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## CONSTRUCTING AND TESTING A MULTIPLE-THEORY (INTEGRATED) MODEL OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

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*The present study positions constructs of five popular criminological/sociological theories into an integrated or multiple theory model to investigate the causation of delinquency. The model was tested on a sample (N=532) of males and females who were being detained in a county juvenile facility. The theories of differential association and anomie contributed the most to the model while social control and self-esteem theories contributed the least, leaving the labeling theory to contribute a moderate portion to the explanation of delinquency. The model indicated that the more anomic youths and those experiencing less social control were more likely to associate with delinquent peers resulting in higher labeling and lower self-esteem. A comprehensive model of delinquency is better structured to depict the sequential and progressive attraction toward delinquent involvement than single theory models.*

### Introduction

The desire for a better explanation of the occurrence of juvenile delinquency has motivated a number of researchers (Elliott et al., 1985; Menard and Morse, 1984; Simons et al., 1980; and Johnson, 1979) to create multiple theory models or to explore the use of integrated theories where propositions are grafted from compatible theories into a form that has a broader explanation of delinquency than a single original or classical theory. Examples of efforts to expand the theoretical scope of a particular theory has been conducted by Thornberry et al. (1990), Elliott et al. (1985) and Weis and Sederstrom (1981). In these mentioned studies the researchers incorporated some elements of a social learning perspective (by including differential associations and deviant beliefs) with that of the elements of social bonding (Hirschi's social control theory). Although such a model cannot replace single theory models, it does provide an additional approach for social scientists as the etiological paths to juvenile delinquency are investigated. Dimensions of the social structure and social process representing the social environment and social interaction can be constructed into a multiple theory or comprehensive juvenile delinquency model. The melding of theories or propositions of theories challenges the traditional unidirectional causal order of delinquency. It argues that human behavior develops more dynamically over time as people interact with one another. A multiple theory approach recognizes the existence of a multidimensional pathway to delinquent involvement. A multiple theory or integrated model permits a synthesis and reconciliation among theories used in the model. Rather than single theories competing with one another there is a need for a more comprehensive investigation into the

developmental and reciprocal issues of delinquency that multiple theory models can achieve.

### Building an Integrated Model - Hypothesizing Delinquency

An integrated framework for delinquency needs to incorporate several components: the social milieu of the individual, the development of personal characteristics that originate within and external to the individual as they relate to behavior performance, and the mechanisms that impact the association with cohorts in the environment. Such a framework, in order to have a high degree of utility, must include both macro- and micro-level features. The following theories are incorporated into an integrated model which is tested by using correlations and multiple regression: (1) strain (anomie); (2) social control; (3) differential association; (4) labeling; and (5) self-esteem. The present model postulates that an anomic person who has low social control; who associates with people who are delinquent or commit deviant acts; who has experienced or perceived negative labeling and possesses low self-esteem will participate in delinquent activities more than someone who does not portray these characteristics.

Each theory or a construct representing it is treated as an independent variable in the model. The dependent variable is delinquent involvement, defined as the self-reported participation in acts for which an individual could be legally prosecuted, behavior for which one could be sanctioned (Segrave and Hastad, 1983; and Cernkovich, 1978). The level of delinquent involvement is determined by the subject's response to a self-reported index that covers a range of illegal behavior from minor offense (including offenses for which only juveniles could be prosecuted) to serious ones.

The term anomie (Durkheim 1897/1938; Merton, 1957) was used to represent the strain theory. The inclusion of this theory permitted the researcher to determine whether the youths sensed status deprivation, whether they possessed a sense of goal attainment and whether they perceived aspiration-opportunity disjunctions. The use of this theory suggests that for a youth to alleviate the strain caused by the environment in which achievement, possessions and status were often denied because of the lack of resources an entire new unconventional normative system was likely to be developed. The rationale for placing anomie into the integrated model is as follows: the experiencing of frustration, the perception of limited access to education or occupation and the feeling of an aversive environment causes the individual to display a strong sense of anomie. Because he or she is experiencing this anomic state, it is believed that the individual will participate in delinquency either to resolve the anomic state or this reaction serves as a form of rebellion. The structural variable in the model is essential because it has frequently been supported by research (Agnew, 1985; Bernard, 1984; Colvin and Pauly, 1983; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) that structural-based pressures are likely to drive an individual into delinquency.

