2

Conduct Problems in Youth: Sociological Perspectives

DONALD J. SHOEMAKER

INTRODUCTION

Within the field of sociology, conduct problems are often described in terms of juvenile delinquency. Juvenile delinquency is a legal term with social implications. Often, delinquent behavior represents an effort of a youth to handle a difficult situation in his or her life, but with behavior which has been proscribed by legislative action. Most legal definitions of delinquency include at least two concepts: (a) the commission of criminal behavior by youth; and (b) the commission of behavior which is unlawful for youth but not for adults. These latter offenses are termed status offenses (Shoemaker, 2009). Thus, juveniles can commit actions which would be a crime for anyone to commit, as well as behaviors which are prohibited solely because of underage status. Typically, the age of majority for establishing delinquency is age 18. The age of majority means when one becomes an adult in terms of legal responsibilities; that is, when one is legally an adult. One important benefit as a legal adult is the right to vote. Within this chapter, general patterns of crime and delinquency will sometimes be referred to as criminality. Studies of delinquency from sociological perspectives may include both formal assessments of delinquency, as represented by police, court, and institutional data, as well as informal accounts of delinquency, which include observational and self-report data.

Sociological explanations of behavior are typically classified as macro or micro. In both examples, an important goal is the understanding of patterns of behavior among people in different settings and from different backgrounds. That is, a sociological perspective attempts to identify and
explain social order and disorder (Inkeles, 1964). A major interest is the 
explanation of how societies and social processes within societies are 
arranged or ordered, and how they may change, or become disordered. 
At first glance, social disorder may seem the proper focus of explanations of 
criminality, and indeed, there is much interest in the disordered nature of 
social behavior in the study of crime and delinquency. However, sociological 
observations of criminality also clearly indicate that there is order within 
the seemingly disordered expressions of crime and delinquency. Patterns of 
criminality often display logic and order among offenders, even if these are 
not consistent with the general patterns of logic and behavior established 
within "normal" components of society.

Macro-level theories focus on the rates of behavior as these are 
expressed across larger collectivities, such as communities or societies. 
One issue of interest to macro theories of criminality, for example, would 
be the differential distribution of crime rates between or among societ-
ies or between communities within a society. Micro explanations concen-
trate on individual behavior but from a societal or environmental point of 
view. Thus, micro-level explanations are also termed social psychological. 
Micro approaches to an understanding of crime or delinquency examine 
the impact on criminality of an individual's characteristics and attitudes 
as these are affected by social groups or environmental conditions. For 
example, a micro-level explanation of delinquency would examine not only 
how one's attitudes are related to crime and delinquency, but also how 
these attitudes are influenced by different social situations or across dif-
fering personal characteristics of individuals, such as race and ethnicity, 
age, or gender. The purpose of this chapter is to present a discussion 
of several sociological explanations of delinquency. Thus, the objective is 
to acquaint the reader with basic sociological explanations of crime and 
delinquency, including their assumptions and interpretations for youth. 
However, the comparative validity of these explanations, or their overall 
utility as explanations of delinquency, as well as policy implications of the 
explanations, will not be pursued in this chapter. Such would require a 
volume to do so (see Shoemaker, 2009). In addition, the discussion of socio-
logical approaches to an understanding of delinquency will be presented 
from an historical perspective. Theories will be discussed as they originally 
developed and in terms of modifications and alterations over time.

**BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Explanations of crime did not differentiate juveniles from adults 
until the early nineteenth century. Historically, juveniles were viewed as 
miniature adults (Aries, 1962; Grossberg, 2002). Early religious author-
ity and English Common Law established criminal responsibility at the 
age of 7, and this age was adopted by most jurisdictions in the United 
States (Kerper, 1972; Postman, 1982). The use of the term, "delinquency," 
was not common until the end of the nineteenth century, when the first 
delinquency law was created in 1899 in the United States (Tanenhaus, 
2002). While certainly juveniles have been misbehaving and otherwise
creating problems for their elders and society for untold hundreds, and probably thousands, of years (Sanders, 1970), they were not legally referred to as “delinquents” until the passage of delinquency laws. In colonial times, for example, such children were often labeled as “stubborn” (Sutton, 1988).

Child reformers in the nineteenth century often associated juvenile misbehavior with one of two conditions: (a) criminogenic forces emanating from urban living conditions; and (b) parents who were unable to instruct and/or control their children (Grossberg, 2002; Tanenhaus, 2002). Often, and unfortunately, youth who were placed in institutions for juvenile corrections were sons and daughters of immigrant families who were thought to be living unrestricted lives in the streets of large cities. An illustration of this conceptualization is evident in the “orphan trains” of the mid-late nineteenth century. Orphan trains were literally trains which were used to transport miscreant youth from large urban areas, such as New York City, to families living in Midwestern states, such as Kansas or Nebraska. The person often associated with developing the notion of orphan trains was Charles Loring Brace, who founded the Children’s Aid Society in New York in 1853. Although the supposed purpose of orphan trains was the rehabilitation of wayward urban youth, Brace’s view of these children was not always favorable. It is argued he developed the phrase, “dangerous classes,” to refer to these youth, along with the prediction that if they were not carted off somewhere for special attention and treatment; that is, “orphaned” to host families sometimes thousands of miles away in Midwestern towns, the result would be chaos and destruction for the people of New York and, presumably, other large cities (Grossberg, 2002).

In the United States, the number of delinquents has been declining since the 1990s. For example, the number of youth arrested in 2006 was approximately 24% lower than the number arrested in 1997. In addition, the number of youth confined in juvenile correctional facilities declined from 116,701 in 1997 to 109,225 in 2003 (Shoemaker, 2009).

Worldwide, rates of delinquency have also been declining or holding steady since the 1990s, although this decline is certainly not universal (Hartjen, 2008; Junger-Tas & Decker, 2006). In Japan, for example, juvenile crime increased from the mid 1946 to the early 1980s, but has been declining since that time (Elrod & Yokoyama, 2006). On the other hand, delinquency is thought to be increasing in Turkey (Atasoy, Baskan, & Ziyalar, 2006).

In some countries, increases in juvenile crime and delinquency may be attributed to increasing industrialization and significant socio-economic and political changes. However, in countries such as Japan, which has experienced significant industrial growth since World War II, the rate of delinquency has declined. Thus, it is difficult to explain historical trends and variations in delinquency across nationalities with a single explanation. The following discussion will focus on theoretical explanations of youth crime and delinquency informed by sociological conceptualization, rather than particular analyses of trends and variations of delinquency within any country.
MACRO SOCIOLOGICAL VIEWS OF DELINQUENCY

The early conceptions of delinquency identified above were decidedly sociological in nature. However, at that time, there were no sound sociological theories or principles to guide the development of these views. In their place, many biological and psychological explanations of delinquency surfaced and became popular in the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the first decade or two of the twentieth century. Some suggest that the creation of the juvenile courts and the further development of juvenile justice institutions were supported largely by individualistic views of delinquency, especially from a psychological perspective. As one social historian has noted, by the beginning of the 1920s, the juvenile court “idea” had been clearly established, along with a set of procedures and practices, such as probation and private records, and individual or clinical treatment (Tanenhaus, 2002).

