

THEORIES OF DELINQUENCY

**AN EXAMINATION OF EXPLANATIONS
OF DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR**



SIXTH EDITION

DONALD J. SHOEMAKER

Theories of Delinquency

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Donald J. Shoemaker

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Printed in the United States of America
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To my grandchildren
Suzannah, Mikayla, Hannah, and Connor
and
in memory of
Julian Alexander

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Preface

Since the publication of the first edition of this book, in 1984, there have been many changes in the study of delinquency, both in terms of theoretical development and societal responses to delinquency. The purpose of this book has always been, and remains, an attempt to present, explain, and evaluate important theoretical explanations of delinquency. The current edition continues that effort. This sixth edition extends the earlier revisions, updating the literature in most chapters.

In addition to basic updates in most of the chapters, the sixth edition of the book continues to examine developments in delinquency theory. This effort is most evident in Chapter 8, Control Theories, and Chapter 12. Much of the material on the general theory of crime has been updated and placed in Chapter 8. Discussions of the general theory of crime and the turning-points explanation of crime and delinquency remain in Chapter 12, but attention to the general theory of crime has been expanded and placed in Chapter 8, as a separate section of that chapter. There are also substantial updated discussions of other theories in Chapter 8, as well as an expanded discussion of social disorganization theory, in Chapter 5, and female delinquency, in Chapter 11.

This edition also continues to include numerous references to international examples of research bearing on the theories covered in the volume. International research and theorizing continue to be important in the area of theory development, and this book attempts to reflect this significance.

As is often the case, preparing this revision has involved several people besides the author. In continuing recognition of contributors

to earlier editions, I would like to acknowledge the collegial support and assistance of John Ballweg, Clifton Bryant, Ricardo Zarco of the University of the Philippines, Diliman, the late James K. Skipper, Jr., and the late Edwin Sagarin. I would also like to thank the office staff in the Department of Sociology at Virginia Tech, who provided important assistance in the preparation of this book. In addition, I would like to express appreciation to James Cook, Oxford editor, who provided important logistical support and encouragement in the production of this sixth edition. Most of all, I would like to recognize the support of my wife, Elizabeth, who has been an inspiration in the preparation of this edition.

D.J.S.
Blacksburg, Virginia

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Theories of Delinquency

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Explanations of Delinquency

The Problem of Delinquency

Practically no day passes without the appearance of some news item carrying a story of a crime committed by youth. Figures vary from year to year, but generally, rates of delinquency in the United States were higher in the late 1980s and early 1990s than they were a generation ago, particularly for violent offenses (Lundman, 1993:8–15). Although rates of delinquency in the United States, in terms of arrests and referrals to juvenile court, have been declining since the mid-1990s, the rates of delinquency are still higher than they were in the 1980s (Sickmund, 1997; Snyder, 1997), delinquency is still a societal concern, and rates could go up again, with economic downturns and social problems affecting youth. Criminal behavior of juveniles involves all types of activity, and it is committed by youth from all backgrounds. In addition to criminal behavior, juveniles can commit illegal acts that apply only to juveniles. These “crimes” are called status offenses, because they apply only to the status of youth.

Collectively, illegal acts, whether criminal or status, which are committed by youth under the age of 18 are called delinquent behaviors, and the youth committing them are referred to as juvenile delinquents. This terminology officially developed in 1899, when the first code of juvenile delinquency was enacted in Chicago, Illinois.

The problem of juvenile “crime,” however, has existed for hundreds of years. Indeed, as Wiley Sanders indicates, juvenile offenders

have been noted in many of the written records of human history (1970). Numerous editorials, commission reports, and governmental statistics reveal that juvenile crime, including that of youth gangs, not only existed but was a source of concern to the citizens of Europe and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even early Anglo-Saxon laws contained provisions for the punishment of child offenders (Sanders, 1970).

In essence, adults have always been concerned about the miscreant behavior of their youth. Perhaps this worry and attention derive from the perception that a nation's future rests on the development of its youth. Perhaps the concern over youthful deviance stems from the thought (however accurate) that today's delinquent is tomorrow's criminal, if nothing is done to change the antisocial behavior of the youth. Be that as it may, when youngsters are known to have been involved in criminal activity, people become concerned. Why did they do it? What should we do with them? These are the questions adults ask, and the demand for answers seems to become stronger with each new generation of adults.