The second theory added to the model was the social control theory of Hirschi (1969). Hirschi acknowledges that an individual gives into the motivation to deviate when there is weak bonding in the areas of attachment, commitment, involvement and belief to the conventional society. The elements are positively associated with one another. They independently and additively affect delinquency. A basic description of the four elements are: (1) *attachment* represents whether a person cares about the opinion and feelings of others, when there is a lack of concern about acceptance or conformity then low attachment exists; (2) *commitment* is a rational aspect of social bonding and is viewed as an investment in conformity, the more one has invested in the conventional lines of action, the less likely the person will be to jeopardize that investment by violating the law; (3) *involvement* in legitimate activities decreases the time or opportunity an individual has to contemplate and perpetrate an illegal act, he or she is locked within the confines of society and therefore has little inclination or the time to act in a deviant manner; and (4) *belief* involves acceptance of a moral order, if the individual possesses the values and norms of the society he demonstrates this by refraining from participating in deviant activity.

By combining the strain and social control theories it is suggested that delinquent involvement occurs because the juvenile has experienced status deprivation or perceived limited opportunities, and possesses weak social bonds to the conventional society, thereby facilitating a state of normlessness. The conceptual framework suggests that as the juvenile experience failure in attaining desirable goals and confronts disorganization at home, at school or within the community he attenuates his ties to the conventional social order, delinquent involvement is likely. Vulnerability to delinquent involvement increases when the individual experiences limitations and is ill-equipped to compete with his contemporaries because of his social environment, he is more likely to develop unconventional behavior and participate in illegitimate activities because they are more attractive and rewarding. These two variables have a direct path to the dependent variable (delinquent involvement), and they also have an indirect path by the influence they exert on delinquent peer association.

As the model is further constructed, differential association (Sutherland, 1947) is the third theory added. The differential association theory suggests that people engage in criminal behavior because of their excessive contact with criminals or with social settings where unfavorable attitudes and regards toward laws are fostered. The impoverished social environment and lack of a strong social bond to a conventional or moralistic segment of society allows the individual to interact with and even to form intimate relationships with those who possess similar attitudes and have experienced similar fates. Due to the lack of a strong attachment to parents who could transmit socially acceptable norms and values, the absence of a commitment to school and little investment in extracurricular activities that facilitate growth and social skill development, the youth seems more likely to begin associating with others who have no rapport with society. They are attracted to these individuals who possess similar dislikes

or inadequacies in dealing with the society and who frequent the same areas of the neighborhood. They may already engage in similar unconventional behavior and therefore are more likely to establish relationships revolving around that common identity. The participation in delinquency is encouraged because the youth's social acceptance by the delinquent peers is contingent on his performing certain illegal acts. Several writers (Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; Massey and Krohn, 1986; and Patterson and Dishion, 1985) have demonstrated the theoretical connection between social control and differential association. The consensus is that with each of the social control elements diminishing and with the individual residing in a social atmosphere identified with disorganization, the chances of this individual's succumbing to delinquent associates and incorporating the delinquent traits of his or her peer support group into his or her own character increase dramatically.

The fourth theory to be included in the integrated model was the labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951; and Tannenbaum, 1938). The basic premise of the labeling theory is that the individual who is labeled experiences stigmatization and that his or her own behavior is adversely affected by the belief that others are aware of the label (Farrington et al. 1978; and Farina et al. 1971). His interactions, relationships and attitudes are redefined as a result of this labeling process. This process does not occur swiftly, recast and limited alternatives gradually appear. Increased social distance from conventional activities and lessened status (Staats, 1978) are the result of the juvenile being labeled. The anomic state, the nonconformity and the delinquent peer association increase the chance of receiving stronger negative sanctions and crystallizing the delinquent identity. By being labeled the juvenile is forced to establish new group loyalties, and bonding to unconventional groups seems justified.

The last construct to be added to the model was self-esteem (used interchangeably with self-concept theory). According to a number of researchers (Bynner, 1981; Kaplan, 1980; and Rosenberg and Rosenberg, 1978) several traits produced by the theoretical variables already included in the integrated model and others not included can evoke negative self-perception. The possession of personal traits incongruent with the conventional society and the manifestation of behavior that permits the actor to be repelled by others increase his or her susceptibility to developing a low self-esteem. As a result of failure or the perception of rejection by others, this negative self-evaluation may become the catalyst for behavior that acts as a source of alternative positive reinforcement. Perhaps in a way, self-esteem is appropriately placed as the last independent and/or intervening variable because all of the preceding variables seem to contribute to a self-devaluing experience for the juvenile.