Social Disorganization

One of the earliest sociological explanations of delinquency is named social disorganization theory. Basically, this explanation of delinquency focuses on the lack of community integration and stability as an important contributor to delinquency. The theory was developed by Clifford Shaw (one of the first probation officers in the United States), Henry McKay et al. (1929), and then refined in 1969 (Shaw & McKay, 1942, 1969). Although this explanation concentrated on gang delinquency, its scope can be applied to most forms of delinquent behavior. The theory of social disorganization offers a clear contrast to the personalized view of delinquency causation popular at that time, as indicated earlier. Shaw noted that many of the youngsters he supervised seemed to come from the same areas or neighborhoods, even after several years. Later, Shaw and McKay (1969) noted that patterns of delinquency seemed to occur regularly in some neighborhoods, “backward in time in an unbroken continuity” (p. 175).

An interesting feature of Shaw and McKay’s studies of delinquency is the use of areas of residence as a key indication of both disorganization and delinquency. Social and economic features of a neighborhood, or area, were used to identify areas as disorganized. Similarly, rates of delinquency were developed based on where juveniles lived, not where their offenses occurred. This perspective clearly separated the social disorganization perspective from individualistic views of delinquency. The concept of social disorganization basically suggests that social control, both formal and informal, have been weakened, making it difficult for residents to solve problems, such as delinquency (Shoemaker, 2005; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927). Formal social control is exemplified by the presence of police officers, while informal social control is often associated with supervision and control exercised by parents, neighbors, and institutional representatives in the community, such as teachers, ministers, and others.

Another feature of the studies of Shaw and McKay was the use of mapping to chart and analyze delinquency patterns. Utilizing previous depictions of growth patterns in Chicago, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess
SoCIoloGICal PerSPeCTIveS (Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, 1925) analyzed delinquency by two-mile concentric zones. According to the concentric zone pattern of Chicago’s growth, there were five zones: Zone I, or the central business district; Zone II, or the zone in transition; Zone III, or the zone of working-class homes; Zone IV, the zone of single-family and residences and upscale apartments; and Zone V, or the suburban zone.

One of the more common findings of Shaw and McKay’s research was the pattern of delinquency by residential zones. Data from 1900 through the 1930s in Chicago consistently documented the regular decline in the percentage of males aged 10–16 petitioned (or referred) to juvenile court (as well as juveniles found in police and juvenile institutional records), from Zone 1 to Zone 5. Moreover, within zones with high rates of delinquency, especially Zones I and II, there were identified high delinquency areas. Often, these areas were found near sections of the city which had industrial and business activities (Shaw & McKay, 1969). Subsequent research, using samples of males and females and in cities other than Chicago, continued to support the conclusion that residential patterns of delinquency declined from the center of the city outward to its suburbs, although not all of this research used the concentric zone method of depicting city growth (Shaw & McKay, 1969).

In addition to displaying high rates of crime and delinquency, these areas also were characterized by high rates of mental illness, tuberculosis, and other “community problems” (Shaw & McKay, 1969). In addition, and perhaps most telling of all, the authors noted that the areas of the city which had the highest rates of crime and delinquency, especially from 1900 to 1933, also experienced a rapid turnover of the ethnic and racial composition of the population. Specifically, they observed that these areas went from predominantly English–Scotch, German and Irish populations in the early 1900s, to Polish and Italian by the 1920s, with African–American arriving in the 1930s (Shaw & McKay, 1969). This finding led Shaw and McKay to suggest that community-based problems, namely areas characterized by social disorganization, were responsible for consistently high rates of crime and delinquency, as opposed to cultural factors expressed through specific racial and ethnic composition.

Contemporary studies of social disorganization often attribute crime and delinquency to the lack of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy refers to the notion that people in a neighborhood share common concerns and expectations of neighbors’ behavior, in particular the behavior of youth, and that they are willing to support each other in supervising and attempting to control youthful misbehavior (Sampson, 2006; Sampson et al., 1997; Sampson et al., 1999). Thus, areas of a community which are characterized by collective inefficacy are also representative of social disorganization; namely, the difficulty of area residents to identify and solve issues and problems in their neighborhoods and communities (Sampson, 2006).

In addition, contemporary conceptualizations of social disorganization incorporate the concept of social capital into their analyses. Social capital essentially refers to the collection of social ties or networks in a community or residential area. The closer or denser the social ties, the more social capital is thought to exist. The presence of social capital, or extensive and
deep social networks, in turn, is thought to reduce the level of crime and delinquency in a neighborhood (Bursik, 1999; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Sampson, 2006).

As noted, Shaw and McKay’s studies indicated that high rates of delinquency persisted in certain areas or neighborhoods despite racial and ethnic turnover in those areas. This prompted them to suggest that conditions of the area, namely social disorganization, contributed significantly to patterns of delinquency. In contrast, other investigators have suggested that cultural factors are influential in the explanation of delinquency. Cultural values and norms can affect whether one is likely to engage in criminality. For example, some have observed that cultures which stress family ties and behavior which brings honor to one’s family tend to have lower rates of crime and delinquency than do other societies (Braithwaite, 1989; Chambliss, 1974).

Others have proposed that culture conflict can create tensions and confusion which can contribute to criminality (Sellin, 1938). The theory of culture conflict and criminality argues that disagreements, or conflicts, between cultural conduct norms, or laws in many cases, can create confusion and anguish in people who have emigrated from one country to another. In most countries, it has been assumed that immigrants are often socially and politically less powerful than those representing the host country. Consequently, immigrants struggling to assimilate to the host country’s cultural norms may express cultural conflicts in terms of crime and delinquency.

Research on this theory suggests that first-generation immigrants are somewhat insulated from the pressures and conflicts of different cultures. Perhaps this insulation derives from immigrants living in cultural enclaves where they receive support and assistance from those of the same ethnic background who have been in the host country for a longer period of time and have become more acculturated into the receiving country. However, it is with the second-generation immigrants, particularly the youth that behavioral problems resulting from cultural conflicts begin to appear in significant numbers. Second-generation youth reflect the conflicts between the customs and language of their parents, representing the immigrant country as well as the norms and values and language of the host country, primarily represented in the school and social groups (Hagan, Levi, & Dinovitzer, 2008; Sellin, 1938; Sheu, 1986; Shoemaker, 1995; Wong, 1997). However, studies clearly indicate that although second-generation immigrants have higher rates of crime and delinquency compared to their parents, their involvement in delinquency is lower than comparable populations of native-born youth. Thus, immigration per se does not contribute significantly to crime. Rather, the more likely contribution to crime among immigrant youth results from the experiences of subsequent-generation immigrants, experiences such as culture conflict as well as negative experiences from the process of cultural assimilation, including discrimination against immigrants (Hagan et al., 2008).

