

Chapter 4

Theories of Juvenile Delinquency

Philosophers and researchers have attempted to explain the etiology of juvenile delinquency since early Greek and Roman times. In past centuries, for example, philosophers developed subjective explanations based on what they observed first-hand, while in more recent times, researchers have attempted to develop and expand theories based on findings from empirical research. Most causal theories of juvenile delinquency have attempted to integrate within one conceptual position a series of factors or variables that have been identified through research, or have been hypothesized based on research data, to be causing delinquency. As a function of integrating this information, theorists provide us with their best guess as to what are the cause(s) of juvenile delinquency. Caution must be taken, however, in presuming that these latter “best guess” positions are, in fact, causal statements since most theoretical positions are based largely on correlational research findings and other non-causal research findings and, as such, do not imply causality (Borowski, 2003). In this regard, given the complexity of the study of juvenile delinquency, as well as the characteristics and risk factors that have been found to be associated with delinquency, it is unlikely that any one current theory can explain what causes youth to become juvenile offenders. This is especially the case when one adds to this area of study the findings from the research literature since the mid-1990s on the relationship between cognitive, developmental, educational, and/or mental health disabilities and the performing of illegal acts by youth, as few theorists have incorporated into their theoretical positions the fact that there is a significant overrepresentation of disabilities among delinquents.

Another important consideration when examining theoretical perspectives in regard to juvenile delinquency is that many theories have little or insufficient empirical validation. While some theories have been shown empirically to have more predictive and statistical power than others, few, if any, are able to account for all the variation in risk factors associated with juvenile delinquency (Borowski, 2003). These theories, however, remain in various discussions of the etiology of juvenile delinquency since they provide an historical perspective on the progress that society and the social and behavioral sciences, as well as the biological

sciences and neurosciences, have made in the understanding of the factors that contribute to delinquency. In addition, these theories collectively provide researchers with a wealth of knowledge concerning potential hypotheses needing further investigation in regard to the origin(s) of juvenile delinquency. In our discussion below, we present an overview of the major theories of juvenile delinquency and provide a perspective on how these theories fare in relation to the contemporary research literature in developmental and cognitive psychology, child clinical and school psychology, and child and adolescent neuropsychology. Although certain disabilities found to be associated with juvenile delinquency are briefly mentioned in our analysis of each theory, a more detailed account of each disability and its impact on juvenile delinquency is discussed in subsequent chapters.

Theories of Juvenile Delinquency

Classical Theories

Classical theory of crime dates back to the eighteenth century and the work on crime and punishment by Cesare Beccaria, a philosopher and early advocate for reforming the criminal justice system (Beccaria, 1764/1963). This theory is based on the premise that behavior is the result of conscious, calculated thought, and it argues that individuals act on *free will* and make *rational choices* with the intent of achieving a goal (Shoemaker, 2005). Beccaria stated that individuals commit crimes voluntarily and do so because they derive pleasure and gratification from the acts. A juvenile delinquent, therefore, differs from a nondelinquent in the way that he or she goes about achieving goals: the nondelinquent abides by society's laws in his or her various pursuits, whereas the delinquent does not (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). For example, according to this theory, a juvenile may steal because he or she wants to steal a car, with the youth making a rational, independent choice to steal the car. Although this is a frequently referenced theoretical perspective, it is also often critiqued for many reasons, including that the theory (1) assumes all individuals have the ability to reason and act rationally, (2) fails to take into account individual differences such as age or cognitive ability, and (3) does not account for mitigating factors that may influence one's decision(s) to engage in criminal behavior, such as environmental stressors (Curran & Renzetti, 1994; Vold & Bernard, 1986).

Neoclassical theory is a close relative of classical theory in that it argues that individuals behave to gain pleasure and gratification; however, this theory does allow for environmental or individual factors that may influence the person's decision to commit a certain act or behavior (Vold & Bernard, 1986). Neoclassical theory takes classical theory a step further by acknowledging that there are individual differences between those youth who choose to commit a crime.

