and responsible for any decision they may take.

SHAW AND MCKAY'S SOCIAL DISORGANISATION THEORY

Fundamentally, Shaw and McKay's original research tries to map crime rates in Chicago across decades. They discovered that the crime remained concentrated in specific neighbourhood, most significantly those dominated by poverty, population turnover as well as ethnic heterogeneity (Shaw & McKay, 1929, 1942).[9] As such, it was concluded that environmental factors which focus on society are one to be the influential reason behind these crime rates. Additionally, modern studies replicate Shaw and McKay's findings to a wider scope; globally.

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[3] Khan, A. (2021, July). *Ethical relativism vs absolutism*. Aligarh Muslim University.

[4] Henricks: Jean-Paul Sartre: The Bad Faith of Empire http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol6/iss1/7
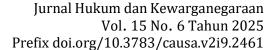
[5] Van den Hoven, Adrian, Leak, Andrew (2005) Sartre Today. A Centenary Celebration. Berghahn Books New York, USA.

[6] *ibid*

[7] Mahdi, S. M. (2020). Hell being other people in Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit*. *Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (KUJHSS)*, *3*(1), 132–136. https://doi.org/10.14500/kujhss.v3n1y2020.pp132-136

[8] *ibid*

[9] Kubrin, C. E. (2010). Shaw, Clifford R., and Henry D. McKay: Social disorganization theory. In F. T. Cullen & P. Wilcox (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of criminological theory* (pp. 4). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n276

For instance, it was found, using a 10–year longitudinal dataset, that on 74 neighbourhoods with higher stability, socioeconomic status and ethnic homogeneity in Netherlands show a pattern of a stronger social control and lower disorder than those of having lower stability, poverty, and vast numbers of illegal immigrants.[10]

The findings made by Shaw and McKay is a development; a continuation to the research found by Burgess in 1925. The Burgess Concentric Zone Model, developed by Ernest Burgess, explains urban land use and social structures through a series of concentric rings radiating from the central business district (CBD). The city is divided into five zones: the CBD, the transition zone, the working-class residential zone, the middle-class residential zone, and the commuter zone.[11] The transition zone, located just outside the CBD, is characterised by deteriorating housing, factories, and a high mix of residents, including immigrants and marginalized groups. This area consistently experiences the highest crime rates due to several factors: economic instability and poverty, high residential mobility that prevents stable community ties, population diversity that sometimes leads to cultural and language barriers, and deteriorating infrastructure. These conditions weaken social bonds and informal social controls, creating an environment of social disorganisation where traditional institutions and norms break down, allowing crime and deviance to flourish. However, what lacks from Burgess' studies was that there were no concrete data that explained so. As such, Shaw and McKay established the social disorganisation theory to complete Burgess' result of study.[12]

It is said that social cohesion and collective efficacy; of how neighbours are willing to intervene with one another for common good, mediates the relationship between structural disadvantages as well as crime rates. Consequently, areas with strong cohesion and acknowledging the importance of collective efficacy shows a lower crime rate. As such, it is expected that community-level factors such as local friendship networks, participation organisations, and peer groups control have the ability to reduce crime rates. The longitudinal analyses confirm feedback loops where disorder weakens social control and residential stability, which then raises disorder further, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. For instance, it was found based on the data in the UK and China to which confirm that economic disadvantage combined with weak social networks increases violent and property crimes.[13]

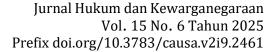## DEBATE OVER EXISTENTIALISM AND SOCIAL DISORGANISATION THEORY

Initially, Sartre's existentialism initiated the radical freedom as a fundamental characteristic of human existence. According to Sartre, even under oppressive or limiting social structures—such as marginalised, impoverished, or socially disorganised neighbourhoods—individuals possess the capacity to choose their actions freely and define themselves authentically. This freedom is not merely abstract but is lived through concrete choices that create one's essence

[10] Steenbeek, W., & Hipp, J. R. (2011, August 1). *A longitudinal test of social disorganization theory: Feedback effects among cohesion, social control, and disorder. Criminology, 49*(3), 833–871. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2011.00241.x

[11] Kubrin, C. E. (2010). Shaw, Clifford R., and Henry D. McKay: Social disorganization theory. In F. T. Cullen & P. Wilcox (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of criminological theory* (pp. 3). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n276

[12] Wickert, C. (2025, July 7). *Social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay)*. SozTheo. https://soztheo.com/theories-of-crime/space-surveillance/soziale-desorganisation-shaw-mckay/

[13] Mao, Z.-W., Wu, J., Zheng, Z., Sang, R., & Jin, C. (2023). An empirical study of social disorganization theory in China. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice, 74*, Article 100608. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2023.100608

in each moment[14]. As such, Sartre rejects any form of determinism or reductionism that would deny the individual's active role in shaping their identity and existence. He integrates this with a nuanced view of oppression, defining it as a dynamic interpersonal and institutional phenomenon where the oppressor tries to validate themselves by denying the freedom of the oppressed.[15] Yet, Sartre also underscores that oppression is a *historical and contestable* reality, not an inevitable or ontological condition, meaning individuals retain agency to resist and redefine their being even within oppressive contexts.

