

THEORIES OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

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Abstract

Juvenile delinquency for a long time has continued to be a controversial subject among psychologists, criminologists, and even sociologists. Many conflicting and likeminded arguments have been experienced with many scholars concentrating on actual reason, which can be simplified using different theories ranging from the conventional to existing ones.

Theories of criminology attempts to deliver predictive factors of delinquency, which optimistically let law makers to amend policies and acts to proactively address crime. This article explains various theories given by various researchers linked to juvenile delinquency. Some theories are more criticized and some are more acknowledged in a way of explaining juvenile delinquent behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Within the former 150 years, the examination of theoretical model became an essential measure for describing reason of delinquent behavior. A theory proposed connection amongst variables and try to describe in what manner and why that connection exist. Many conflicting and likeminded arguments have been experienced with many scholars concentrating on actual reason, which can be simplified using different theories ranging from the conventional to existing ones. Many theorists have come up with different descriptions seeking to explore developments in youth crime.

The Psychologists, Criminologists, Philosophers and Sociologists have done several studies to understand juvenile delinquent behavior and have put forward many theories regarding this. All theorists first try to explain the crime and delinquency from their own prospective ways. They have also concentrated on juvenile behavior and juvenile laws, because they have come to a conclusion that delinquency and crime are interrelated to each other. Most of the theories regarding crime and delinquency suggest that they cannot be explained in terms of one single facet.

Generally there are three major interpretations as “Biological Theories, Psychological Theories and Sociological Theories”. Faulty biology of juvenile delinquency is the basis of biological approach. According to psychological approaches they are varied in nature. According to the sociological theory there exist a connection between delinquency and the social organization of society.

1. BIOLOGICAL THEORIES:

Biological theory is grounded upon the notion that the ordinary body structure of criminals is generally different from normal human beings. The delinquency in a human being is as a result a biological occurrence, whose criminal tendency originates from his physical characteristics. ‘Cesare Lombroso’ is regarded as the founder of biological theory. Lombroso’s theory of criminology stated that criminality was hereditary, and that “born criminal” could be identified by physical defects, which confirmed a criminal as savage or atavistic. Physical attributes separates the normal human being from the abnormal human being. According to Lombroso, ‘criminal has certain physical characteristics such as low forehead, hairy body, red eyes, ear deformation, receding chin, big and protruding jaws, and an extreme sensitivity or non-sensitivity to pain.¹

Among the physical theories of delinquency, the most important aspect was phrenology i.e. the study of the conformation of the skull. Gall who was a physician visited various prisons and lunatic special homes to find the bumps and variations of the skulls; he came to a conclusion that there exists a connection between head ‘Knobs’ and behavior, to which he gave different names.²

Further researches found a relationship between physical appearances and delinquent behaviour. William H. Sheldon noticing populations in juvenile board identified a classification system, known as somatotyping. He created three somatotypes which are referred to as body types that he believed were related to deviant behaviour. Ectomorphs, who were skinny, delicate, flat, linear and likely to be, reserved who complained

¹ Sage Publications. (2020). Theories of Delinquency. Retrieved 2021, from https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/104796_book_item_104796.pdf

² Sage Publications. (2020). Theories of Delinquency. Retrieved 2021, from https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/104796_book_item_104796.pdf

regularly. Endomorphs who were heavy or overweight, with a round, soft bodies and likely to be easy-going and joyful. Mesomorphs, demonstrating muscular composition, were durable and possess aggressive traits. Sheldon claimed that mesomorphic types were more likely to commit crime. Over the next 25 years, Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck conducted research into juvenile delinquency. Researchers did not believe that juveniles were mesomorphic because when body grow, their body type's changes, a factor that these theories didn't reflect.³

One of the principal modules of biological theory is the idea of a genetic tendency to commit crime. To recognize genetic tendency towards criminality, researchers studied twins.