Another theory related to classical theory is *rational choice theory*, which takes the position that individuals commit crimes using reasoning and rational approaches to their behavior (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Similar to neoclassical theory, it also allows for mitigating factors that may influence an individual's choice to commit a

crime. Rational choice theory continues the classical thought that a crime is committed out of self-interest, but it argues that the decision to commit a criminal act is reasoned out and based on a “rational choice” (Onwudiwe, 2004). For example, an individual who decides to steal a car may decide that the benefits of having the car outweigh the risks associated with stealing the car. The primary criticism of this theory, however, is that it assumes that the individual has the ability to make a reasoned, calculated decision (Paternoster, 1989).

Classical theories assume that abstract thinking and behavioral regulation are inherent in an individual. While many individuals do have these abilities, the expectation that higher-level thinking, reasoning, and self-regulation are inherent in youth directly conflicts with current findings in cognitive neuroscience. In this regard, contemporary studies have demonstrated that children and adolescents lack the brain maturation to think and reason at the same level as that of adults (Kolb & Winshaw, 2008). This, therefore, calls into question some of the assumptions upon which classical theories were formulated, namely, that an illegal act is conducted only after a calculated decision has been made. For example, rational choice theory posits that individuals make a rational decision in whether to engage in a specific act, whereas a hallmark symptom of the mental health disorder attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is impulsivity, or the tendency to act *without* thinking of the consequences (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Moreover, behavioral and emotional *dysregulation* are symptoms associated with the mental health disorder bipolar disorder (APA, 2013); therefore, in the case of youth offenders having bipolar disorder, their symptoms would be inconsistent with the assumptions surrounding classical theories. A similar argument can be made for those youth offenders having an intellectual disability, since these youth do not have the intellectual capacity to logically reason at the same level presumed in classical theories.

Psychological Theories

Psychological theories assume that while environmental factors may influence an individual, the cause of juvenile delinquency is internal to the youth and, therefore, the individual is directly responsible for his or her behavior and actions (Shoemaker, 2005). This theoretical approach also assumes that the psychological disturbance in the youth began in early childhood. Types of psychological theories include psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories, as well as personality trait theory, social learning theory, and labeling theory.

Psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories assume that individuals develop in stages, at which point abnormalities may occur and, consequently, the development of their personality is hindered. This, in turn, leads to conflicts between an individual's personal desires and restraints placed on him or her by society, which may lead to delinquent behaviors (Shoemaker, 2005). The psychodynamic approach to juvenile delinquency can be traced back to Sigmund Freud (1900/1953). Psychodynamic theory assumes that delinquency is a manifestation of underlying constructs comprising

a person's psychological framework, including Freud's conceptualizations of the "conscious" and "unconscious" and the interactions between the *id*, *ego*, and *super-ego*. This theory, therefore, assumes that delinquency is the result of psychic conflict between the mainly unconscious ego and conscious superego (Vold & Bernard, 1986).

Personality trait theory, as related to juvenile delinquency, is similar to psychodynamic theories in that it assumes that traits develop primarily from childhood and are internal mechanisms controlling the individual's behavior (Shoemaker, 2005). Most research supporting personality trait theory describes general personality traits exhibited by juvenile delinquents. Eysenck (1977), for example, constructed a theory that specifically studied personality and delinquency. He stated that juvenile delinquents differ from nondelinquents on three dimensions of personality: psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism. Eysenck (1977) argued that delinquents score high on all three of these traits. More recent studies, however, have failed to confirm Eysenck's position or hypotheses (e.g., van Dam, De Bruyn, & Janssens, 2007).

