

## 1. Major theoretical perspectives on juvenile delinquency

The past half century of sociological research on juvenile delinquency has led to the development of a diversity of causal images in the search for an understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, the tendency has been to set up each major theoretical orientation against the others to determine which of the competing theories is “true” in a given research setting. These competing perspectives have been categorized in a number of ways (as a perusal of any sample of textbook contents will reveal), but the focus here is upon three major theoretical orientations known as strain theory, subculture theory, and control theory (cf. Hirschi, 1969:3–15). Each entails a different conception of how adolescents become delinquent.

This study, however, is based on the assumption that each orientation has pinpointed certain processes that play a role in generating delinquent behavior. The either/or approach of many researchers is rejected in favor of drawing together the most useful and empirically tenable features of the major theories, incorporating them into a coherent conception of delinquency causation to be represented in a causal model, and testing the empirical tenability of the resulting model.

This chapter briefly reviews the causal images contained in these three orientations. Specifically, it explores the implications of the major perspectives for specific issues in delinquency causation. These center around the roles of social class, family, school, perceptions of the future, peer associations, personal values, and the deterrent effect of perceived risk of apprehension in producing or discouraging delinquency. These special topics will be discussed following a brief overview of the general theoretical stances.

The key to any *strain* explanation of adolescent law violation (Merton, 1938; Cohen, 1955; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) is the proposition that some adolescents are driven to law violation in response to the frustration of experiencing or anticipating failure. The pressure to deviate from acceptable behavior norms is created by a discrepancy be-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29516-1 - Juvenile Delinquency and Its Origins: An Integrated Theoretical Approach

Richard E. Johnson

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Juvenile delinquency and its origins*

tween culturally induced aspirations and realistic expectations. The individual internalizes the goals of society but must employ illegitimate means to obtain them when legitimate avenues to success are blocked. The causal image is the same whether the frustration or lack of opportunity involves economic success goals (Merton, 1938) or adolescent peer group status (Cohen, 1955). The frustrated, deprived, or strained individual violates society's rules to obtain the commodities that society has convinced him or her are important to obtain.

The defining characteristic of a *subculture* perspective is the view of an adolescent as drawn or socialized into law violation in an attempt to live up to the perceived expectations of his or her deviant associates. Whereas individual subculture theories (Cohen, 1955; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Miller, 1958; Sutherland and Cressey, 1974; Akers, 1973) vary a great deal in terminology and focus, they all share the common element of stressing "affiliational" (cf. Matza, 1969) causal processes. Deviance is seen as adherence to the norms, expectations, or definitions of one's associates, which happen to differ from the prevailing norms, expectations, and definitions of the dominant society.

Both strain and subculture orientations are essentially motivational theories (Briar and Piliavin, 1965) in which the disposition to deviate (*a*) derives from certain interpersonal or social conditions, (*b*) is essentially a permanent aspect of the personality or value framework of the individual, and (*c*) propels the person into illegal behavior.

The third major orientation – *control* theory – is not concerned with delinquency-causing motivations or provocations but rather with factors that prevent deviance (Nye, 1958; Hirschi, 1969; Hewitt, 1970; Briar and Piliavin, 1965; Toby, 1957; Karacki and Toby, 1962; Polk and Halferty, 1966). Each adolescent develops a degree of commitment to (or stake in) conformity through the formation of social bonds to aspects of conventional society. Hirschi (1969), for example, specifies that the prospects of delinquent behavior decline as the adolescent is controlled by such bonds as affective ties to parents, success in school, involvement in school activities, high occupational and educational aspirations, and belief in the moral validity of conventional norms. To the control theorist, the delinquent act is the result not of being drawn or driven but rather of being freed from constraints.

As compared with explanations centered on strain or on subcultures, the control perspective emphasizes irrational and situational aspects of deviant acts. As Schrag (1971:109) points out, control theories "focus

*Major theoretical perspectives*

3

attention on the dynamics of the interactional processes by which people move towards and beyond the brink of deviant behavior . . . [A] deliberate and autonomous decision to commit an act of crime, followed by an appropriate sequence of responses leading to the act, is an uncommon occurrence.”

The discussion to this point has entailed only brief, general descriptions of the theories. Their various implications regarding the roles of certain key variables in the causation of delinquent behavior are discussed here.

**Social class**

On the authority of the pioneering research of Shaw and McKay (1942) and of official crime statistics in general, it was long accepted as fact that the relative incidence of delinquent behavior varied by social class. However, the major theoretical orientations differ in their presumptions about the relation between social class and delinquent behavior.