Differences between fraternal (dizygotic) and identical (monozygotic) twins is that dizygotic twins develop from two separate eggs and share about partial of their genetic material, whereas monozygotic twins develop from a single egg and share all of their genetic material. Researchers found that monozygotic groups have high probability of engaging in deviant behavior.⁴

However, twin studies did not consider environmental influences on behaviour and to deal with this issue adoption studies, examined the behaviour of adoptees is compared with the outcomes of their adopted and biological parents. The goal is to differentiate out the impact of the surroundings from the influence of genetics. Researchers pointed out that an adoptee with a biological parent who belongs to criminal background is more likely to get involve in crime than other adoptees and this outcome is stronger for boys.⁵

One more biological explanation for criminal behaviour includes the hormones, released by some of the body's cells or organs to control activity in other cells. Testosterone is considered the male sex hormone. Androgens are male sex hormones in testosterone associated with masculine traits, has been linked to violent and aggressive behaviour. Males secrete testosterone in higher levels than females. Researchers have found that higher levels of this hormone have been linked to violence and aggressive behaviour, both in males and females.⁶

Other body chemicals have also been linked with delinquent behaviour. Neurotransmitters are chemicals accountable for transmission of impulses in nervous system and have a direct impact on the many functions of the brain, including those that affect behaviour. Three specific neurotransmitters, norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin have been associated with aggression. Norepinephrine is associated with the body's fight-or-flight reaction in the body. Dopamine is a pleasure inducing chemical, plays a role in thinking and learning, enthusiasm, sleep, and responsiveness. Serotonin controls hyperactivity and low level of serotonin has been related with anger, aggression, and behaviour linked to low self-control.⁷

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES:

The psychological theories examined the effect of early life experiences on deviant behaviour. Some psychologists suggest that delinquent behaviour is a result of psychological problems, not identified during childhood years.

According to Psychoanalysis theory, unconscious psychological processes that developed in early childhood control the personality, and these psychological processes influence behaviour, including juvenile delinquency. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud describes three aspects of human personality and behaviour; the id is the pleasure seeking portion of the psyche, and does not distinguish among fantasy and reality. The id also is antisocial and knows no rules, boundaries, or limitations. If the id is left unrestrained, it will destroy the person. The superego is the result of moral principles, also responsible for feelings of guilt and shame and is more closely aligned with the conscience. And last is the ego, which keeps balance between id and superego. It deals with reality, distinguishes it from fantasy, and clarifies children to delay enjoyment because acting on impulse will get them into trouble. When these portions are in conflict, children may become disturbed and ready for delinquency. The purpose of psychoanalysis is to determine why the individual behaved in certain manner and what can be done to correct it in future.⁸

³ Sage Publications. (2020). Theories of Delinquency. Retrieved 2021, from https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/104796_book_item_104796.pdf

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Psychologist B. F. Skinner hypothesized that children learn conformity and deviance from the punishments and reinforcements that they obtain in reaction to their behaviour. He believed the atmosphere shapes behaviour and children identify those facets of their atmosphere they find pleasing and which ones are painful; their behaviour is the result of the consequences it produces. He concluded that children and adolescents replicate remunerated behaviour and dismiss penalized behaviour.⁹

Similarly, Albert Bandura suggests that children learn by modelling and imitating others. In his Social Learning Theory, children are observers and they imitate behaviours of another person who is closest to them.¹⁰

The psychological theory that most clearly matches the thinking patterns and personality of the individual with his or her consequent contribution in juvenile delinquency is psychopathy. Psychopathy is a clinical concept that is usually referred to as a personality disorder defined by a set of interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and behavioural characteristics that evident in wide-ranging antisocial behaviours. The individualities of psychopathy delivered like a blueprint for juvenile delinquency. Psychopathic persons are impulsive, manipulative, cold-hearted, arrogant, irresponsible, short-tempered and they lack in empathy. They are the ones who tend to violate social norms and victimize others. Research has also shown that the cold-hearted and unemotional qualities that are indicators of psychopathy are present early in life during childhood and these traits are mostly genetic in origin.¹¹

Researchers have also linked mental disability with delinquency. Intelligence quotient or mental aptitude is based on the performance on a standardised test. Many studies stated that imprisoned individuals are often less educated but it is not clear whether this shows low IQ. Many criminologists concluded that there is an unforeseen link between low IQ and delinquency. Juveniles with low IQ have been tied to bunking schools, poor test performance, and disobedient behaviour, including immoral deeds.¹²

3. SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES:

Sociological theories of juvenile delinquency point to social factors and societal processes that in turn have emotional impact on human behaviour. Sociology deals with people's behaviour using individualities beyond the individual. Mostly, these theories emphasize that certain undesirable phases of communities and society in general serve as an organizational encouragements for young individuals to resort to juvenile criminal behaviour. In this way, these theories lean towards to disregard psychological differences of an individual.¹³

One of the most noticeable sociological theories is the social disorganization theory. It was developed by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay. Instead of aiming on individual traits, they suggested that, the neighbourhood in which a person lived is the key factor for juvenile delinquency. Shaw and McKay studied the influence of the different types of places, such as neighbourhoods, that made conditions favourable to delinquency. They revealed that delinquency rates dropped, the farther one relocated from the centre of the city.¹⁴

Social ecology is an associated terminology that involves the collaboration of social groups conflicting for assets in the same zone. Sociologists Ernest Burgess and Robert Park observed waves of new immigrants who relocated in Chicago. They mapped the Chicago city into five concentric zones to highlight a variety of surroundings. Since most of immigrants were from economically backward class, they used to settle in the same region of low income area that was near to industrial unit jobs, which Park and Burgess referred to as Zone of Transition (Zone 2). When they become economically stable they would relocate to appropriate neighbourhoods. At the centre was the Loop, the downtown business district where property values were highest (Zone 1). Working class zone is

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¹² Sage Publications. (2020). Theories of Delinquency. Retrieved 2021, from https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/104796_book_item_104796.pdf

¹³ Sage Publications. (2020). Theories of Delinquency. Retrieved 2021, from https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/104796_book_item_104796.pdf

¹⁴ Sage Publications. (2020). Theories of Delinquency. Retrieved 2021, from https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/104796_book_item_104796.pdf

zone 3 which comprised of multifamily housing such as buildings. Suburban residential areas (Zone 4) are for nuclear family, and Commuter zone which is Zone 5 is extended beyond the suburbs.¹⁵

Twenty years later, Shaw and McKay applied the model of concentric zones to understand juvenile delinquency. They define the Zone 2 as the area with least collective efficacy which means the aptitude of neighbourhood to control behaviour of their inhabitants. Their work suggested that an atmosphere demonstrating social disorganization and absence of unified societal norms promotes delinquency. While this philosophy has faced criticism for its tendency towards ecological misconception. The crime rate may be higher in lower income group area, but it does not imply that every person living in low income area will be delinquent.¹⁶

Strain theory is a sociological theory developed by Robert Merton. This theory predicts the criminal behavior based on the amount of pressure that individuals feel to obtain societal goals and success. According to Strain theorist, success is measured in terms of accomplishment such as education, economically fit, constructive and strong relationships. People undergo strain or stress, when trying to achieve these objectives. Strain occurs when individual feel incapable to reach such objectives through lawful means. These negative feelings, in turn, generate burden for counteractive action. This is particularly accurate of annoyance and frustration, which motivate the individual for action, build a desire for revenge. Merton developed the idea of 'anomie' to define this difference between cultural goals and institutionalized means. Individuals may then experience anomie, and then respond with deviant behavior. Sometimes people become disappointed, and may participate in illegal activities as a result. Individuals may start consuming drugs to relieve the feelings of stress. Theorists attempt to define those influences that increase the possibility of a delinquent response.¹⁷

Related to this, strain is more likely to lead to criminal behaviour among individuals with few conventional communal supports. Family, friends, and others often help individuals deal with their problems, providing guidance, direct aid, and emotional support. In doing so, they reduce the possibility of a delinquent response.¹⁸

Merton believed that there were five means an individual could adapt to anomie. They are (1) conformity, pursuing socially approved goals through legitimate means; (2) innovation, using illegitimate means to obtain culturally approved goals. Example: dealing drugs or stealing to achieve monetary benefits; (3) ritualism, where people do not invest in culturally approved goals but stick to legitimate means; (4) retreatism, to discard both the cultural goals and legitimate means to obtain it, then discover a way to escape it; (5) rebellion, to reject the cultural goals and means, then attempt to replace them.