Other research has also attempted to discern personality traits specific to juvenile delinquents, using such measures as the *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-Adolescent* and the *Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory* (Oxnam & Vess, 2006; Sorenson & Johnson, 1996; Taylor, Kemper, Loney, & Kistner, 2006). Although studies using these latter assessment instruments have yielded significant results, many of the findings have yielded poor predictive power (Shoemaker, 2005).

Social learning theory is based on the work of Albert Bandura and maintains that individuals learn to behave through their social interactions with others (Bandura, 1977). As applied to delinquent behavior, social learning theory suggests that individuals learn social behaviors such as delinquent behavior through modeling (Akers, 1977). It supposes that because social behavior is learned through modeling or imitating the behavior of others, criminal behavior will thus begin or continue when it is seen in others with whom the delinquent strongly identifies or when the youth observes that others are rewarded by engaging in the criminal behavior(s). If an individual observes others reinforced for a crime (e.g., peer support or attention, monetary gains), then she or he develops positive attributions and beliefs regarding engaging in similar illegal acts (Akers, 1977). In this regard, a study by Elliot and Menard (1996) investigated the relationship between delinquent peer group association and delinquent behavior and found numerous results that support social learning theory, such as: (1) the onset of exposure to delinquent friends typically preceded the onset of a juvenile's own illegal behavior; (2) adolescents tend to gradually become involved with delinquent friends and gradually become involved in delinquent behavior in early to middle adolescence and become less involved with delinquent friends and engaging in delinquent behavior as the person enters young adulthood; and (3) there is some association with delinquent peers by youth before they begin engaging in minor delinquent acts. Other studies have also found support for social learning theory, with many focused on the influence that family members, friends, and gangs may have on the youth's behavior (Caputo, 2004; Winfree & Backstrom, 1994).

Labeling theory assumes that the initial delinquent act is caused by a number of factors, with the primary reason for repeat offending being the label "delinquent"

appended becomes incorporated into the youth's cognition of himself or herself. This theory argues that the label alters the adolescent's self-image so that she or he construes herself or himself as a "delinquent" and, therefore, will act accordingly (Shoemaker, 2005). Labeling theory can be traced back to Lemert (1951), who focused on the impact of both formal and informal labeling on behavior. He identified formal labels as those which social agencies place on youth, and informal labels as those placed on youth by teachers, parents, friends, or peers (Adams, Robertson, Gray-Ray, & Ray, 2003). In this regard, Becker (1963) argued that peer social groups may also impact the affect of labeling, because many serve as social support systems for the youth in which their delinquent behaviors are accepted and supported.

Although many psychological theories tend to take into account the impact that a disability, particularly a mental health disability, may have on a youth's conduct, these theories typically focus on psychological variables or concepts that are internal to the individual. In addition, these theories appear to assume that a youth has responsibility over the acts in which he or she engages; a presumption that we indicated above in regard to classical theories has increasingly been questioned as a function of the findings from more contemporary research (Kolb & Winshaw, 2008). More specifically, these psychological theories do not take into consideration the increased presence of cognitive, developmental, educational, and/or mental health disabilities that have been found in juvenile offenders, which can subsequently have a negative effect on a juvenile's ability to engage in rational thinking and related decision-making. In addition, these theories do not account for the impact that a disability often has on a youth's social functioning which, in turn, may subsequently influence the youth's behavior choices and contribute to his or her negative social interactions.

Sociological Theories

Sociological theories posit that delinquent behavior is caused primarily by the environment. Personal and situational influences may be taken into consideration with these theories, but ultimately, it is assumed that delinquency is caused primarily by social factors in the environment (Shoemaker, 2005).