Anomie

Another macro level theory of crime and delinquency is based on the concept of anomie. Earlier discussions of anomie as a condition of society
are often credited to a sociologist named Emile Durkheim. Durkheim noted that during times of social and economic change, societies go through transformations of their organizational states, particularly in regard to their division of labor. In a simpler state of organization, or mechanical solidarity, Durkheim posited that the division of labor was simple and people tended to interact on the basis of similarities and commonalities in terms of values and behavioral norms. As societies grow and become more complex, their organizational states and division of labor become more complex. This state of organization is called organic solidarity and it is characterized in part by interactions based on interdependence and mutual needs. During these periods of growth, societies can lose the ability to meet the needs and expectations of their people. In a sense, a state of “normlessness” develops. Expectations concerning goals and aspirations and behavioral expectations become less clear. This state of uncertainty and frustration is known as anomie. In advanced, organic societies, anomie can occur as the result of sudden and/or major changes in the society, such as major shifts in the economy. Although anomie is a condition of society, its consequences are often discussed in individual terms. Increased numbers of people commit suicide during times of economic crises and uncertainty (Durkheim, 1933, 1951; Vold et al., 2002).

Durkheim’s ideas concerning crime, anomie, and social change have been examined in contemporary times in connection with the impact of modernization on crime rates. Much research supports the general conclusion that crime increases with modernization. However, this trend is most notable for property crimes, not violent crimes. Rather, if there is any trend regarding the connection between modernization and violent crime, it is that violent crimes decline with modernization (Shelley, 1989; Vold et al., 2002).

Durkheim’s notions of crime and anomie, and the studies examining the relationship between crime and modernization, focused on society in general. However, a few decades after Durkheim, Robert Merton, proposed another sociological view of anomie. This newer interpretation of anomie and crime focused not just on crime, but on patterns of deviant behavior in general. In addition, this newer conceptualization of anomie addressed attention to the impact of anomie on crime and deviance primarily among those in the lower social class (Merton, 1957). Merton defined anomie as the structured, or more permanent, tension or strain, between achieving highly valued cultural goals and the availability of legitimate means for achieving those goals. For this reason, his theory is often called a means–end theory or a strain theory. For Merton, society, particularly American society, promotes economic success above other possible definitions of accomplishment. For the most part, individuals gain economic success through educational achievement and/or business acumen. For those who have less access to these legitimate avenues for success, other, more deviant or criminal pathways, are more likely to be chosen. When the pressures to succeed become too great in the mind of the individual, crime and/or deviance is more likely to result. As Merton put it, “It is only when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain common success-goals for the population at large while the social structure rigorously restricts...
or completely closes access to approved modes of reaching these goals for a considerable part of the same population, that deviant behavior ensues on a large scale” (Merton, 1957, p. 146).

Based upon these notions, Merton constructed a theoretical series of five possible options, or responses, an individual may make to this situation of structured strain, or anomie. Each option is expressed in terms of accepting or rejecting the cultural value of economic success and the legitimate means of achieving this success. These are options, not individual expressions of personality, and they can change and/or be combined in a lifetime. The first option is considered the most common, and it is called conformity. Conformity results in accepting both the goal of success and legitimate means of achieving it. The next four responses are either criminal or deviant. Innovation involves accepting the goal of success but rejecting legitimate avenues for achieving success. This adaptation is more clearly connected with crime and delinquency, such as theft. Ritualism involves rejecting the goal of success, but accepting the means – a kind of deviant response often found among bureaucratic workers and primarily those in the lower middle class. To Merton, the least common response is retreatism, or dropping out of society. This response involves rejecting both means and goals. It may be exemplified by heavy drug use or addiction. The final response is rebellion, which involves not only rejecting means and goals but the desire to substitute new means and goals in their place (Merton, 1957). The essence of Merton’s means–end or anomic theory of crime and deviance is that social and cultural structures are largely responsible for the creation of factors that may lead to crime. Merton clearly recognized that individual responses or adaptations to this structural situation played a major role in the actual commission of criminal behavior. This recognition is exemplified in the notion that the most common adaptation to anomie is conformity. Nonetheless, this explanation of criminality is considered more structural, or macro level, than individual, or micro level.

Others have offered refinements or modifications of this theory to further clarify the structural roots of crime and delinquency. For example, Richard Cloward (1959) argued that the availability of illegitimate means of success was not evenly distributed in society. Thus, those individuals facing the prospect of not having legitimate means for achieving success may not always be able to prevail on illegitimate means of success. Wanting to make money by selling drugs or robbing banks, for example, may be what one desires, but being able to accomplish these criminal tasks with any degree of success may not be possible for just anyone.

Another extension of this theory focuses on the institutionalized and pervasive influence economic success has had on American society, and the pursuit of “the American Dream,” or the achievement of economic and material success through individual competition and abilities (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2001). Messner and Rosenfeld argue that this goal is emphasized in the basic fabric of American society, and promoted in institutions such as the family and schools. In addition, they argue that economic institutions dominate other institutions in society. Economic concerns, for example, often influence the daily schedules of families. Schools exist
primarily to support the job market. Schools depend on the economic system for their operations. Although not specified by Messner and Rosenfeld, school schedules can also be influenced by the job market, as when schools modify opening and closing dates to accommodate summer job opportunities for students. When the economic institution contributes to criminal incentives, the entire society is affected. Thus, what Merton offered as an example of an anomic situation, which could promote crime and deviance (i.e., economic success for everyone), has been refashioned by Messner and Rosenfeld into an endemic criminogenic factor which has become a basic part of society, “a society organized for crime” (p. 1).

Both anomic explanations of crime have tended to focus on adult patterns of criminality, rather than juvenile crime. Theoretically, anomie can be used to explain crime among people of any age. The nature of the arguments, however, seems to address the experiences of adults, more so than juveniles. Nonetheless, there have been a couple of attempts to focus the issues of anomie theory on juveniles. In particular, researchers have adopted Merton’s strain theory of anomie to juveniles, especially juvenile gangs or subcultures.