A contemporary version of strain theory was presented by Robert Agnew's, 1992. He suggested general strain theory. Agnew points to certain types of strain which were not reflected in these aforementioned versions and deliver a complete discussion of the circumstances under which strain is most likely to contribute to crime. He defines two general classifications of strain: (1) the threat to remove positive stimuli, and (2) the threat to present you with negative stimuli.¹⁹

Kohlberg's theory of moral development is an extended part of Jean Piaget's work that explained development of moral reasoning in children. Kohlberg identified three levels of moral development, with each level divided into two stages. The three levels of moral reasoning include preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. Preconventional level of moral development lasts up to age 9. At first stage, individuals see rules as fixed and absolute. Obeying the rules is important in order to avoid being punished. At the individualism and exchange stage of moral development, children recognize that different individual has different point of views. Conventional level is categorized by an acceptance of societal rules regarding right and wrong. The third stage of the interpersonal relationship is focused on living up to social expectations and roles. At this point behaviour is regulated by approval of others. The fourth stage is focused on maintaining social order where behaviour is controlled by authority and recognition of social norms. Postconventional level is categorized by an individuals' understanding of worldwide ethical principles. In fifth stage social contract between self and society is recognized, and behaviour is constructed accordingly. Final stage is based on universal ethics and morality. At this point, individuals follow these principles of justice. Kohlberg proposed that individuals move through these stages in a fixed direction, and that moral understanding is associated to cognitive development. He stated that

¹⁵ Sage Publications. (2020). Theories of Delinquency. Retrieved 2021, from https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/104796_book_item_104796.pdf

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deviants were individuals whose moral development was incomplete. They did not reach the same level of development as those who renounced from immoral activity.²⁰

One model used to assess development is Interpersonal maturity levels (I-Levels). This model describes an evolving societal perceptual structure of references that functions as a means of understanding interactions with people, surroundings, and even one self. There are seven I-Levels.

Level 1: one learns to differentiate between themselves and others.

Level 2: one learns to distinguish between individuals and objects, comparatively on the basis of their own desires. Deviant behavior generally occurs in Level 2.

Level 3: one begins to learn rules and can control their surroundings for their own profit.

Level 4: one observes events from other point of view.

Level 5: one becomes conscious of behavior patterns and relations.

Level 6: one can differentiate between themselves and characters they exhibit.

Level 7: one observe many ways for handling the world and make suitable selections based on other experiences.²¹

One of the most prominent criminological theories was developed by Edwin Sutherland. It states that delinquency is a learned behaviour. Individuals observe and learn means of committing crime. When they are in peer group that supports deviant behaviour, they are likely to get influenced. Sutherland termed this process as Differential association. The theory consists of nine propositions. First, Sutherland asserted that delinquent behaviour is learned. Second, delinquent behaviour is learned through interaction with others by the means of communication. Third, learning occurs within intimate personal groups. Fourth, when children learn delinquent behaviour, the learning includes different techniques for committing crime and motives, drives, and attitudes in a certain manner. Fifth, this specific way of drives and motives is learned from descriptions of the lawful code as convenient or inconvenient. Sixth, a child becomes antisocial due to an excess of explanations favourable to the breaking of law over explanations unfavourable to the breaking of law. Seventh, the propensity toward delinquency may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of learning experiences. Sutherland used the term intensity to refer to the degree of respect an individual gives to a role model. Eight, the process of learning delinquent activities include all similar mechanisms that are engaged in any other learning. While the content of what is learned is not the same, but the process for learning any behaviour is the same. Ninth, criminal behaviour and noncriminal behaviour are expressions of the same needs and values. The aims of delinquents and nondelinquents are similar, what differentiates them is the means they use to pursue their goals.²²

Subculture theory is one of the important theories in juvenile delinquency. A subculture is a sub group within a superior culture that provides recognition for its members. Subcultures

Contribute to a melting pot of language, customs, and values. Subculture can also foster criminality that often includes aggressive and violent behavior (Sage Publications, 2020).

A Subculture is a group that has morals that differs to the main culture. Subcultural theorists claims that deviance is the consequence of whole groups breaking off from society who have deviant principles and it is the outcome of these individuals following to the values and norms of the subculture to which they belong.