Social disorganization theory links social and demographic characteristics associated with those juveniles who commit crimes and is a frequently referenced social theory of crime. The theory proposes that juvenile delinquency is the result of a breakdown of institutional structures in the youth offender's environment (Lander, 1954). This theory hypothesizes that social disorganization in an area leads to a community's inability to maintain social order and exert informal social control. This disorganization, in turn, leads to the development of criminal values and traditions which replace conventional values and traditions, with the process then becoming a self-perpetuating revolving door (Bursik, 1988; Kornhauser, 1978). This theory argues that the disorganization occurs more readily in urban areas because of rapid

industrialization and urbanization, and it is often used to understand social conditions associated with crime rates (Jacob, 2006). Shaw and McKay (1942, 1969) were the first to apply this theory to juvenile delinquency. They studied delinquency rates in Chicago and found that in addition to juvenile crime rates being substantially higher in the central city, areas with low rates of juvenile delinquency were characterized by “uniformity, conformity, and universality of conventional values and attitudes with respect to child care, conformity to laws, and related matters...” (Shaw & McKay, 1969, p. 88). Relative to other theories of delinquency, social disorganization theory has had a substantial amount of empirical research to support its claim that juvenile delinquency is greater in an unstructured social environment (Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 2007; Lowenkam, Cullen, & Pratt, 2003; Osgood & Anderson, 2004; Rice & Smith, 2002; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Veysey & Messner, 1999).

Anomie theory is similar to social disorganization theory; however, a primary difference between these two theories is that anomie generally refers to larger societal conditions than does social disorganization theory, and it refers mostly to the inconsistency between societal conditions and individual opportunities for growth, fulfillment, and productivity within a society (Shoemaker, 2005). Anomie theory’s primary assumption in the etiology of juvenile delinquency is that youth who find themselves at an economic disadvantage are more motivated to engage in delinquent behaviors. The theory argues that if these individuals were allowed the same opportunities as others, they would not engage in delinquent behaviors. When these youth are not allowed these same opportunities, they become frustrated with society and engage in criminal activities or engage in crime acts out of economic necessity. Emile Durkheim first coined the term *anomie* in his work conducted in the late 1800s (Durkheim, 1893/1933). Although originally applied to labor and financial crises, this theory was applied to criminal behavior in Durkheim’s later work (Durkheim, 1893/1933). Durkheim’s work on anomie theory and its association with criminal behavior was continued by Merton (1957). He expanded on anomie, maintaining that it is a relatively permanent feature of society rather than one that only occurs during economic change. Merton suggested that criminal behavior results after one’s inability to obtain his or her desired goal(s). More recently, this theory was expanded upon and is now generally referred to as strain theory (2006, Agnew, 1992; Agnew & White, 1992).

Strain theory posits that it is strains or stressors in the individual’s environment that increase the likelihood of criminal behavior occurring. General strain theory is an extension of Durkheim’s (1893/1933) and Merton’s (1957) work on anomie work and states that individuals try to obtain certain goals as well as avoid painful situations. The attempt at avoiding painful situations may become frustrating for the individual and consequently produces strain (Agnew, 1992). Attempts to escape this strain may include criminal activities. Agnew described likely situations under which criminal behavior would occur in response to strain, including the strain (1) being severe or high in magnitude, (2) seen as unjust, (3) associated with low social control, and (4) creating some pressure or incentive for violent or criminal behavior (Agnew, 2007). Agnew explained the cycle of violence with this theory and has related it to the effect that victimization of adolescents can have on subsequent delinquency. Agnew (1992) noted in his theory that not all juveniles who experience

strain become delinquents, arguing that there are constraints, such as values, goals, self-esteem, intelligence, interpersonal skills, social support, or societal values, which may support the individual. Therefore, delinquency is less likely to occur if the costs of the delinquent acts exceed the benefits. Although available research is limited and in many cases methodologically flawed, empirical evidence does exist to support a general strain theory of crime (Broidy, 2001; Froggio, 2007; Ostrowsky & Messner, 2005; Perez, Jennings, & Gover, 2008). In addition, while strain theory does not specifically mention the impact of disability on juvenile delinquency, it does attempt to account to some extent for individual differences that may impact a youth's participation in delinquent behavior, such as intelligence, social skills, or internalizing difficulties. However, similar to the comments made regarding classical and psychological theories, sociological theories do not appear to take into consideration more contemporary research findings regarding the presence of poor impulse control, emotional dysregulation, or cognitive immaturity common in many youth having a cognitive, developmental, educational, or mental health disability.