Strain theory was, in effect, created to account for the “fact” that delinquency and adult crime are more common among lower-class individuals. Merton’s discussion (1938), though perhaps centered around adult criminal behavior, contains the following suggestions regarding adolescent law violations, which are the focus of the present study:

1. Aspirations are approximately the same in all social classes.
2. Expectations are reduced among lower-class adolescents because of their disadvantages in the competition for educational, occupational, and economic success.
3. The pressure toward delinquency is proportional to the discrepancy between aspirations and expectations.
4. Delinquent behavior is therefore primarily a lower-class phenomenon.

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) share this same presumption of greater lower-class deviance, and they extend the analysis to include opportunities for various kinds of illegal activities as another important variable in determining specific delinquent responses.

Cohen’s “status deprivation” version of strain theory likewise attempts to explain greater amounts of lower-class delinquency (1955:26, 30, 42 ff.). He sees virtually all boys as aspiring to success in middle-class schools. Lower-class boys are at a disadvantage in doing well because of deficient socialization and the school’s “middle-class bias,” and

4 *Juvenile delinquency and its origins*

thus they experience status frustration or strain – often resulting in a “reaction formation” against their own middle-class values. Delinquent gangs of lower-class boys form as a collective solution to shared frustrations.

At this point in his explanation of gang delinquency, Cohen may be classified as a subculture theorist, in that the gang is said to develop a set of norms prescribing delinquent behavior. His gangs are more properly “contracultures,” in that they exhibit negativistic, malicious, and nonutilitarian behavior, directly flaunting conventional expectations. But the essential ingredient is that delinquency is seen as conformity to separate norms.

As a general perspective, subculture theory as defined herein does not imply a necessary relation between class and delinquency. Sutherland’s notion of differential association, for example, applies to definitions conducive to law violation in any stratum of society. For historical reasons, however, subcultural norms and values conducive to delinquent behavior are presumed to flourish primarily among the lower class.

Walter Miller (1958) is a prime exponent of the view that a separate lower-class subculture in America is built around a set of “focal concerns” that differ significantly from those of the middle class. In his words, middle class and lower class “are to an important degree different worlds, with different emphases, different values, different bases of concern, and different definitions of reality” (Kvaraceus and Miller, 1959:59). Segalman (1965) likewise dichotomizes the middle class and the underclass according to basic views of American life.

From this outline of the subcultural perspective, the following implications are evident:

1. Delinquency is conformity to norms.
2. Middle-class and lower-class youths have different norms, values, and aspirations.
3. Delinquency is primarily a lower-class occurrence, as middle-class norms prevail in that part of society which is given authority to define delinquency and to label the offender.

Neither strain theory nor subculture theory offers much in the way of an explanation of middle-class delinquency. The paucity of work in this area is probably the result of the fact that official records show a concentration of juvenile delinquency in the lower socioeconomic levels. Cloward and Ohlin are described as holding “a personality expla-

*Major theoretical perspectives*

5

nation for most middle-class delinquency” (Miller, 1970:40). Cohen, too, holds that middle-class delinquency results primarily from a boy’s lack of identification with his father, followed by rebellious behavior aimed at proving his masculinity (1955:162–9; see also Parsons, 1947). He adds that this problem of male role identification is greatest for middle-class boys in industrial society (1955:164–6). Later Cohen suggests that the apparent increase in middle-class delinquency in recent years is the result of a weakening of the middle-class pattern of deferred gratification (see Vaz, 1967:203–7). Kvaraceus and Miller see middle-class delinquents as “disturbed” and lower-class delinquents as “normal.” Hence, the common implication of these theories is not only that there is more delinquency in the lower class, but that qualitatively different processes lead to delinquent behavior, depending on social class position.

The implication from both strain and subculture theories is that the frequency, the seriousness, and even the basic patterns or types of delinquent behavior should vary by social class position. Control theorists, on the other hand, commonly make no assumption about the relative strength of social controls or bonds in different social classes, and hence make no class-related claims. This approach has resulted in part from the development of self-report techniques of measuring delinquent behavior and the consequent questioning of the causal role of social class.<sup>1</sup> The more recently developed control formulations therefore encountered no presumed “fact” of a social class influence on delinquency to explain.

**The family**

Very few explicit hypotheses about the role of parental factors in delinquency causation are deducible from strain or subculture theories. This is no surprise in view of the macro or structural level of analysis of these orientations. Most versions of these perspectives were never intended to predict which individuals would become involved in delinquency, but merely which sectors of society are most vulnerable to delinquency-producing influences. Subculture theory does imply, however, that deviant parents will produce delinquent offspring.