### Research Design

*Sample.* The data were collected in a large southwestern city, using a county operated juvenile detention center. A total of 532 out of 980 residents volunteered to participate in the survey during the one year period the survey was

conducted. No significant differences existed between the obtained sample (N=532) and the detention population.

*Demographics.* The racial composition of the obtained sample was 45% black, 30% white, 24% hispanic and 1% other. There were 426 (80%) males and 106 (20%) females in the sample. Twenty-nine percent of the sampled youths were in the ninth grade with the remaining grades containing less youths than identified here. Those fifteen and sixteen years old made up 59% of the total number of participants. All participants had a mother figure at home, but 65% of the participants had no father figure present at home.

Based on a self-reported crime index of criminal activity committed within the previous year it was revealed that 45% of the males and 49 of the females surveyed reported a very high participation in delinquency representing minor offenses (taking items from desks or lockers at school, vandalism and stealing items valued at or less than two dollars); 93% and 95%, respectively, of the participating males and females reported problems in the areas of school and family (second delinquent category representing acts such as truancy, runaway and hitting parents); 97% and 83%, respectively, of the participating males and females reported having committed illegal acts placed in the third category of the self-reported index representing drugs and medium criminal acts (smoked marijuana, used or sold other illicit drugs, gone to school drunk, and stolen items valued between ten and fifty dollars); and 85% and 42% respectively, of the participating males and females reported committing delinquent acts in the serious criminal acts category (stolen items worth more than fifty dollars, used physical force to get money, committed sexual activity for money or other favors, and had possession of a knife or gun with intention to commit an offense).

*Instrument and Variables.* A Likert-type questionnaire was employed to measure each part of the theoretical constructs included in the integrated model. Although the data were collected over a one year period, each participant was administered the survey one time. Each independent variable was measured by a scale: (1) anomie ( $\alpha = 0.822$ ) was measured by a sixteen-item scale representing the perceived access to educational goals and opportunity, and perceived aspirations, expectations and opportunities; (2) social (bonding) control ( $\alpha = 0.753$ ) was measured by an eighteen-item scale that represented attachment to parents and school, commitment to school, involvement in school, and belief; (3) differential peer association ( $\alpha = 0.891$ ) was measured by a ten-item scale that represented the attraction toward delinquent friendship; (4) labeling ( $\alpha = 0.724$ ) was measured by a sixteen-item scale that represented the perception of negative labeling as done by the parents, teachers and classmates; and (5) self-esteem ( $\alpha = 0.782$ ) was measured by a ten-item scale that represented the respondent's evaluation of his or her worth, value, self-respect and acceptance of self. A Cronbach alpha of 0.79 was obtained for the complete instrument used to measure the constructs (independent variables) in the integrated model.

A Cronbach alpha of 0.89 was obtained for the self-reported index that contained the areas of delinquent involvement (dependent variable): (1) minor delinquency; (2) school and family problems; (3) drugs; and (4) serious crimes. Subjects indicated how many times during the previous year they had committed each act within these four broad categories: never (coded as 0), 1 or 2 times (1), 3 or 4 times (2), 5 or 6 times (3), more than 6 times (4). The total delinquency score for a respondent is the mean of the sum of the products of each act's frequency and its seriousness weight (Wolfgang et al. 1985). Scale scores for the index ranged from 0 to 56.00, with a mean of 33.7.

**Analysis and Findings**

The correlation matrix was used to establish the direction and strength of the linear relationship between each independent and dependent variables. The strongest correlation was a negative one ( $r = -.54, p = .001$ ) between differential association and social control. It indicated that the institutionalized youth had a tendency to be less attached to, involved in and committed to the conventional norms, while his or her belief in social expectations appeared to foster little enthusiasm for society's regard. This lack of bonding encouraged association with those who hold similar contempt for society; therefore, the inverse relationship between social control and differential association appeared to be logical for the institutionalized sample. The motivation to participate in delinquent acts is likely to increase because the youth senses no obligation to conform to the normative society but may seek acceptance and social reinforcement by participating in delinquent acts with delinquent friends.

The weakest correlation was self-esteem and delinquent involvement ( $r = -.12, p = .05$ ). For the institutionalized youths the relationship between self-esteem and delinquent involvement suggests the possibility of delinquency enhancing self-esteem. This self-enhancement seems to occur not because the correlation is negative but because the correlation is so small. A large negative correlation would have supported the idea that low self-esteem and delinquency are highly related.