Proposals for preventing and diminishing delinquency, as well as controlling and punishing the young perpetrators, have assumed so many different forms that any casual reader of the literature can be excused for being totally confused and bewildered. But essentially the question of causation is paramount. In the Middle Ages, and into the nineteenth century, children and adults were lumped together as one group, and whatever explained the misbehavior of older criminals was equally applicable to younger ones. Such was the case with demonology, and it was equally true of the first systematic criminology of the modern era, known as the classical position (Inciardi, 1978; Empey, 1982; Vold and Bernard, 1986).

Demonology assumes that criminal and delinquent behavior is caused by demonic possession. While this view of criminality can be traced to primitive societies, it still maintains some popularity today among laypersons. A recent popular example of demon possession of a child is presented in the novel *The Exorcist*.

The Classical School in criminology argues that people, adults and children, act according to free will, rationally exercised, in the pursuit of happiness and the minimization of pain. According to some of the

early proponents of this thought, such as Cesare Beccaria, and to some extent his English utilitarian follower, Jeremy Bentham, all persons, including children, are thought to weigh the costs and benefits of their proposed actions before they embark on them, and all persons, it is assumed, possess the ability to do so (see Chapter 2).

Although the American legal system is based on the notions of free will and individual responsibility, it has been recognized for some time that not all individuals have the same ability to reason and weigh the outcome of their behavior; witness, for example, the mentally ill and children (including adolescents). For this reason, juveniles are thought to be less responsible than adults for their behavior, and an entire system of juvenile justice, from separate court proceedings to separate confinement facilities, has been established for them over the past 150 years. Of course, this separate system of handling juvenile offenders does not always result in protective and treatment-oriented practices (Murphy, 1974; Wooden, 1976; Ayers, 1997). In addition, juvenile court procedures are assuming many of the characteristics of adult courts in response to Supreme Court decisions since the 1960s (Shoemaker, 1988). Whatever changes may have been introduced, the juvenile is still considered by many to be less responsible than the adult, and thus in need of different procedures for adjudication and different policies that emphasize prevention and treatment over punishment.

Along with the assumption that young delinquents need special treatment, the idea has developed that *explanations* of crime among juveniles must be applied specifically to experiences common to youth. Particularly associated with this thought is what came to be known as the Positive School of criminology initiated in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Radzinowicz, 1966). Although some thinkers equate the Positive School with nineteenth-century studies of the criminal personality, the name positive can be applied to any theory that systematically and, in varying degrees, empirically analyzes the causes of crime and delinquency and concludes that personal or social and environmental factors *determine* criminal behavior. As such, many modern theories of delinquency may be called *positivistic*.

Contributions to an understanding of crime and delinquency from a positivist approach have come from a variety of disciplines, most notably biology, psychology, and sociology. While not all positivist theories

distinguish juveniles from adults, many do. Some specify several stages of development, from infancy to old age, with accompanying explanations of crime and deviance for each growth period (the psychoanalytic approach, for example). Others focus on pressures, uniquely from an adolescent point of view (such as the middle-class measuring rod theory proposed by Albert Cohen, which is discussed in Chapter 6).

It is the many and varied theories of delinquency, particularly those stemming from the positivist tradition, that create much of the confusion concerning the causes of delinquency. The object of this book is to present the major theories of delinquency to the reader in a manner that is systematic and comparative. Before discussing more fully what will be included in this book, however, a few comments concerning the concepts of causality and theory are in order.

The Issue of Causality

The Positive School is associated with determinism, that is, the idea that criminal behavior is determined, or caused, by something (Radzinowicz, 1966). It is the identification of that “thing,” or set of things, that has elevated the question of causation to a central position in the analysis of crime and delinquency.

A strict interpretation of causality would argue that one phenomenon (the cause) always precedes the result, or the effect, and that the effect never occurs without the previous existence of the cause (MacIver, 1942). For example, broken homes would be considered a cause of delinquency if broken homes always led to delinquency and if all delinquents came from broken homes. In actuality, such an interpretation of causality would eliminate the “causal” explanations of a variety of phenomena, both natural and social. This view of causation is particularly inappropriate for the development of concepts and theories in the social sciences because of the existence of multiple causes, or factors, in human behavior (MacIver, 1942; Hirschi and Selvin, 1978; Gibbons and Krohn, 1986).