Assertions about the effects of intrafamilial, “under-the-roof” experiences on delinquency are left largely to the control perspective. The central theme is that the more satisfying the parent–child relationship,

## 6 *Juvenile delinquency and its origins*

the less likely it is that the child will deviate. This presumes that the parent stands for conformity, so that the child has a meaningful relationship to lose or damage by deviating from parental expectations.

### **The school**

All three of the major orientations assign some relevance to the role of the school in generating delinquent behavior. Within the strain formulation, the school is the setting in which frustrations are most sharply felt. Economic success in adulthood, as well as immediate success in the adolescent social world, are highly dependent upon school success. Negative experiences in school produce a lowering of expectations, a heightened sense of strain, and the consequent projection into delinquent activities.

The subculture orientation cannot ignore the importance of school success to adult success in American society. One of the crucial value differences between the middle class and the lower class cited in formulations such as Miller's is a lesser degree of commitment to education by the latter. In a sense the relationship between educational commitment and delinquency in this theory is a spurious correlation. By following their own distinct values and focal concerns, lower-class adolescents become more delinquent and less committed to education simultaneously.

Control theory, of course, stresses the roles of attachments to teachers, positive experiences in school activities, and desires or plans for future educational success as factors that act to decrease delinquency through increasing the adolescent's stake in conformity. A school failure has little to lose by being caught in a delinquent act; a school success risks losing both current rewarding experiences and future educational and occupational opportunities.

### **Perceptions of the future**

It is clear that strain theory is the most future oriented of the major perspectives. In fact, aspirations, expectations, and the discrepancy between them (strain) are all present feelings about future hopes and possibilities. It is the calculation of the yet-to-be that sparks the frustration in the mind of the lower-class youth, who sees his or her chances for success blocked at every turn. Thus it follows that aspiring to a future of wealth and status – “the American Dream” – can become a key element in the processes generating illegal behavior.

*Major theoretical perspectives*

7

Subculture theorists are generally mute on the effects of perceptions of the future in the etiology of delinquency. They rarely tread beyond that point in the immediate future at which delinquent responses are expected to receive approval from delinquent associates.

Control theory is typically present oriented, with its emphasis on situational factors and current social bonds. As Briar and Piliavin state: "Younger boys, those in the age group with the highest rate of delinquent behavior, are not affected by job market conditions; rather, their behavior is influenced, as we have argued above, by more mundane situational considerations" (1965:290-1).

When control theorists do venture into the world of future perceptions, they come up with somewhat different predictions than do strain theorists. As Hirschi (1969:170-1) points out, higher educational or occupational aspirations should act as important controlling linkages to society, regardless of the corresponding levels of realistic expectations. Expectations of success should also act as controls against deviation, independently of wishful desires.

**Delinquent associates**

Traditional subculture theory places highest emphasis on the influence of group pressures in generating delinquency. Cohen (1955) and Cloward and Ohlin (1960) suggest that delinquents have been socialized within cohesive delinquent groups to hold attitudes and values conducive to antilegal behavior. Similarly, Miller (1958) asserts that the focal concerns of the adolescent corner groups are belonging and status – two key propellants into illegal acts committed to gain peer approval. And finally, the greater the association with delinquent others, the greater the likelihood of "differential association" with "definitions conducive to law violation" (Sutherland and Cressey, 1974).

Strain theory in its early form (Merton, 1938) accorded no explicit theoretical relevance to group pressures, but in its subsequent formulations (Cohen, 1955; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) strain is presumed to be the source of delinquent peer groups that in turn encourage delinquent acts. Indeed, Cohen's "status deprivation" conception pinpoints status striving within the delinquent gang as a key motive in flaunting society's rules.

Control theory, in its purest form (Hirschi, 1969), accords no importance to the pull of delinquent associates. The same lack of social bonds

## 8 *Juvenile delinquency and its origins*

that generates delinquency also facilitates associations with other delinquents, creating a spurious correlation between delinquent associates and delinquent behavior. However, Hirschi concludes that he initially underestimated the causal influence of delinquent associates. Moreover, other control theorists recognize that part of the general motivation to break legal rules (which must therefore be controlled) is “to portray courage in the presence of, or be loyal to peers” (Briar and Piliavin, 1965:36).

### **Delinquent values**

Each of the major orientations places some significance upon personal values as influencing the likelihood of delinquency. As stated above, strict subculture theorists like Miller (1958), and Cohen (1955) to a lesser extent, depict American values as sharply dichotomized between middle class and “working” (lower) class. No one really acts against personal values; the values just happen to differ. Thus all delinquents should believe in the appropriateness of their delinquent acts.