Table 1  
Correlation matrix, Means, and Standard deviations  
for the Institutionalized Sample (N = 532)

	Anomie	Social Control	Differential Association	Labeling	Self-Esteem	Mean	SD
Anomie						42.23	8.49
Social Control	-.3176					45.54	10.06
Differential Association	.4930	-.5419				29.46	7.63
Labeling	.3458	-.4701	.2742			46.40	8.47
Self-Esteem	-.3086	.3287	-.2354	-.3296		21.38	4.69
Delinquent Involvement	.3978	-.2064	.5145	.1949	-.1191***	134.80	81.25

All correlations are significant at  $p < .001$ , except one, \*\*\* $p < .05$

The correlation between differential association and delinquent involvement ( $r = .51, p = .001$ ) was expected. It was a rather high positive correlation as much of the previous research had suggested. When there is a high association with delinquent peers, a high delinquent involvement of the individual appears inevitable. The correlations between labeling and other variables were interesting: the strongest correlation was a negative one between labeling and social control ( $r = -.47, p = .001$ ). This correlation suggested that, for the institutionalized sample, the relationship between perception of negative labeling and the degree of social control was fairly strong.

The approach that the present research is taking is that low social control permits the individual to engage in negative or deviant behavior; therefore, his or her social audience negatively labels him or her. This relationship becomes tautological. The development of this correlation between independent and dependent variables has permitted a preliminary investigation of the relationship between the variables used in the present study.

The temporal order of this integrated model is based on a theoretical and sequential/progressive development of the individual into the committing of delinquent behavior. The model was constructed as a recursive model, although a nonrecursive model could be just as informative with the use of longitudinal

data. The constructed model explained 29% of the variance of delinquent involvement for the present institutionalized sample.

The bivariate relationship between anomie and delinquent involvement was small but significant ( $B = .18, p = .001$ ). The significant direct and indirect paths substantiate the idea that youths who are institutionalized for delinquent offenses do report aversive stimuli (their environment or factors within it) in the form of negative school experiences and frustration because of a lack of achievement (Franworth, 1982); parental conflict and an adversarial type relationship (Fagan and Wexler, 1987); the inability to escape victimization in one's own neighborhood (Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz, 1986); and the intimidation that such adversities have produced permit the youth to attempt a form of escape or anger-based rebellion (Agnew, 1989). The outcome is delinquent behavior quite noticeable in early adolescent and even evident in younger, pre-adolescent youths (LaGrange and White, 1985).

The first indirect path involved anomie, self-esteem and delinquent involvement. The indirect path contained a significant Beta ( $-.19, p = .01$ ) between anomie and self-esteem, and a significant Beta ( $-.11, p = .05$ ) between self-esteem and delinquent involvement. These results suggest that high anomie (frustration with one's social strata and limited perception of achievement) is associated with low self-esteem and that low self-esteem appears to lead to delinquent involvement. Caution is necessary in the interpretation of this relationship because all evidence (the low Beta weight) and other studies (Rankin and Wells, 1990; Rosenberg et al., 1989; Wells, 1989; Kaplan et al., 1986) continue to point to self-enhancement occurring or at least there is a chance of a very strong reciprocal process occurring here that is not detected by the present model. All information seems to suggest that alienated youths possess low self-confidence, evaluate themselves in a negative manner, see themselves as different from others and attempt to change that self-perception. Whether the youth drifts into delinquent behavior or consciously decides that this will be the mechanism by which he or she avenges his or her self-image is left to be resolved, we do know that self-esteem and delinquent involvement are connected.

By including an additional intervening variable into the relationship of anomie and delinquent involvement, the researcher attempts to expand the model and approach the original bivariate relationship from another direction. The indirect path from anomie to labeling to self-esteem and delinquent involvement presented two additional significant Betas (anomie to labeling  $.26, p = .001$  and labeling to self-esteem  $-.16, p = .05$ ). Another indirect path would be anomie to labeling then to delinquent involvement, a significant Beta is produced ( $.15, p = .05$ ). The present model confirms that institutionalized youths are likely to have experienced alienation, perceived negative labeling by teachers, parents or classmates and possessed low self-esteem. Those youths in juvenile custody, perhaps more than those youths who have never been detained by juvenile authority, are more likely to report the experiencing of a disjunction between immediate goals and the achievement of these goals, and that the blocking of

pain caused by their environment is less successful than what they would like for it to be.