In the development of causal explanations of delinquency, the usual procedure is to identify contributory factors, or variables, that are *associated* with delinquency. In identifying these factors, however, some

attention must be paid to a minimal set of criteria for the development of causal explanations: (1) there must be an association or connection between the contributory or causal variable and delinquency; (2) the connection must be temporally established such that the causal factor is known to occur before the effect, that is, delinquency; and (3) the original connection between delinquency and the causal variable must not disappear when the influences of other variables, causally located prior to the causal variable, are considered (Hirschi and Selvin, 1978).

Sometimes, correlational data are interpreted in deterministic terms. For example, broken homes are often described as a cause of delinquency because broken homes and delinquency are correlated with one another (that is, delinquents often come from broken homes). The temporal order of this association must be established, however, before causation can be determined. If all we knew was that broken homes and delinquency were correlated, we might just as easily reason that *delinquency* causes broken homes (through parental conflicts over what to do with a troublesome child) or that coming from a broken home causes delinquency (perhaps because trouble and conflict or lack of supervision in the home create problems for a child, which are manifested in the form of illegal behavior).

Even when it has been established that two variables are not only connected, but that one variable precedes another in a time sequence, the preceding variable may not be causal. It could be that a third variable, preceding both of the others, is the real causal agent. When this occurs, it is assumed that the originally identified association between two variables is *spurious*, that is, misleading or false. For example, if a relationship has been established between delinquency and poor grades in school, the relationship may not be a causal one. Perhaps conflicts in the home are contributing to both poor school performance and delinquent behavior. If family conflicts were then introduced into the analysis, the original association between grades and delinquency would disappear, and we would then be able to call that relationship spurious.

In reading the following chapters of this book, the student should be aware of these points. The theories to be discussed are attempts to explain delinquency. While no one theory is able to provide *the* causal answer, some appear to be stronger than others in consideration of the criteria just discussed.

What Is a Theory?

The word “theory” means many things to different people. To the layperson, a theory often suggests a wild speculation, or set of speculations, an unproved or perhaps false assumption, or even a fact concerning an event or a type of behavior, based on little, if any, actual data. To some scientists, or philosophers of science, a theory consists of a set of descriptions or classification schemes concerning a particular phenomenon (some would call such schemes “taxonomies”; Zetterberg, 1963). To others, a theory is a systematic collection of concepts and statements purporting to explain events or behavior (Timasheff, 1957). Blalock (1969) views theories of this sort as deductive theories, which consist of inter-related propositions. These propositions are described as axioms, or statements of truth, and theorems, which “are derived by reasoning, or *deduced*, from the axioms” (p. 10). Homans takes a similar approach by arguing that theories are essentially deductive explanations of events, and explanations are attempts to test and understand specific parts or sequences of the larger phenomenon, which are organized as propositions (1967: 22–27). Other students feel that theories should not only be able to explain phenomena on an abstract level but also should be applicable to practical, everyday situations. In other words, a significant feature of a theory is its ability to explain things for the layperson who may wish to use the theory in an applied setting (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Some theories concern the activities of individuals, and attempt to explain why individuals commit acts of delinquency. These kinds of theories are often called *microtheories*. Other theories deal with the larger social and cultural context in which humans act, and address the issue of why rates of delinquency are higher in some settings, or among some collections of people, than in others. These theories are called *macrotheories* (Williams and McShane, 1994:8–9; see also, Akers, 1994:4–5; Gibbons, 1994: 8–11). Still other theoretical perspectives focus on the explanations of why laws and norms are established, and in what manner these prescriptions and proscriptions for behavior are enforced (Akers, 1994:3).

Whatever the definition, the social scientist sees a theory, in one way or another, as an attempt to make sense out of observations (Akers, 1994:2; Curran and Renzetti, 1994:2; Gibbons, 1994:6–7). It is in this general sense that the word “theory” will be used in this work. Thus,

a view of delinquency will be recognized as a theory if it attempts to explain or understand delinquency, regardless of the level of its causal assumptions and irrespective of the sophistication of its concepts and propositions. It is tempting to adopt a strict interpretation of theory, but to do so would eliminate some useful and interesting approaches to an understanding of delinquency. At one time or another, each of the explanations presented in this book has been referred to as a theory, and it is for this context that the term has been chosen.¹