One of these efforts follows up on the argument that the distribution of access to illegitimate means of achieving success is not evenly distributed in society (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). This view of gang delinquency maintains that gangs are primarily composed of youth from working and lower-class backgrounds. As such, these youth are exposed to the same pressures or strains to commit crime as are their adult counterparts. The assumption of this view is that youth aspire to gain economic success, as Merton suggested. Thus, the ultimate goal is to become economically successful. However, the particular expression of criminal activity depends upon the structure of the neighborhood in which a youth lives. In areas where there is the presence of adult criminal role models, specifically organized criminal activity, a criminal gang tends to emerge. This type of gang is focused on property crime. In neighborhoods where organized adult criminal activity does not exist, there tends to be less restraint placed on youth and violent or conflict gangs emerge. Another type of gang might appear in either type of neighborhood. This type of gang is named retreatist, because its members are drug users and the gang tends to be organized around drug activity. The members of this gang are considered double failures because they are dropouts from school and conventional society in general, as well as from other gangs, whose members rejected these retreatists because of their drug use. Attempts to examine this explanation have not typically discovered retreatist gangs (Shoemaker, 2005). In addition, some have suggested that a fourth type of gang can emerge in neighborhoods in which members of organized crime reside, a racket gang, which differs from the criminal gang .... (Spergel, 1964).

The view that juveniles, including gang members, are primarily motivated by economic concerns is not accepted by all scholars. For example, Albert Cohen (1955) developed an explanation of gang delinquency which posited that the primary source of social status for juveniles is found within the school setting. Juveniles are not as motivated to obtain a high-paying job as adults may be. In addition, juveniles are often brought together
for significant amounts of time, particularly within the school setting, so
their sources of social identity tend to come from this setting. In ad-
dition, Cohen maintains that most gang members are from the lower social
classes, which is consistent with macro-level strain theories in general.
Consequently, the argument is that class-based differences and strains,
within the school setting, are the basis for delinquency, including gang
delinquency, among youth in working and lower social classes.

Cohen makes the argument that all youth wish to succeed at school,
at least in earlier years of education. However, an important impediment
to academic success for lower-class youth is the existence of middle-
class values which dominate the educational institution and which are
expressed by teachers and school administrators. These values include
a willingness to delay the immediate gratification of wants and desires
for longer-term profits (delayed gratification), respect for the property of
others, a desire to succeed in school, long-range plans, and self-control
in relationships with others, especially resistance to the use of violence
in interpersonal relationships. While one may quarrel with the view that
these values are specifically middle-class values, they are an important
component of Cohen’s argument. Moreover, they are not values which are
emphasized in lower-class settings. In essence, they are evaluated accord-
ing to a *middle-class measuring rod*. Thus, lower-class youth learn early in
their school careers that school work may involve activities and normative
standards which they are not prepared to follow.

One consequence of this class-based system of strain, especially for a
lower-class youth, is failure at school, failure which is interpreted by those
leading the school system as individualized. Thus, the young student must
learn to handle this failure, one way or another. Cohen hypothesizes that
there are three major responses to this source of strain. One reaction is
described as a *corner-boy* response. This adaptation to strain is basically
conformist, and predicted by Cohen to be most dominant within the lower
class. This response basically involves coming to terms with the situation
and doing the best one can, given the circumstances. It may involve some
delinquency, but typically not serious crime. A second mode of adapt-
ing to this strain is considered by Cohen to be the least common, the
*college-boy* response. This reaction involves not only adjusting to class-
based strains in the school system, but overcoming the sources of tension
and excelling at school. Delinquency is rare with this response. The last
reaction is considered the most serious and threatening to society and
often associated with gang delinquency. It is called the *delinquent-boy*
response. The delinquent boy is full of resentment at his situation, and
comes to reject the school system in which he wished to succeed earlier in
life, and the middle-class values it represents. He becomes “negativistic,”
“malicious,” and “just plain mean” (Cohen, 1955). Thus, within the delin-
quent boy mentality, other students, especially those doing well in school,
are to be terrorized and victimized. Symbols of success, including schools,
are to be vandalized, and so on. Thus, while Cohen is definitely propos-
ing what might be considered a psychological profile of a gang youth, the
basic motivation for this behavior pattern is social-class strain within the
school system.
Conflict Perspective

Both social disorganization and anomie theories suggest that there are commonly accepted norms and values which exist in society, and that delinquency in one way or another violates those basic norms. The conflict perspective, however, is based on the assumption that there are real and meaningful differences in society, created by various factors, and these differences are influential in shaping the behavioral patterns of people. One example of this view is the culture conflict theory, which is based on the assumption that there is a dominant value system which is expected to be honored and followed by immigrants, despite differences in their cultural norms and ideas. In addition, there are other conflict views which maintain that basic divisions in society are accountable for criminality more so than social forces which influence people to violate commonly accepted norms and values.

One conflict explanation of crime and delinquency has been termed the “radical” perspective, largely because its assumptions call for radical reorganization of social and economic structures for crime prevention. The radical view of criminality argues that the basic cause of criminal behavior is the capitalist system. In many ways, this perspective is based on the ideas of Karl Marx, even though Marx did not specifically develop a theory of crime (Shoemaker, 2005). One conflict proponent maintains that there are two kinds of crime: crimes of domination and repression and crimes of accommodation (Quinney, 1977). Crimes of domination and repression are committed by the ruling class, owners and managers of property and means of production, and constitute efforts to control and dominate the social, economic, and political institutions of society. These crimes include price fixing, environmental crimes, and white-collar crimes in general. Crimes of accommodation and resistance include common property and violent crimes, such as larceny and robbery, as well as rebellious activity. These crimes are committed in response to the efforts of the ruling class to control the economic and social lives of others.

While the radical or “Marxist” view of crime has achieved some measure of interest and support from criminologists, its basic tenets seem to apply more to adults than to juveniles. This view of criminality stresses economic issues. Juveniles, it would seem, are more concerned about social and peer issues, school-related problems, and other issues than jobs and economic problems. Some, however, suggest that the ideas of the radical view can be applied to juveniles. For example, developing the issue of economic concerns among juveniles, David Greenberg (1977) suggests that capitalist societies tend to prolong adolescence and extend schooling. These conditions result in an extended reliance on peer acceptance for social status and alienation, or at least separation, from the adult world of work and economic independence. To Greenberg, capitalism works better for adults than for juveniles and juveniles are relegated to lower social status and dependency as a result. Thus, the age and work structure of a capitalist society create conditions conducive to juvenile defiance and resistance to their low status. In addition, especially among lower-class males, anxiety may develop about supporting
oneself and a family adequately because of low-paying jobs for young men, which can lead to violence committed by adolescent males from lower-class backgrounds.

In sum, macro-level explanations of criminality view the larger societal context as the proper focus of attention. As such, these explanations are better able to elucidate the origins of criminal behavior patterns, rather than the continuation of such patterns of behavior. In addition, macro-level theories typically do not address the manner in which individuals perceive and incorporate societal conditions into personal motivations for behavior. The personalization of societal conditions is often addressed by the next set of factors to be discussed; micro-level theories.