The children from economically backward class are generally involved in criminal activities like being a member of gang. Albert Cohen perceived that this group of children encouraged each other to engage in delinquent acts because they believe that they could not meet basic standard of living. When they get involved in juvenile justice system they developed negative self-image and face identity crisis. This led to status frustration a sense of personal failure and feelings of inadequacy.²³

Walter Miller developed a theory that is applicable to all males in lower class subculture. He does not believe deviant behaviour taking place due to the incapability of the lower class groups to attain success. Miller observes that they possess their own set of values, culture and traditions which are entirely different from those of other groups. Miller termed such values and beliefs 'focal concerns'. He describes the goal of delinquent was to embrace a different yet distinctive lifestyle, which incorporated the subsequent characteristics:

1. Smartness: looking good and being street-smart and entertaining
2. Trouble: getting out of concern.
3. Excitement: activities that deliver quick thrill or enjoyment

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4. Toughness: demonstrating masculinity and physical abilities
5. Autonomy: refuse to be pushed around by authority
6. Fate: accepting what happens, rather than planning

These focal concerns they possess are fundamental to their daily lives which lead them on the way to deviance.²⁴ David Matza and Gresham Sykes believed that despite the fact that juveniles commit delinquent act based on lower class potentials, they still wish to apt into the middle class culture. Sykes and Matza proposed that juveniles of lower class use methods of neutralization to defend their activities of deviance and crime when confronted with the outlook of a law abiding culture. Matza and Sykes made the following techniques by which, they believed, delinquents justified their unlawful actions:

1. Denial of responsibility: the offender will propose that it wasn't my fault.
2. Denial of injury: the offender claims that their actions did not cause any harm. It wasn't a big deal.
3. Denial of the victim: the offender believes that the victim deserved the harm and damage.
4. Condemnation of the condemners: the offenders maintain that those who judge their offense are shifting the blame off. They believed that police themselves are corrupted.
5. Appeal to higher loyalties: the offender proposes that his offense was for the good cause, which would defend their actions, such as I did it to protect my family.²⁵

The other major sociological theory of juvenile delinquency is social control theory. The purpose of social control theory is to recognize the factors that stop, protect, or prevent youngsters from contributing in delinquency in the first place.²⁶

Walter Reckless, American criminologist developed containment theory of criminology. He categorizes that there are inner and outer containment forces that confine an individual from committing a crime. The inner containments are the moral values, religious beliefs and level of self-control that an individual refers to when deciding on behaviour; the outer containments have direct control on individual behaviour and it come from family members, peers, teachers, or others who influence the individual to some degree. Both forms of containment can help an individual avoid deviant behaviour, but that individual has to also deal with external influences that might lead to deviance. These external influences include pressures such as joblessness and poverty, external pushes such as nervousness and annoyance, and external pulls such as subcultural expectations and deviant peer influences. The constant clash amongst all these forces determines whether an individual will engage in illegitimate activity. Reckless's containment theory gave upsurge to later control theories, counting those of Travis Hirschi, which became prevailing in the field of Criminology.²⁷

The most important social control theory is Travis Hirschi's social bond theory. A social bond describes an individual's connection to society which constitutes the bond. These bonds include: (1) attachment; (2) commitment; (3) involvement; (4) and belief. Each element of the social bond builds its own continuum, going from low to high. The weaker the social bond, the more likely the youth will engage in delinquency. Decades of criminological research have reliably stated that children who are strongly attached to parents are less likely to become delinquent. Hirschi explored that delinquent behaviour among juveniles were significantly related to following individual characteristics: weak attachment to parents (attachment), disrespect for law enforcement agency (belief), lack of ambition toward measures of legitimate accomplishment (commitment), and actions driven by deadliness (involvement).²⁸

There are several other theories of juvenile delinquency stemming from an array of theoretical disciplines. But the fields of biology, psychology, and sociology have been the most evident disciplinary opening points for understanding why young people engage in delinquent acts.

²⁴ Sage Publications. (2020). Theories of Delinquency. Retrieved 2021, from https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/104796_book_item_104796.pdf

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