Verification of Theories

The utility of any theory lies in its validity. Can it be verified? Is it true? Will it predict what will be found in groups not yet observed and studied? Theories are analyzed and verified in a variety of ways. Most often, they are verified by gathering data designed to test the validity of their concepts and propositions. This way of testing a theory may be referred to as the empirical method (Akers, 1994:6–12). Validity refers to the extent to which a theory is true (valid). In testing theories, or theoretical propositions, the researcher is often concerned with the validity of the questions and procedures used in the study. That is, do they truly measure what they are purported to measure? For example, do IQ tests actually measure native intelligence, or are they, in part, gauging learned behavior and responsive abilities? A goal of scientific disciplines is to continually test their theories and refine their concepts. To ignore a theoretical explanation of delinquency, or any other type of behavior, because it is unsophisticated or untested would be denying the integrity of the scientific process and foreclosing, perhaps prematurely, what might eventually become a meaningful interpretation of delinquency.

Included in the empirical method of evaluating theories of delinquency is the implementation of a theory's assumptions in prevention or treatment programs. A major concern in this approach to the evaluation of a theory is the gap that can develop among particular questions concerning what the theory proposes, how a practitioner interprets the theory, and how the major elements of the theory are implemented (see, for example, Lilly et al., 1995). While these problems

occur in the testing of theories in all disciplines, they are pronounced in the social sciences. The outcomes of practical tests of a theory can be highly affected by the practitioner's understanding of the theory as well as the practitioner's commitment to its success (or failure). What are the chances of a theory being designated successful in reducing delinquency if the practitioner does not believe in the validity of the theory in the first place? Such issues as these make it impractical to evaluate theories of behavior on the basis of their ability to effect changes in behavior in a purposeful manner.²

Another method of testing theories is to examine their logical consistency and conceptual clarity. However, some theories are worded so abstractly or with such conceptual unclarity that it is difficult to test them empirically. For instance, theories which argue that behavior is influenced by cultural norms and values are difficult to test with experimental or survey data because the central concepts of the theories are so far removed from day-to-day behavior that it is hard to connect behavior specifically with the concepts. Similarly, psychoanalytical theories which stress unconscious motives for behavior are difficult to test because such motivations are outside the scope of normal observation. These kinds of theories are better evaluated primarily according to their internal logic and consistency rather than their empirical accuracy. These are what McCord describes as "soft theories" (1989:132-133).

The Plan of This Book

The purpose of this book is to present the student with a systematic discussion of the dominant explanations of delinquency. It is not the intention of the author to develop a new theory of delinquency but, instead, to explain the existing theories in a consistent, organized manner. It is hoped that this procedure will enable the reader not only to obtain an understanding of each theory, but also to be able to compare and contrast these explanations.

It is recognized from the beginning that no single theory will ever be able to explain all types of delinquency. The theories presented are assessed according to their general empirical and logical adequacy. In some cases, such as with theories of lower-class and female delinquency,

the evaluation is based on the ability of the theory to explain the specific form of delinquency addressed. The more usual procedure, however, is to discuss each theory in relationship to delinquent behavior in general.

The format of the book is the same in most chapters. First, a brief historical overview of the theory, or set of theories, is presented. Next, the basic assumptions of these theories are examined.³ These items are followed by discussions of specific theories within the general set, including specific assumptions, key concepts, a general discussion, and an evaluation. Each chapter concludes with a summary and comparative overview. Exceptions to this format occur in the chapters on female delinquency and integrative theory.

This book is not intended to "sell" anyone on the merits of any particular theory, although comparative evaluations will point to the apparent efficacy of one theory over another. Despite the support received from scholarly training or the concentration of experts favoring particular causes of delinquency, students must make up their own minds on explanatory approaches but should reach conclusions based on information and not ignorance, with an open mind and not a rigid one, and free from precommitments and prejudices. If the contents of this book help students in formulating a considered and thoughtful opinion concerning the etiology of delinquency, its purpose will have been fulfilled.

Notes

1. Only in one instance, the discussion of labeling, can it be argued that it is not a theory under consideration (because there is no causal explanation), but a perspective. This problem is considered later.

2. The purpose of this book is to discuss most of the major explanations of delinquency. Of course, this decision forces one to select from the range of potential entries those which are considered representative. In so doing, some theories may be omitted which might be included by other authors. Learning theories of criminality, for example, are not fully covered in this volume. To some extent this interpretation of behavior is addressed in the discussion of differential association theory in Chapter 7. Other versions of learning theories, such as those informed by behavioral psychology, are not included, primarily because the manner in which these theories are used

focuses on the treatment, or modification, of delinquent behavior. While the subject of treatment is certainly important, the parameters of this book exclude a detailed examination of treatment or rehabilitation programs. Those interested in such topics may wish to consult other books, such as Lundman (1993) and Morris and Braukmann (1987: especially Chapters 2, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14, 15, and 18).