**MICRO-LEVEL EXPLANATIONS**

One of the troubling aspects of macro-level explanations of crime and delinquency is the difficulty in understanding how structural and cultural factors get “in the heads,” so to speak, of individuals. In other words, while macro theories may offer reasonable explanations of the structural conditions under which crime and delinquency are more likely to occur, these views do not provide adequate explanations of how the structural conditions are interpreted and acted upon by individual people. This problem is no minor consideration. For example, in the Shaw and McKay research discussed above, only about 30% of youth living in high delinquency areas appeared in juvenile court data (Shoemaker, 2005). While it may be argued that substantially more youth are involved in criminal behavior than those who appear in juvenile court, the issue still remains, why are not more youth affected by generic structural factors with respect to committing delinquent behavior? In addition, advocates of anomie or strain theory, suggest that conformity, or involvement in low levels of criminality, are the most common reactions to anomie, as was indicated earlier. Again, these conditions do not affect all individuals the same way. Micro-level explanations of criminality have been offered in part to address this issue. While some advocate that these theories are substantially sufficient as explanations of delinquency in their own right, the argument that these explanations can serve as a link between structural conditions and individual behavior is persuasive.

**Differential Association Theory**

One of the more popular micro-level theories of delinquency is called differential association theory, originally proposed by Edwin Sutherland in 1939. One of the major assumptions of this explanation is that behavior, including delinquent behavior, is learned, not biologically inherited. While this assumption may seem almost mundane by today’s standards, it was an important consideration 70 years ago, and it remains an important feature of most micro-level sociological views
of crime and delinquency today. Over several years, Sutherland refined and modified this theory to ultimately include nine basic propositions:

1. **Criminal behavior is learned.**
2. **Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication.**
3. **The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups.**
4. **When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes very simple, and (b) specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.**
5. **The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable.**
6. **A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law.**
7. **Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.**
8. **The process of learning criminal behavior by associations with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.**
9. **While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values, since non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978, p. 80–83).**

The contention that crime and delinquency are learned in primary group settings has attracted the attention of many researchers and has been examined most often with respect to delinquency (Vold et al., 2002). The group context of delinquency is clear from the behavior patterns of juvenile gangs. However, studies indicate that delinquency in general is often committed in a group context. As one commentator put it, “One of the most consistently reported features of delinquent behavior is its group nature” (Warr, 2002, p. 31). While the group context of delinquency alone does not “prove” the validity of differential association theory, the consistency of this pattern does lend credence to the theory.

Differential association theory assumes that delinquency is formed, perhaps shaped, by group involvement. An important issue here is the direction of the group influence. That is, do delinquent youth choose delinquent companions, or do delinquent groups create delinquency (Vold et al., 2002)? Studies concerning this question have concluded that the answer is both patterns exist. Some evidence suggests that delinquent youth seek out delinquent companions; whereas, other studies suggest that involvement in youth gangs contributes to delinquency of youth (Shoemaker, 2009). The most reasonable conclusion to this question, however, is that both patterns exist, and they exist in a reciprocal, bi-directional fashion. That is, regardless of one’s past behavior, involvement with delinquent companions increases one’s delinquency
involvement, and one’s delinquency increases associations with delinquent peers (Warr, 2002).

Another issue regarding differential association theory is the importance of group membership and participation. Does one have to be a member of a group, and participate in its activities, in order to be affected by the group? Some have suggested that individuals may be influenced by groups of which they are not true members but in which they desire to belong. One term used to express this situation is differential identification (Glaser, 1956). Others add that this concept identifies the importance of reference groups in the understanding of delinquency (Haskell, 1960). Studies of gangs further maintain that gangs are often admired by younger members of a neighborhood, who become wannabes, or aspirants for gang membership. These wannabes can be used to help gangs in the pursuit of criminal activities (Shoemaker, 2009). Their desire for acceptance by the gang can make them attractive to the gang for criminal purposes, such as serving as lookouts during a burglary, or helping out in times of gang fights, or rumbles.

**General Strain Theory**

Another attempt to bridge the gap between structural factors and individual-level responses to these macro conditions is the general strain theory, or GST (Agnew, 1992, 2006). The basic argument of GST is that juveniles are presented with stressful situations, sometimes reflecting structural conditions, such as poverty, racism, and so on, and sometimes more localized, such as bullying at school, or abuse in the home. The ability of the child to escape these stressful situations is limited, and may even involve illegal actions, such as running away or truancy. According to Robert Agnew, the developer of GST theory, there are three types of strain: “Individuals may (a) lose something they value, (b) be treated in an aversive or negative manner by others, and (c) be unable to achieve their goals” (Agnew, 2006). This latter example of strain theory is similar to Merton’s anomie strain theory. The original version of the general strain theory was a more modest revision of anomie (Agnew, 1985). For juveniles, strains associated with family or school problems are thought to have the greatest impact on delinquency (Agnew, 2006). In general, strains that are more likely to result in criminality are those which are seen as unjust and salient to the individual, and among those with low levels of self-control (see the discussion below), and who feel “pressured” to respond in criminal ways (Agnew, 2006).

GST also includes a variety of social and individual, or emotional, reactions to strain, which definitely augments structural anomie or strain explanations of criminality. For example, Agnew discusses various individual “coping” mechanisms, or strategies, in response to strain, such as anger. More generally, the argument is that coping strategies can be divided into three categories; behavioral, cognitive, or emotional. Each of these three categories can be influenced in specific cases of individual coping by social psychological and environmental characteristics, such as social class, neighborhood context, and personality characteristics.
For example, individuals with low self-control, who are living in poverty and in neighborhoods with high crime rates, are more likely to respond to strain in criminal ways than are those who have ample economic resources, living in secure and stable neighborhoods, and with high levels of frustration tolerance (Agnew, 2006).

**Control Theories**

Control theories pose a different question than the other explanations considered so far. Instead of asking why people offend, control theories assume that the tendency to offend is common among humans. Thus, the more appropriate question to ask is why do people *not* offend more than they do? The answer to this question within the perspective of control theories is that some type of control prevents a person from offending. The nature of the control mechanism divides control explanations into personal or social controls. Both perspectives are properly categorized as micro-level explanations of crime and delinquency, but personal control theories focus on *internal* sources of control, such as self-concept. Social control explanations focus more on *external* sources of control, such as ties to family or school.

One example of a control theory is containment theory, proposed by Walter Reckless (Reckless, 1961, 1967). Containment theory is a broad multi-level explanation of criminality. It proposes that there are substantial pressures and pulls upon a youth which can result in delinquency. These pressures and pulls are both internal, such as deviant personality configurations, and external, such as delinquent peer groups. However, at the same time, there are numerous internal and external controls, or containments, which help prevent delinquency; external controls such as strong social institutions and internal controls such as a strong self-concept. Although the theory basically addresses external and internal sources and controls of criminality, Reckless and others have focused on the importance of internal controls as the major containment of delinquency. One reason for the focus on self-concept is the view that self-concept is more important as a control of crime and delinquency in modern industrialized societies, because in these societies, external sources of control, such as social institutions, are weaker (Shoemaker, 2005).