Control Theories

Control theories of criminal behavior assume that the motivation an individual has to commit a crime is similar to the motivation for all other behaviors. Similar to social learning theories, control theories assume that behavior is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Control theories, therefore, seek to explain what drives the majority of society to refrain, in general, from engaging in criminal behavior. Types of control theory include social control and self-control theories.

Social control theory was developed by Hirschi (1969) and argues that when an individual's relationships with family, friends, and society are broken, they are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. According to Hirschi, individuals abide by society's rules and values because they fear having bonds broken with other individuals in society. Once these are broken, the individual has less motivation to abide by society's laws and, consequently, is more likely to engage in criminal behavior.

Self-control theory assumes that the basis for the development of conforming behavior is the attachments that children form early in life with parents or other caregivers. This theory argues that it is these early attachments and bonds that aid in the tendency of the child to regulate his or her conduct by developing an ability to delay instant or near gratification and avoid long-term negative consequences (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Specifically, self-control theory is the ability to delay short-term personal gain for long-term personal rewards and interests, and it focuses on socialization as a primary means for an individual to develop self-control (Gottfredson, 2007). In regard to delinquency, this theory maintains that while many delinquent acts provide for immediate satisfaction and serve desires, they do so only at the risk of long-term goals. Therefore, those with lower levels of self-control are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior than those with higher levels of self-control (Gottfredson, 2007).

Unlike the theories discussed in previous sections, control theories do account for the impact of impulsivity and behavioral dysregulation that are often found in juvenile offenders having a disability, suggesting that youth having less self-control are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. Control theories also appear to be able to explain why social difficulties may be related to delinquency, which is an important consideration when understanding the relationship between juvenile offending and disability. Although control theories do not directly discuss the interaction of disability and delinquency, they do provide researchers with a foundation for further exploring hypotheses focusing on the relationship between juvenile delinquency and disability.

Biological Theory

A *biological* approach to juvenile delinquency assumes that criminal behavior, whether it is genetically or biologically influenced, is caused by a mechanism internal to the individual (Hoge, 2001; Shoemaker, 2005). Classical biological theories assume that there is a biological basis within an individual that *causes* the criminal behavior, while more contemporary biological theories of crime maintain that the biological basis of an individual leaves one *predisposed* to commit a crime, implying that not all persons with a biological predisposition for crime will engage in illegal acts. Recently, researchers have identified certain physiological measures such as low resting heart rate, abnormalities or lesions in different areas of the brain, and slow EEG wave activity as being related to juvenile delinquency and antisocial behavior (e.g., Lorber, 2004; Ortiz & Raine, 2004; Patrick & Verona, 2007; Raine, 2002). Consequently, some researchers have posited that juvenile delinquency may be the result of hypoarousal, as these individuals have a need for sensation-seeking behavior (Eysenck, 1977; Raine, 2002).

A genetic theory of juvenile delinquency posits that delinquency is determined by factors passed biologically from the parent to child. The exploration for a genetic link associated with crime has existed for centuries, with early studies using a “family tree” method to explain the continuation of criminal behavior between generations of families (Fink, 1938; Shoemaker, 2005). A major criticism of this theory, however, is that it fails to account for any social learning that may be occurring. Twin studies are a commonly used method for supporting a biological link to criminal behavior. One of the earliest twin studies published was by Newman, Freeman, and Holzinger (1937). These researchers evaluated the concordance of juvenile delinquency in 42 pairs of identical twins and 25 pairs of fraternal twins. Results indicated that 93 % of identical twins were both adjudicated while only 20 % of fraternal twins were both adjudicated, strongly supporting a genetic link to criminal behavior. More recent studies have also supported the findings that identical twins exhibit higher rates of concordance on delinquency than fraternal twins (Reid, 1979; Vold & Bernard, 1986). A meta-analysis of twin and adoptee studies by Rhee and Waldman (2007) examined five studies focusing on criminal behavior and

14 studies focusing on aggression and concluded that there was a significant link between genetics and criminal behavior.