3. The assumptions listed for each theory cover the causal connections of delinquency. They at times include assumptions of basic human nature (see, for example, Stevenson, 1974) and of the social order, but the focus remains on the theoretical explanation of delinquent conduct.

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The Classical School: Issues of Choice and Reasoning

Historical Overview

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the foundation of American jurisprudence is the individual culpability of offenders. Criminal culpability typically rests on the issue of reasoning and criminal intent. That is, legal evidence is based on the degree to which a person is considered to have committed an act, and the degree to which the individual is considered to have committed the act voluntarily, or of free volition.

Many scholars maintain that the legal constructs of free will and reasoning capacity are products of a school of thought named the Classical School (Vold and Bernard, 1986:Chapter 2). The Classical School is characterized by a belief in the influence of free will on the commission of behavior, as well as the use of punishment to deter criminality, but just enough punishment to outweigh the benefits of committing crime. Contemporary systems of criminal justice have been modified to include a variety of “mitigating” circumstances which are thought to reduce the impact of “free will” on behavior.

One of the more common mitigators of criminal responsibility is a person’s age, and the corresponding connection between reasoning capability and age. In the United States, historical accounts maintain that beginning in the early nineteenth century, public perceptions of young offenders began to accept the notion of reduced criminal responsibility because of age (Platt, 1977; Krisberg and Austin, 1978).

Sanders (1970) demonstrates that age qualifications for punishment were recognized in the laws of the colonies. Specific reform efforts, and institutional structures which focused on the youthful offender, began to appear in the United States during the first third of the nineteenth century. Throughout the twentieth century, a number of legal and social reforms ultimately led to the development of a separate court process for juveniles, first represented in Chicago, Illinois in 1899 (Platt, 1977). However, these reform efforts were not uniformly accepted by all, and even for juveniles, there is the assumption that free will is the basic cause of behavior.

Assumptions In strictest form, the Classical School argues that all people act according to the exercise of free will and reasoning. Individuals act, furthermore, in order to accomplish some desired goal. Variations of this theme posit that humans behave according to rational considerations of the consequences of their acts, both those results which are beneficial and those which are harmful.

KEY CONCEPTS

Free Will Within the concept of classical theory, free will represents individual responsibility for behavior. This does not mean that a person always accepts responsibility for actions. Rather, it means that society holds a person accountable for behavior because this activity is assumed to be the result of conscious, calculating thought.

Rational Choice This concept refers to the method of reaching a decision to commit behavior. It refers to the idea that people act according to a reasoned, logical set of planned calculations (see, for example, Cornish and Clarke, 1986). This choice is based on awareness of potential consequences, positive and negative, of the behavior.

Discussion The person most often identified with the Classical School is Cesare Beccaria, who outlined his views in a book entitled *On Crimes and Punishments* (1963; originally published in 1764). According to Beccaria, people do what they do because they derive pleasure from their acts, and they voluntarily choose to commit them. In this manner, criminal activity is motivated by the same principles as noncriminal behavior, namely, the gratification of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

The difference between the two is that the law violator chooses to circumvent laws and rules to obtain desired goals, while the law abider stays within the bounds of legal limits to achieve objectives. This position assumes that all people have the same opportunities to exercise choices in their lives. One of the important characteristics of the Classical School is the notion that all people possess the ability to reason and to act on their own volition.

Of course, contemporary social science challenges this conceptualization. While people may exercise reason and choice in pursuing their desires and objectives, these patterns of thought and action are influenced by a host of environmental and individual factors which have been the focus of attention among students of human behavior and society for decades. For example, people from different social status or social class backgrounds may see the availability of legitimate opportunities from very different perspectives (Vold and Bernard, 1986:29). The same may be said of gender differences in society, as well as many other human and social characteristics. Furthermore, this perspective fails to provide meaningful interpretations of why some people choose an illegal path to success, happiness, or whatever else they may be seeking, while others opt for the conformist way, except to contend that this is the way people elect to lead their lives. Moreover, this philosophy does not help to understand why people choose alternating methods of achieving their goals, some legal, some not.