The basic prediction of this aspect of containment theory is that one’s self-concept affects behavior. Specifically, the lower the self-concept, the more likely delinquency will occur. Delinquency, therefore, becomes a mechanism for improving self-concept, or at least for providing a behavioral outlet for those with low self-esteem. The relationship between self-concept and delinquency has been examined frequently, and, in general, the predicted relationship has been supported: that is, those with low levels of self-concept are more involved with delinquency than those with higher levels of self-esteem (Dinitz, Scarpitti, & Reckless, 1962; Reckless, Dinitz, & Murray, 1956; Reckless, Dinitz, & Kay, 1957; Schwartz and Tangri, 1965; Wells, 1978). In addition, some studies have shown that self-concept *increases* with delinquency, or at least with associating with delinquent peers (Kaplan, 1978; Jang and Thornberry, 1998),
particularly for those with lower levels of self-esteem prior to delinquency involvement (Kaplan, 1980; Mason, 2001). While authors may use different names relating to self-concept, such as self-esteem, self-derogation, and self-enhancement, the conclusions seem generally the same; namely, those committing acts of delinquency tend to have initially lower levels of self-concept which are elevated through committing delinquency, or at least associating with delinquent others.

While most scholars agree that self-concept has some impact on delinquency, many now think that self-concept is not as strongly connected to youth deviance as are other constructs, such as peer associations or social bonds (Jensen, 1973; Rankin, 1977; see also Shoemaker, 2005). A modification of this view suggests self-concept should be combined with these other factors to enhance the delinquency explanatory model (Kaplan, Martin, & Johnson, 1986). In addition, some view the importance of self-concept as a mediating construct between these other factors and delinquency (Wells & Rankin, 1983). Thus, self-concept may either augment or reduce the impact of peers and social bonds on delinquency. Overall, self-concept or self esteem seems to be an important variable in the explanation of delinquency, but probably not the primary factor. Self-concept can be a moderator of other influences on delinquency, but a low self-concept, in the absence of other significant variables, is not likely to result in delinquency.

**Social Bond**

Another control variable which has been used to explain delinquency is social control, or the social bond theory. The main prediction in this explanation of crime and delinquency is that the stronger the bond between a juvenile and representatives of social institutions, the less the likelihood of a youth committing acts of delinquency. The developer of this explanation of delinquency, Travis Hirschi, conceptualized four major components of the social bond including attachment, belief, commitment, and involvement (Hirschi, 1969).

*Attachment* refers to emotional connection with someone who is significantly related to social institutions such as a parent, teacher, or minister. The bond, in this sense, is usually identified through feelings such as admiration, respect, trust, and so forth. *Belief* is the component of the social bond which involves acceptance of basic rules, laws, and policies, especially with regard to formal systems of social control, such as the police and courts. Belief is summarized by Hirschi in terms of moral values. If a person’s moral values have been weakened or compromised, then “The probability that he will commit delinquent acts is therefore increased” (Hirschi, 1969, p. 26). *Commitment* includes investing time, money, or other personal sacrifices into something desired, such as an education or the development of a successful career. Consequently, acts of crime and delinquency are inversely connected to commitment in part because an individual wishes not to risk losing the gains made by these investments, or stakes in conformity (Toby, 1957). The more one has to lose, so to speak, the more he or she will consider the “costs” of committing crime.
The final component of the bond, *involvement*, is often associated with busy work, or doing things in connection with an institution. An example would be participating in extra-curricular activity at school, or serving on committees and boards in an organization. In the logic of the social bond theory, a juvenile who is kept busy with conventional activity has less time to commit delinquent acts. As Hirschi (1969) states, “The assumption, widely shared, is that a person may be simply too busy doing conventional things to find time to engage in deviant behavior” (p. 22).

Hirschi expressed the argument that all elements of the bond were uniformly and positively related (Hirschi, 1969). Thus, if one were committed to the rules and laws of society, then he or she would also express conventional beliefs, maintain positive attachments with conventional others, and be involved in conventional activities. These bonds, in turn, would logically predict, through the theory, that such individuals would be less likely to commit acts of crime and delinquency.

The social bond theory has received considerable attention in the study of delinquency. Some of this research has focused on the relationships between specific elements of the bond and delinquency. Other studies have examined the connection between the social bond, in general, and specific social institutions, such as religion, the family, and schools. For the most part, these attempts to examine the validity of the theory’s assumptions have been supportive. Not only is there support for the direct contribution of a weak social bond to delinquency, but social bonds are often found to interact with other factors, such as delinquent peers, social disorganization, and low self-concept, to enhance the explanation of delinquency (Shoemaker, 2005).

**Self-Control**

Although the social bond theory has received general support in the literature, a revision of the theory was offered by Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson, which focused on the impact of low self-control as a major contributor to criminality. The basic argument with this explanation is that *low self-control* better explains or predicts delinquency, compared to a weakened social bond. Gottfredson and Hirschi further claim that the impact of low self-control is evident for general acts of crime and deviance and is so pervasive in the characteristics of offenders that it is appropriate to refer to low self-control as a *general* theory of crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Gottfredson and Hirschi reason that the nature of low self-control “can be derived directly from the nature of criminal acts” (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, p. 88). From their understanding of criminal traits, they posit that criminals are characterized by the following: inability to delay gratification of wants and desires; interest in short-term rather than long-term goals; lack of training or apprenticeship in manual skills; and insensitivity to pain and suffering especially among victims of crime. Thus, criminal activity is based on the satisfaction of short-term goals, needs, or desires, with little or no planning or concern for the harm inflicted on victims or society. The relationship between low self-control and crime is expressed
in the following passage, “In sum, people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short-sighted, and nonverbal, and they will tend therefore, to engage in criminal and analogous acts” (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 90).

In addition, according to Gottfredson and Hirschi, self-control is a learned trait, not inborn or inherited. Thus, the basic contribution to crime and delinquency is acquired, not innate. Thus, individuals who have been properly socialized tend to become more controlled in social settings, and thus less likely to commit criminal acts. Furthermore, the primary agent of socialization in society is the family. Other social institutional settings, such as the school, may have a significant impact on the levels of self-control among its members, but the family remains the primary setting in which self-control is or is not learned. Parents, or by implication, significant care-givers who do not properly socialize youth into conformist activity are considered ineffective and so “ineffective parenting” is thought to lead to low self-control and to crime. More particularly, ineffective parenting includes inadequate monitoring or supervision of youths’ behavior, the lack of recognition of criminal or deviant behavior committed by their children, and the failure to punish transgressions among children.