With regard to a neuropsychological basis to delinquency, research has consistently found that juvenile delinquents display a variety of neuropsychological deficits in the areas of verbal processing, executive functioning, and verbal memory (e.g., Linz, Hooper, Hynd, Isaac, & Gibson, 1990; Ross, Benning, & Adams, 2007; Teichner & Golden, 2000; Wolff, Waber, Bauermeister, Cohen, & Ferber, 1982). There are a variety of explanations regarding the etiology of the neuropsychological impairment, including natural brain abnormalities, illicit drug use by adolescents, or brain damage (Lewis, Shanock, Pincus, & Glaser, 1979; Millsaps, Azrin, & Mittenberg, 1994; Rosselli & Ardilla, 1996).

Despite the evidence suggesting a biological and genetic link to juvenile crime, the majority of available research focuses on adults. Given that many youth offenders cease delinquent behavior as they enter into adulthood, generalization of available studies should be done with caution. Moreover, in regard to the nature versus nurture debate, some contemporary biological theories do acknowledge the contribution that the environment may also have (e.g., Burt, McGue, Krueger, & Iacono, 2007, Dodge & Pettit, 2003). Dodge and Pettit (2003), for example, argue for a biopsychosocial model of the development of conduct problems. This model suggests that youth with conduct problems have a biological disposition toward certain cognitive and emotional processes, as well as sociocultural factors that place them at risk for conduct problems. These risk factors are then exacerbated and exploited or mediated by life events and environmental risk factors.

From our perspective, biological theories of delinquency provide a more thorough explanation of the relationship between juvenile delinquency and disability than do the other theories discussed in this chapter. As research in the field progresses, we are increasingly becoming aware of the cognitive factors associated with many disabilities in children and adolescents and how these factors contribute to the behaviors manifested by these youth. Biological theories presume that there is a brain-behavior relationship and that neuropsychological variables, such as emotional and behavioral dysregulation, are associated with various types of cognitive, developmental, educational, and mental health disabilities. As we stated in regard to control theories, we believe that biologically based theories provide researchers with a foundation for further exploring hypotheses focusing on the relationship between juvenile delinquency and disability

Conclusion

As was discussed in Chap. 2, juvenile delinquents are a heterogeneous group, with a number of risk factors being identified as being related to delinquency. While there is some empirical support for many of the theories of juvenile delinquency described above, few, if any, are able to account for the complex behaviors observed in juvenile delinquents. In addition, some theories assume a degree of rational

thinking or decision-making in these youth, which research findings have shown is actually a common impairment in many youth having a disability. These theories assume rational thinking, therefore, they do not appear to be applicable to those juvenile delinquents having a disability. Other theories, however, do appear to be more relevant to our understanding of the relationship between juvenile delinquency and disability, especially the control theories and the biological theories emphasizing a brain-behavior relationship. Moreover, the biopsychosocial model appears to address both the biological and social/environmental influences that may contribute to juvenile delinquency.

While no theory may explain the cause of juvenile delinquency, theoretical explanations are nevertheless important to consider, since they provide further scientific and professional discussion, as well as research hypotheses, on the possible factors that contribute to delinquency. An understanding of contributing risk factors is particularly important when trying to assess a youth offender's risk to reoffend, as well as when developing effective intervention programs for these youth. While these theories still cannot explain why, for example, many at-risk youth do not offend or help us identify those who will continue to engage in illegal activity through adulthood, they do provide professionals who work in this field with some direction regarding developing more effective intervention programs and better measures for identifying at-risk youth.

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