In fairness to Beccaria and his treatise on crimes and punishment, these questions and issues were not foremost in his presentation of arguments. Rather, Beccaria argued that the goal of his essay was to present a plan of jurisprudence which would be fair and effective in controlling crime (Martin et al., 1990:6–15). Thus, we are told that capital punishment is not an effective means for instilling respect for the law in people and preventing crime among the general population, because it is excessive, cruel, and barbaric (Beccaria, 1963:45–52). Throughout this essay, the arguments and comments focus on the proper response to criminality, with an eye toward producing a fair and just system of punishment which would lead to the prevention of future crime among the populace, rather than to disrespect for those charged with enforcing the law, as well as the laws

which are being protected. A more complete evaluation of this theory of criminal motivation would encompass the wide range of correctional philosophy which has developed in response to these issues (Martin et al., 1990:16–18). However, the purpose of this book is to present theoretical arguments for the causes of delinquency, not an evaluation of various correctional practices designed to reduce or eliminate crime and delinquent conduct. Consequently, the following evaluation of the Classical School is based on the ideas of this theory which concern the motivations for committing crime, and whether these ideas hold merit when applied to juveniles.

Evaluation Strict applications of Beccaria's legislative principles, such as the French Penal Code of 1791, have not met with much success (Vold and Bernard, 1986:25). One reason for the inability to hold all people accountable for their actions is the quite human condition of complexity and variability in motivation. Even if the principle of behaving to achieve pleasurable consequences, and to avoid pain, were perfectly valid, there would be the issue of how much and what kinds of pleasure and pain were needed in order to motivate people. Recognition of these difficulties led to revisions of penal codes based on Beccaria's ideas, revisions which incorporated elements of mitigating circumstances and other conditions which might reduce the capacity of people to reason and thus be held fully accountable for their actions. One of the earliest proponents of this view of behavior was Jeremy Bentham, who enunciated his basic philosophy of crime and punishment in a book entitled *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1948; originally published in 1789). Bentham is often included as a member of the Classical School, because he believed in the essential freedom of people to chart the course of their actions. In addition, Bentham subscribed to the philosophy that the primary motivation in human behavior is based on pleasure and pain (Bentham, 1948:1). However, Bentham also believed in the principle of *utility*, by which he meant that the ultimate objective in legislation was to achieve the greatest happiness for the community, or as many members of society as possible (pp. 1–3). This principle is the crux of Bentham's position, for it leads to a consideration of a large number of factors and circumstances concerning crime and its motivation, which a strict classical view cannot

entertain. For these reasons, Bentham is more properly classified as a "neoclassical" theorist. The Neoclassical School is characterized by the core belief that people operate according to free will and pleasure-pain, but these principles are modified according to mitigating and extenuating circumstances of a wide range (Vold and Bernard, 1986: 26-27; Curran and Renzetti, 1994:15).

Because of these considerations, the contemporary criminal justice system in America and other Western nations is more properly associated with the Neoclassical School. This association extends to the system of juvenile justice as well. Basically, the very existence of a separate system of handling juvenile offenders, apart from adult criminals, is a reflection of a neoclassical view that free will is mitigated by extenuating circumstances, namely, a person's age. However, societal acceptance of the idea of reduced punishment for juveniles based on age is neither automatic nor uniform (Champion, 1992:4-28). Not only was this lack of agreement evident in the earlier stages of the development of juvenile justice concepts (Platt, 1977), but it exists in contemporary times, probably as strongly as ever.

While the juvenile justice system is based on treatment, rehabilitation, prevention, and similar ideas of human correction, efforts continue to be made which would provide punishment to juvenile offenders, even to the extent of providing that juveniles be processed as adults. Most jurisdictions, for example, allow for the transfer of juvenile cases to the adult system, where the juvenile would be then "treated" as an adult (Champion, 1992:210-244). In some states, such as Washington, there have developed strict interpretations of the penalties which should be assessed for the commission of specific offenses, in connection with specific circumstances. The express intent of this legislation, moreover, is based on the assumption that juveniles should be held "accountable" for their acts (Siegel and Senna, 1988:484-485). Thus, while it may be argued that a separate system of juvenile justice recognizes limitations on the influence of free will relative to one's age, court and legislative decisions often work against this philosophy by establishing laws and policies which are based on the assumption that young people should be held accountable for their behavior.