The general theory of crime, in particular the connection between low self-control and criminality, has received considerable support in the criminological literature over the past 2 decades. While there is ample evidence to support a connection between low self-control and criminality, there have been many criticisms leveled at this theory as well (Gottfredson, 2006). There is the contention that self-control theory is tautological, especially since it assumes that characteristics of criminals identify causes of criminality. That is, the impulsive, short-sighted, uncaring nature of criminals is used to describe low self-control as an explanation of crime (see above). In addition, Gottfredson and Hirschi maintain that their general theory is a social explanation of criminality. Gottfredson (2006) further suggests that low self-control and the social bond are essentially control theories and are more similar than distinct. Thus, if anything, a social bond and self-control are different in that they occur along different points on a control spectrum. Despite these claims that self-control is a social construct, some have noted that the basic, underlying general trait ascribed to this theory, namely low self-control, is essentially a psychological construct (Shoemaker, 2005; Vold et al., 2002). Still, most scholars of crime and delinquency place the theoretical context of this theory into a social psychological category, rather than a psychological field.

Gottfredson and Hirschi also claim that low self-control is not automatically followed by criminality. Indeed, they assume that many individuals with low self-control are able to construct a life without criminal activity. This contention is not remarkable in itself, since virtually all explanations of crime would allow for the nonobservance of criminality among individuals possessing traits or living in societal conditions which are thought to be conducive to crime. However, for a theory which purports to offer an explanation of crime and deviance in general, the claim that the primary contributor to criminality, low self-control, is not always followed by crime indicates recognition that low self-control is not a single, major impetus to crime.
Criminality, as recognized by Gottfredson and Hirschi, is a product of several contributing factors, often working in concert, or in an integrated fashion. Theoretical integration, or convergence, is a concept which will be discussed further below.

In sum, micro-level explanations posit that social psychological factors play an important role in the etiology of crime and delinquency. As such, these variables are conceptualized as lying between individual-level characteristics, such as biological and psychological factors, and larger structural and societal variables in the explanation of criminality. Micro-level explanations are better able to explain the continuation of criminal behavior patterns, than the origin of criminality. The combination, or integration of both levels of explanation, macro and micro, offers a more complete description and understanding of the origins and transmission of delinquency, from a sociological perspective.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Besides the macro- and micro-level explanations of crime and delinquency discussed above, there are other perspectives which should be briefly noted, but which do not fall neatly into a macro or micro category. Two of these perspectives will be commented upon below, life-course and labeling.

Life-Course Perspective

The life-course perspective is based on the view that crime and delinquency are the results of dynamic patterns of events and traits which change over the life course. As noted above, a common finding in the literature on delinquency is that rates of crime and delinquency decline with age. Some have argued that these changes should be considered in connection with overall patterns of delinquency. In particular, Robert Sampson and John Laub have promoted the view that behavior patterns of delinquents can and do change not only over the course of adolescence, but also over a lifetime. Sampson and Laub have been studying the long-term behavior patterns of a sample of delinquent youth first studied by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in the 1930s and 1940s. This study examined the individual and social characteristics of 500 delinquent males, who had been incarcerated in Massachusetts’ reform schools, compared to a control sample of 500 “non-delinquent” males from public schools in Boston. The non-delinquent youth were so designated because they had not been institutionalized and were not considered serious offenders. All of the youth were 10–17 years old, white, and lower-class with average IQs; enabling matched pair comparisons between delinquent and non-delinquent subjects. The original sample of youth were restudied when they were 25 and then again at age 32. These two follow-up studies included 88% of both delinquents and controls (Sampson & Laub, 1993). The original study also included interviews with the youth, their parents, and school officials (Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Sampson & Laub, 1993).
Sampson and Laub re-analyzed the Glueck data, including their two follow-up studies, and then collected additional information on them up to age 45 (Sampson & Laub, 1993). They conducted a subsequent follow-up study of the sample at age 70 (Laub & Sampson, 2003). One of the findings of the follow-up studies was that 76% of the delinquent youth, compared to 20% of the non-delinquent youth, were arrested between ages 17 and 25. These differences were 61% versus 14% between ages 25 and 32, and 55% versus 16% between ages 32 and 45. In addition, 64% of the delinquent youth were charged with criminal behavior while in the military, compared to 20% of the control youth. Similar disparities appeared between the delinquent and control youth when considering parent and teacher self-reports of delinquency and disruptive behavior, as well as indications of early disruptive behavior in the youth, such as having tantrums. In addition, interviews of samples of the youth who became men suggested that behavioral patterns of delinquent youth transferred to more difficulties in marriage and work in adulthood, compared to the control sample (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Thus, one of the conclusions of the Glueck and Sampson and Laub studies was that patterns of offending among youth tend to persist and become generalized to other venues in life as individuals mature and become adults.

Further analyses of Sampson and Laub; however, suggest that an explanation for the persistence of delinquency, crime, and misfortune is the inability of delinquent youth to form and maintain strong social connections, or bonds as youth, especially in the family and school. These weak bonds carry over into adulthood. Thus, problems of delinquency generated in youth persist to additional legal and social problems in adulthood, as exemplified by continued patterns of arrest and incarceration, problems in military service, with marriage, and at work (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

However, the Sampson and Laub analyses also indicated that a significant number of the original delinquents did not continue to lead lives of crime and social disruption. Some were able to develop “turning points” in their lives, which tended to redirect their behavior patterns and lifestyles to conformist activities. Again, according to Sampson and Laub, these turning points were largely achieved through strong and stable marriages and employment histories, which were described in terms of “social capital” (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Laub and Sampson continued their analysis of the Glueck data by examining arrest data for the original 500 delinquents and interviewing a sample of 52 of those still alive at age 70 (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Their analysis confirmed the general conclusions from the first study; namely, that most delinquents desist from criminal behavior, especially after age 16. In addition, again for older youth or young adults, significant turning points were responsible for much of the desistance from criminality. However, this analysis also indicated that individual will, choice, or agency (i.e., the desire and will to change) contributed to the pattern of desistance for many individuals (p. 249). These conclusions are based on a limited sample of the original 500 delinquents studied by the Gluecks. However, additional research and reflection on this perspective continues to identify social
bonds as an important turning point, but underscores the importance of human agency as well (Laub, Robert, Sampson, & Sweeten, 2006).

The life-course perspective is part of a social development interest in theoretical explanations of crime and delinquency (Farrington, 2006; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Vold et al., 2002). Although social development has a long history in psychology, its use in sociology is more recent but becoming more commonplace. Often, a social development component is included in integrated theoretical perspectives (see discussion below). In addition, many social development views of delinquency incorporate aspects of social bond and social learning, along with a life-course view of delinquency (Huang, Kosterman, Catalano, Hawkins, & Abbott, 2001).