On the other hand, social disorganisation theory attributes variations in crime and delinquency primarily to environmental and structural factors.[16] As so, this theory argues that crime rates and social problems tend to be higher in neighbourhoods where social institutions have broken down. These conditions often include high unemployment, residential instability, poverty, and discrimination towards immigrants, which together inhibit social cohesion and the community's ability to exert informal social control. This environmental determinism suggests that the social environment heavily influences individual behaviour, limiting the capacity for social order and thus fostering crime as a community-level phenomenon rather than solely an individual failing.

Consequently, the debate between these two centers on the degree of individual agency versus environmental determinism. Social disorganisation theory tends to emphasise the constraining power of social structures and neighborhood context on behavior, implying that individuals are significantly shaped and restricted by their environments. This can risk denying or minimising individual responsibility by focusing on systemic and ecological causes of crime. Unlike Sartre's existentialism which holds the view that regardless of external constraints, individuals maintain full freedom to choose authentic existence, making individual agency inescapable even in adverse situations. However, Sartre's philosophy does not deny the reality or impact of social structures but contends that individuals' freedom to respond and transcend these limitations remains intact. Sartre thus navigates a middle path that recognises both structural oppression and personal freedom, offering a framework where social conditions matter but do not deterministically fix one's identity or choices.

SOLUTIONS

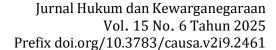## HOW EXISTENTIALISM MAY DEVELOP SOCIAL DISORGANISATION THEORY

It is to be acknowledged that—since criminology is a rendezvous subject of studies—it is not a mistake to take into account philosophy to enhance criminological theories. As such, there is a possibility that Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism may enhance Shaw and McKay's social disorganisation theory. Conclusively, Sartre's concept of *praxis* (reflective action) underscores that people make history through conscious negation as well as transformation of their given conditions.[17] Residents in disorganised neighbourhoods are not merely passive victims of social

[14] Wilson, J. (n.d.). *Jean-Paul Sartre: Existentialism*. In W. F. Reese (Ed.), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved September 12, 2014, from https://iep.utm.edu/sartre-ex/

[15] Elijah Akinbode. Jean-Paul Sartre's Existential Freedom: A Critical Analysis. International Journal of European Studies. Vol. 7, No. 1, 2023, pp. 16. doi: 10.11648/j.ijes.20230701.13

[16] *Section II: Social Disorganization Theory* [PDF lecture notes]. CriminalBehavior.com. Retrieved July 21, 2025, from https://www.criminalbehavior.com/Fall2009/Section%20II%20Social%20Disorganization.pdf

[17] Elveton, R. (2007, January 30). *Sartre, intentionality and praxis*. *Sens-Public*. Retrieved July 21, 2025, from http://www.sens-public.org/article.php3?id_article=361

forces but can creatively reinterpret and transcend their circumstances by acknowledging that they are free through making authentic choices even in constrained environments. This is said to be able to inspire community action, resistance to disorganisation, and the forging of collective efficacy from the ground up. Therefore, instead of seeing people in high-crime neighbourhoods only as victims of their environment and are determined to commit crime because so, this combined perspective insists that people still have the power to make meaningful choices—they can reclaim their freedom to act differently despite difficult circumstances.

Crime prevention then moves beyond just fixing neighbourhood problems (like reducing poverty or disorder) toward also empowering residents as individuals and as a community. This means supporting people to take personal and collective responsibility, make authentic decisions, and actively participate in improving their neighborhood—building genuine social bonds and "collective efficacy" (the shared willingness to keep the community safe). This is because the reason behind high crime rates in what is called the 'transition zone' (Burghess, 1925) is not merely about the society. More importantly, it is about how the individual chooses to commit crime.[18]
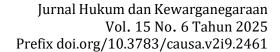
CONCLUSIONS

It is to be concluded that the correlation between social disorganisation theory and Sartre's existentialism provides a wider understanding of crime causation that neither perspective alone fully captures. While social disorganisation theory highlights how structural and environmental factors such as poverty, discrimination, and weakened social institutions foster conditions conducive to crime, Sartre's existentialism reminds us that individuals always own radical freedom to make authentic choices, even in oppressive or disorganised neighbourhoods. The understanding that social environments shape but do not determine behaviour invites a more comprehensive approach to crime prevention, one that addresses both improving community conditions and empowering individuals to assume responsibility for their actions. Therefore, by integrating existentialist philosophical views into social disorganisation theory, criminology can move beyond deterministic frameworks and promote *praxis*, to which individuals within marginalised communities actively resist and transform their circumstances. Conclusively, this synthesis affirms that while social context matters greatly, human freedom and moral responsibility remain central, underscoring the complex, multi-dimensional nature of crime and the possibilities for meaningful change in both personal and social realms.

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