Merton (1938), by contrast, posits the virtually universal acceptance of traditional American middle-class values. A great frustration or strain is necessary to induce someone to break through a portion of his or her own value system (legitimate norms) in the attempt to fulfill another portion (cultural goals) of those same values.

Control theorists generally include some sort of “internal control” (Nye, 1958:7) or conscience, or “belief in the moral validity of social norms” (Hirschi, 1969), as one of their deviance-preventing mechanisms. As such, they imply a continuum of individual degrees of acceptance of values consonant with delinquent actions. Moreover, they recognize the possibility of “drift” from (Matza, 1964), or “neutralization” of (Sykes and Matza, 1957), personal moral constraints. Again, the picture of delinquency is much more situational from a control viewpoint.

### **Deterrence**

Although sociological theories of delinquency causation have not emphasized the fear of apprehension as a deterrent to delinquent involvement, there is a large body of literature focusing on deterrence (cf. Johnson, 1974, or Gibbs, 1975, for a summary; see also Kandle, 1974). The general image of control theory is more compatible with the as-



*Major theoretical perspectives*

9

sumption of a deterrent effect of perceived risk of official apprehension than is the image of either strain theory or subculture theory. Briar and Piliavin (1965), for example, include “fear of deprivations and punishment” as part of their conception of “commitment to conformity.” But control theory has commonly emphasized a different kind of deterrent effect – restraint from deviance because of the likelihood of its visibility to close associates who would disapprove and because of the negative implications of categorization as delinquent for institutional ties and future success chances.

Subculture theory, on the other hand, seems to entail the implicit presumption that the approval of delinquent associates will outweigh any potential negative consequences of official apprehension. And strain theory seems to entail the implicit presumption that the risk of official apprehension will not deter because delinquency is seen either as an instrumentally effective adaptation to blocked legitimate opportunities or as an irrational adaptation to the frustration of finding instrumental channels blocked.

**Summary**

These descriptions of strain, subculture, and control statements and implications are not intended to be detailed summaries. They serve two main purposes. First, they focus the reader’s attention on the general positions of the major theories concerning the relevance of several key variables in sociologists’ search for causes of delinquent behavior. Second, even this brief look at these orientations should convince the reader of the complexity of the issues and of the futility of attempting to demonstrate which theory is “true.” In some cases the theories predict the same associations; in other areas opposite relationships are implied; and on the influences of certain variables, one or more of the theories may simply be silent. And, of course, this list by no means covers the range of possibly relevant variables in delinquency causation.

Having gained an appreciation for complexity and a flavoring of the major hypotheses, the reader can now more fruitfully proceed to the review of past studies in Chapter 2. The intent is to select those aspects of each of the major perspectives that remain tenable under the scrutiny of empirical evidence. Then, in Chapter 3, the pieces will be put together with even further theoretical and empirical contributions in the form of a causal model of delinquent behavior.

## 2. What others have found: a review of the data

It would be foolhardy to attempt to assess the weight of all the evidence regarding the etiology of delinquency within the confines of this study. At the outset, the discussion is limited to theoretical propositions that are sociological or social psychological in nature. Certain biological or psychological factors undoubtedly play a role in generating delinquent conduct by some adolescents at some times. However, as general explanations they seem to lack empirical support. To quote Gibbons (1976:73), “The many years of biogenic exploration of delinquency have not produced any valid generalizations about biological factors in deviance.” Furthermore, “analysis has rejected psychoanalytic claims and notions about psychopathy as untestable” (p. 87). And finally, “The mass of studies which have searched for these severe emotional disturbances have failed to find them. In short, it appears that delinquents are no more or less ridden with personality pathology than are nonoffenders” (p. 87).

The review of the data in this chapter will be confined to studies bearing on the issues cited in the previous chapter. The goal is to determine which claims of which major orientations are refuted or supported by studies exploring the relationships of delinquent behavior with social class, intrafamilial relationships, school experiences, conceptions of future opportunities, delinquent peer associations, delinquent personal values, and perceived risk of apprehension. Certain decisions are made in this chapter, on the basis of a review of past studies, concerning which variables to retain as part of a causal model of adolescents’ law violations. These decisions do not represent the present study’s conclusions. Rather, the present aim is to determine which variables and propositions to include for further testing with new data.

### **Social class**

As previously indicated, strain and subculture theories predict an inverse relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and delinquent