A relatively recent approach to the understanding of delinquency is the notion that delinquency is not just a common term, but involves more than one “pathway.” Some, such as Terrie Moffitt and colleagues, suggest that there are two predominant pathways to delinquency, the “life-course persistent” pathway and the “adolescence-limited” pathway (Moffitt, 1993, 1997; see also Chap. 3 this volume). The life-course persistent pattern suggests that some juveniles become delinquent, or criminal, relatively early in life, sometimes before school age, and remain involved in criminality well into adulthood. The life-course persistent pattern of delinquency pathway is often associated with relatively few delinquents, typically less than 10% of a delinquent population. Moreover, this sample of delinquents is involved in a variety of delinquent activity, including serious violent crime. The adolescence-limited pattern usually begins in mid-adolescence, lasts 1 or 2 years, and involves relatively minor acts of crime, such as minor theft or status offending. This pattern of delinquency fits the typical age-crime relationship, which suggests that most delinquents cease delinquent activity around the age of 16 or 17. It also applies to the majority of delinquent offenders. Research continues to support these two pathways as major patterns of delinquency (Moffitt, 2006).

The life-course persistent and adolescence-limited pathways to delinquency are not the only pathway views of delinquent patterns. Some have suggested that there are three patterns of delinquency: “authority conflict,” which involves status offending; “covert,” which includes acts of theft; and “overt,” which is considered the most serious pathway and involves violent crimes (Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, Moffitt, & Caspi, 1998). Regardless of whether there are two, three, or more pathways to delinquency, the concept that not all youth are equally delinquent is informative, and likely to remain a key component of theoretical perspectives on delinquency.

Labeling Perspective

The labeling perspective has two primary concerns in connection with criminality. First is the issue of law making and enforcing. That is, this perspective questions the motives and intentions of law makers and enforcers. Key questions from this concern are who makes the laws and how are they enforced? The labeling perspective views these processes as potentially discriminatory, or at least in need of research (Shoemaker, 2005). The second
concern of labeling theory is the impact of a label, typically a formal label applied by the police or courts, on the offender. Basically, labeling theory proposes that identifying one as an offender tends to separate him or her from the rest of society. The label becomes a stigma which is difficult to shed. One important result is the change in one’s identity to that of an offender and subsequent behavioral changes conducted to conform to the label and one’s identity (Shoemaker, 2005; Vold et al., 2002).

An important contributor to the development of the labeling theory was Edwin Lemert. As originally proposed, Lemert developed a perspective which applied to general patterns of deviance. However, the labeling theory has been applied to crime and delinquency as well. Lemert distinguished between primary deviance and secondary deviance (Lemert, 1951, 1967). Primary deviance is that which is not enhanced by the impact of a formal label. Its causes are many and varied, as seen in part by the theoretical overview presented in this paper. Secondary deviance occurs after a formal label has been applied, and ultimately results in a change of one’s identification, to that of a delinquent. It is as if the offender now says, “since I am called a delinquent, I will act that way.” In addition, the theory suggests secondary deviants begin to alter their behavior to accommodate the label and its consequences.

Of course, there has to be a reason for a label of delinquency to be applied in the first place, namely, an act of crime or delinquency, so in part, the rationalization implied with secondary deviance might be interpreted as a way of avoiding responsibility for wrongful acts. As mentioned earlier; however, the other concern of labeling theory rests with discriminatory or unfair labeling by criminal and juvenile justice authorities. Thus, in part, secondary deviance may be viewed as truly a reaction to being labeled through societal processes (Becker, 1973).

Of course, scholars recognize that the path from primary to secondary deviance is not as straightforward or inevitable as labeling theorists might suggest. In part, the theory seems to downplay the impact of human will, or agency, in the acceptance, or modification, of a label and its impact on one’s self-concept and behavior (Akers, 1967; Shoemaker, 2005; Vold et al., 2001). However, Lemert suggested that the movement from primary to secondary deviance was a process which involved several steps, any one of which could be broken by intervening factors. In addition, this process is replete with efforts by the individual to resist, or at least manage, the label of deviant or delinquent (Lemert, 1967). Whether that secondary deviance, with its change in identity and behavior patterns, occurs at all seems to be more a product of strong social pressures, rather than unthinking willingness on the part of the offender to accept the label when first applied.

Efforts to examine, or test, labeling theory have not uniformly supported its tenets (Shoemaker, 2005). Besides mixed empirical results concerning deviant identities based on formal applications of labels, and the issue of human will (as discussed earlier), there is the difficulty of reconciling the implications of secondary deviance with the typical pattern of cessation of delinquency at mid-late adolescence. Despite these drawbacks and questions regarding the labeling theory, its assumptions appear to lie behind many current practices and policies in the juvenile justice in
western societies, such as diversion, restorative justice and re-integrative shaming (Braithwaite, 1989; Braithwaite, Ahmed, & Braithwaite, 2006; Shoemaker, 2009). Thus, despite inconsistent evidence that the assumptions of labeling theory are accurate, considerations and modifications of labeling theory are likely to continue.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this chapter, several sociological explanations of delinquency and youth misconduct have been identified. It should be emphasized, however, that this discourse has not included numerous variations and conditions which might specify or modify the theoretical links with delinquency. For example, no separate discussion of female or gang delinquency has been presented, although certainly there are explanations of these examples of youth misconduct which could go beyond the broad explanations presented. In addition, no separate considerations of race, ethnicity, social class (especially middle-class delinquency), geographical location, or international settings have been presented.

In addition, many have suggested that explanations of youth misconduct be refined to include integrated or combined interaction models (Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985; Shoemaker, 2005; Vold et al, 2002). Combining or integrating different explanations of criminality is a challenging exercise, especially if the attempt includes micro and macro sociological explanations, and/or interdisciplinary perspectives. Often, integrated explanations of crime and delinquency include interactions between contributing factors and delinquency (Thornberry, 1987; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994). For example, a weakened social bond may be an explanation of delinquency, but delinquency may also weaken the social bond between a child and his or her family. Or, family conflict may interfere with academic performance, which, in turn, may lead to further conflicts in the home, both of which may contribute to delinquency. Thus, “cause and effect” can be reciprocal.

Further, explanations of crime and delinquency may be linked, especially when considering micro and macro-level theories. For example, social disorganization may well lead to weakened social bonds, which may be the more proximate contributing factor to crime and delinquency. The basic cause, which is social dislocation in a neighborhood, may thus be overlooked, or undervalued, as the explanation of youth misconduct because the concern is directed more at the proximate cause, that is, the relationship between the child and the family, or the school setting.

Thus, sociological explanations of crime and delinquency are considerably more detailed and integrative than this brief chapter can describe. In addition, modern explanations of crime and delinquency are becoming more interdisciplinary, encompassing biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives, rendering unique disciplinary efforts more difficult to establish. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that this overview of sociological explanations of youth crime and misconduct will enable the reader to appreciate the range of factors which can impact on delinquency.
REFERENCES


Clinical Handbook of Assessing and Treating Conduct Problems in Youth
Murrihy, R.C.; Kidman, A.D.; Ollendick, Th.H. (Eds.)
2010, XXIV, 544 p., Hardcover