Within the field of social science and theoretical positions on the nature of human action, there also exists considerable argument and

debate concerning the impact of free will on behavior. Nearly all the theoretical positions discussed in the remainder of this volume are based on the assumption that, at the very least, people act according to the interaction between free will and a host of factors which operate to constrain the extent to which action is truly “free.” These forces are often conceptualized as “determining” factors, and at times it might seem these conditions all but eliminate the option of choice in human behavior.

Rational Choice Theory

In the past few years, an explanation of criminality has emerged which is often referred to as “rational choice theory” (Clarke and Cornish, 1985; Cornish and Clarke, 1986). Basically, this conception of behavior is a modified version of classical theory, in that it suggests that criminal behavior is predicated on the use of calculations, reasoning, and “rational” considerations of choices. In this manner, the theory is similar to the ideas of economists such as Becker (1968), who advocate an economic, calculative approach to the understanding of crime. Rational choices, furthermore, are based on the principle of self-interest (Cornish and Clarke, 1986:1), or what others might refer to as the pleasure-pain principle. Unlike the early classical theorists such as Beccaria, however, the contemporary, “rational choice” view is based largely on, and encourages, empirical investigations into the motives of behavior and the influence of rationality on human actions.

Most of the contemporary literature on rational choice theory addresses the criminal activity of adults. While many attempts to test this perspective report results favorable to its basic assumptions (Cornish and Clarke, 1986), there are exceptions. For example, Piliavin et al. (1986) report data on the connection between self-reported crime, perceived opportunities for committing crime, and the perceived risks of arrest and/or imprisonment for committing crime among samples of previously incarcerated adult offenders, known adult drug users, and adolescent school dropouts. Their analysis failed to support any deterrent effect of perceived punishment on criminal behavior. However, perceived criminal opportunities were related to self-reported crime,

especially among adult offenders (pp. 111–117). These findings were particularly relevant for the sample of adult offenders. According to this study, therefore, the assumptions of rational choice theory and classical theory in general, are too simplistic. People may be more affected by perceptions of opportunity for committing crimes than by the prospects of being caught and punished for criminal behavior.

Perceptions of opportunities and risks, furthermore, may be influenced by experiences with committing crime and/or with being punished for crime. Since the results discussed above applied more to adult offenders who had previously been in jail or prison than to adolescents, it may be that perceptions of risks and opportunities relative to crime are more accurate for adult offenders than for adolescents. Also, as Piliavin et al. suggest, people may be sensitive to major shifts in perception, such as a certainty that criminal opportunity exists or that arrest for criminal behavior is imminent, but not to more remote possibilities (1986:115).

These considerations would seem to place even more importance on the impact of age as a conditioning factor for a rational perspective on the understanding of delinquency. If calculations and reasoning are affected by experiences, then it is reasonable to assume these processes are less developed among juveniles than among adults (Paternoster, 1989), which, again, is the basis for according differential corrective responses to delinquent conduct as opposed to adult criminality.

Some discussions of rational choice theory link the perspective with learning theory, or differential association theory (Akers, 1990; Clarke and Felson, 1993). Paternoster (1989) provides some empirical evidence on the relative effects of deterrence/rational choice variables, compared to social and attitudinal factors, on “common” forms of delinquency. Basically, Paternoster concludes that rational choice and deterrence factors play at best an inconsistent role in the “decision” to commit relatively minor acts of delinquency for the first time, particularly alcohol use and minor theft, as well as for subsequent decision-making, including the notion of repeating delinquent acts, or to stop offending (pp. 22–38).

The degree to which juveniles rationally consider the consequences of their delinquent acts remains a matter of investigation and discussion. Some examinations of longitudinal studies of delinquency find

support for the deterrent value of punishment on juveniles, especially those who are more involved in delinquency, or are at “higher risk” to commit delinquent acts. These findings cast some doubt on theories, such as the general theory of crime (see Chapter 8), which propose that criminals and delinquents have strong predispositions to delinquency. In addition, these findings lead to continued debate on the issue of the ability of juveniles to weigh and calculate the results of their actions, and to policy implications associated with this debate (Wright et al., 2004; Matsueda et al., 2006).

Summary

It may be difficult to assess the calculative nature of human behavior with any more precision than is currently evident in the literature. These attempts often utilize information gathered from individuals *after* the act has been committed, and sometimes years after the event has occurred. This problem alone should not be sufficient to warrant no further study of a classical, rational choice, or any other similar kind of approach to human behavior. Many attempts to test or examine interpretive explanations of criminal or delinquent behavior incorporate *post hoc* methods which involve recollections or imputations of behavior well after the acts have occurred.

