Chapter 3
Can Theories of Crime be Applied to Cybercriminal Acts?

ABSTRACT

Theories of crime have been an important part of criminological literature for many years. Different theories address the issue of crime at various levels, ranging from societal, through community and socialisation influence theories, to the most specific level, individual theories. The aim of most of the theories of crime is to explain why crime occurs and who is most likely to engage in criminal acts, and as such they are an important element of developing a thorough understanding of the psychology of cybercrime. Many of the high level theories of crime are mainly sociological, geographical or political in scope, whereas theories of crime that consider socialisation and individual differences are those which are most suited to psychological discussion. Because of this, the current chapter will primarily focus on these types of theories of crime, although reference will be made to higher level theories as appropriate. Some of the theories of crime considered in this chapter include biological theories, labelling theories, geographical and routine activity theories, trait theories learning theories, psychoanalytic theories, addiction and arousal theories and neutralization theories, as well as examining the complex theory of crime proposed by Eysenck and the complicated issue of defining crime due to its existence as a social construct. While it must be remembered that there has been little empirical examination of how these theories specifically relate to cybercrime, some theories show potential for explaining the nature of the phenomenon. This chapter aims to determine which theories are most suitable for further investigation and applicability to cybercriminal cases.

DEFINITIONS AND KEY TERMS

Theoretical explanations of crime are important for several reasons. Not only do they help society to understand how and why crime occurs, but they can also be useful in helping to predict future criminal behaviour. Theories of crime are also of assistance in attempting to prepare successful rehabilitative interventions for offenders, as well as developing crime prevention strategies that have the best chance of success in a given society. There are many theories of crime, providing various levels of explanation of criminal events. It is important to note that many of these theories of crime are

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-350-8.ch003

not seen as competing with each other. In contrast, most criminal events can best be explained by utilising facets from a number of the theories that follow, and so in many cases the theories can be seen as complementary in nature. When several theories of crime are contemplated in conjunction with each other, they are often stronger than any single theory can ever be. Nevertheless, some theories of crime have fallen out of favour with the academic and professional communities, while others are currently seen as integral to current criminological theory. Similarly, not all theories of crime are appropriate to cybercriminal acts, and in many cases there has been little or no research testing the applicability of theories to cybercrime.

Levels of Explanation of Crime

Howitt (2009) indicates that theories of crime can occur at various levels. High level explanations of crime can include societal (or macro) levels and community or local levels. Other theories consider crime at a more personal level, including socialisation influence theories and individual approaches. Most theories of crime can fit into one or more of these levels, although few theories consider all levels in explaining crime.

Societal Theories

Societal or macro-level theories are considered by Howitt (2009) to be the broadest theories, and suggest that crime can be considered at a societal level rather than as a result of individual differences. Howitt gives the example of strain theory, which describes how it is impossible for all members of society to achieve all of society's goals (such as wealth). The remaining members of society can only achieve these goals through criminal or detrimental means, such as theft. Other societal level theories include control theory (as described by McGuire, 2004), which attempts to examine the structures that maintain social order in society, such as governments and legal entities. An application of these theories to cybercrime involves the social construction of crime, which is described below.

Community Theories

According to Howitt, crime and criminality is not randomly distributed within communities or cities, and so community or locality theories may need to be considered. Some areas of cities will have higher crime rates than others, often those areas that are economically deprived. The Internet does not have such geographical tendencies, although some international variations in cybercriminal activity have been noted and are discussed below.

Socialisation Influence Theories

Group and socialisation influence theories have more of a connection with psychology than community or societal theories do. There are several theories of this kind, but they generally relate to how people around the individual impact on their likelihood of becoming an offender. These can include family and friends, as well as other influences on their lives, such as teachers, and media. One of the key applications of this level of theory to cybercrime involves the concept of observational learning, where our behaviours are shaped by watching how other individuals behave in similar circumstances. This theory is described under the heading of 'learning theories' below.

Individual Theories

Individual theories consider how certain characteristics specific to the person may influence their likelihood of becoming an offender. For example, two children brought up with the same social group, in the same community, may still vary in whether they become criminals or not. Individual theories seek to identify personal characteristics which may help to differentiate between those who are at risk of offending and those who are