A similar bivariate relationship (considering the influence of the intervening variables) between social control and delinquent involvement produced a small but significant relationship ( $B = -.14, p = .05$ ). By the relationship remaining significant it suggests that those youths who become institutionalized at some point in their adolescent years do not have a strong social bond to conventional society as have been demonstrated by numerous studies (LaGrange and White, 1985; Elliott et al., 1985; Aultman and Wellford, 1979; and Hirschi, 1969).

The intervening variables demonstrated that an individual with low social control is more likely to associate with other individuals who feel less constraints and moral obligations to perform behavior that is socially acceptable. All of the indirect paths were significant. According to the indirect paths a youth with low social bonding is attracted to other youths who feel the same estrangement from society and form an attachment with youths who can provide the socioemotional support ( $Beta = -.42, p = .001$ ). This low social bonding to conventional society and association with youths who engage in unacceptable social behavior as recognized by parents, teachers and adults of authority find themselves spending more time distracting than contributing, engaging in disruptive or idle behavior if and when they attend school. Negative labeling further propels the adolescent toward delinquency ( $Beta = .15, p = .05$ ). As similar to the indirect paths using anomie and the intervening variables, according to the model and substantiated by the delinquent sample self-reported crime index, low social control, high delinquent peer association and high negative labeling lead to low self-esteem. A low self-evaluation and a sense of stigmatization leads to delinquent involvement ( $Beta = -.11, p = .05$ ).

### Summary and Conclusion

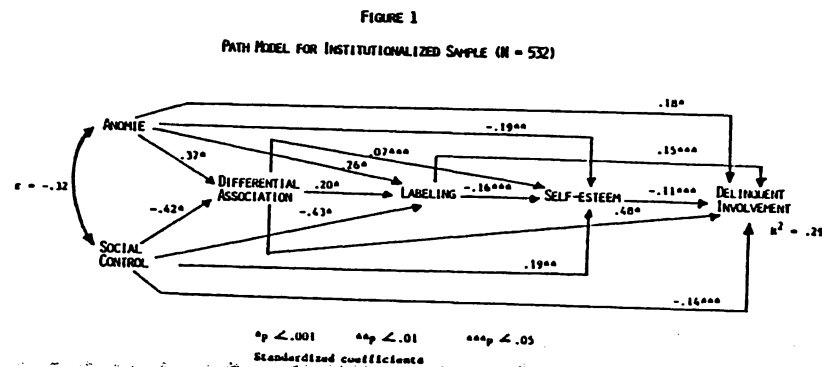
An integrated model ought to be inclusive, testing propositions and positioning variables so that a more comprehensive explanation is produced. It ought to resemble a net that has woven into it all of the salient propositions that address as many of the dimensions found in the phenomenon as possible. By integrating theories an elaboration is formed.

In the present model anomie, social control and differential association (contributing the most explanation) played a substantial part in explaining delinquency. Essential ideas derived from the employment of these theories were: (1) a social milieu or structural setting may exist that could propel a person into committing delinquent acts, while at the same time this construct does not capture the entire process that leads one to become a delinquent; (2) an individual who has limited or little attachment, commitment, involvement and belief to/in the conventional aspects of society is more likely to be free to participate in delinquency, therefore a low social bonding to the conventional world or a high social bonding to the delinquent subculture can produce the same results; and (3) association with peers whose motives, drives, rationalizations

and attitudes produce law-violative behavior draws the previous nondelinquent youth into the committing of delinquent acts, this camaraderie permits the learning of delinquent skills, the identifying with and eventual committing/participating together in delinquent activities.

Even though the labeling and self-esteem theories made significant contributions to the present model, the full spectrum of their contribution to the explanation of delinquency has not been identified. The future inclusion of these theories into a model of delinquency will have to increase the accuracy of their measurement and resolve the question of where they occur in the scheme of delinquency, whether before, afterward or reciprocal.

In addition to the theories employed in the present model, the review of other research using multiple theory models demonstrates the necessity of considering a number of combined theories when explaining delinquency. No variable should be summarily dismissed as theoretically and empirically irrelevant. The need to test more comprehensive integrated models will continue because the phenomena researched by social scientists are often complex and not totally understood when single theory investigations are performed. Further use of models that integrate the macro- and micro-level can only enhance the understanding of delinquency.



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