The issue is not as absolute as some positions may imply. Of course, humans act on the basis of reasoning and calculation. Just as certainly, however, people behave in response to habits, suggestions from others in their lives, cultural norms and values, and other environmental stimuli (Harding, 1993). Some refer to this situation as “conditional free will” (Fishbein, 1990:30) or “degree determinism” (Denno, 1988:618, 661–662). These factors and conditions constitute the subject matter of the remainder of this book. People make mistakes in judgment, interpretations of events, assessments of situations, and so on. Some attribute these mistakes to lack of self-control, and contend that criminal behavior occurs early in life and is maintained throughout life (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Others (Sampson and Laub, 1992, 1993) contend that choices made early in life are often due to the interaction between personal and environmental influences,

but that these choices influence other decisions people make throughout their lives, including those which affect social and occupational selections (as well as the reactions of others to these decisions). In Sampson and Laub's view, however, people can also change in their perceptions and views concerning how they should behave, and in their decision making relative to these changes. These fluctuations occur among young people as well as with adults.

It should not be surprising, therefore, to find scholars openly divided about the importance of "free will" versus determinism on the subject of human behavior, for, in fact, humans behave rationally and impulsively, but not robotically. None of the theories to be discussed in the following chapters should be taken as the ultimate explanation of delinquent behavior. This point of view should become increasingly clear as the reader moves through this book. The presentation concerning "integrated" theories, in the last chapter, attempts to reinforce this position. A reasonable compromise position on this issue is to view human behavior, deviant or conformist, as the result of the exercise of choice within given situations. We may never be able to control the human will; we may never want to reach this level of control. However, we can reasonably expect to reach a clearer understanding of circumstances and situations that are thought to influence delinquent behavior, which is the primary goal of this book.

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Biological and Biosocial Explanations

Historical Overview

An essential component of the biological approach to delinquency is that such behavior is caused by some mechanism *internal* to the individual. Biological theories of crime and delinquency (criminality) have been proposed for hundreds of years (Fink, 1938). However, the works of early theorists varied considerably on just exactly what this internal mechanism, or set of mechanisms, might be. Furthermore, many of the early attempts, like those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, made little distinction between biological and psychological characteristics, assuming in general that the criminal's mind is affected by biological composition. Since nearly all of these theorists had been trained as physicians, it is logical that they would focus on the physical properties of the body as the topic of research.

Generic Assumptions

Besides positing that delinquency is a product of internal, physical properties, modern biological theories usually assume that these properties at least predispose one to criminality. The predispositions, however, are said to interact with environmental factors which can affect the influence of biology on behavior. Prior to the twentieth century, many

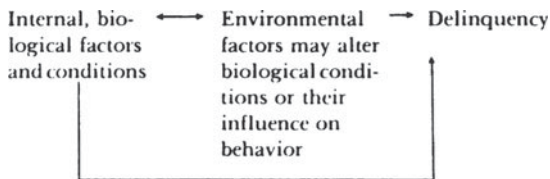


Figure 1

assumed that biological factors did more than predispose one to crime—they directly caused the behavior. A general diagram of the relationship between biological factors and delinquent behavior should incorporate these two explanatory views (Jeffery, 1979; Denno, 1990; Magnusson et al., 1992; Booth and Osgood, 1993). The assumptions may be depicted as shown in Figure 1.

It should be noted that the predisposition connection between biology and delinquency is a reciprocal one. That is, environmental factors (which can be of a wide variety, such as family and peer associations, school performance, and social class membership) may both be shaped by and influence biological factors. It is the result of this reciprocal influence that contributes to delinquency.¹ The direct causation position, however, bypasses environmental situations and suggests that a biological phenomenon, such as a brain tumor or some kind of chemical imbalance, can directly lead to delinquency.

Although numerous biological explanations of crime have been offered in the past (Fink, 1938; von Hentig, 1948), many of these theories made no theoretically substantive distinctions between adult and juvenile offenders. The subjects of this chapter are some of the more dominant biological explanations of *delinquency*, with minimal attention paid to explanations of both crime and delinquency. The specific topics to be discussed are somatotypes and delinquency, the issue of inheritance and delinquency, and emerging trends in biosocial explanations of delinquency.

Somatotypes and Delinquency

Specific Assumption A *somatotype* is the overall shape of the body, in consideration of the relative development of the various parts of the