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# Upper-Class Adolescent Delinquency: Theory and Observation

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UPPER-CLASS ADOLESCENT DELINQUENCY: THEORY AND OBSERVATION

by

Nick Marsing

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Sociology

Approved:

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Logan, Utah

2011

## ABSTRACT

Upper-Class Adolescent Delinquency: Theory and Observation

by

Nick Marsing, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2008

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Delinquency in adolescence has captured the imagination of thinkers and researchers for generations. In this thesis, a unique segment of adolescent delinquency is examined: delinquency in upper-class adolescents. My experience working in residential treatment centers was a catalyst for this research and inspired the primary question which guides the work: “Why would upper-class adolescents commit delinquent acts?” In an attempt to answer this question, the “Big Three” (strain, control, and social learning) sociological theories of crime and delinquency are used to explore upper-class or “elite” delinquency. After examining each theory I demonstrate how none of them, individually, can adequately explain this phenomenon. Thus, I present an integrated approach to understanding upper-class or “elite” delinquency.

(82 pages)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this time to acknowledge the members of my advisory committee. The circumstances surrounding my presentation of this thesis have put them under considerable stress. I would especially like to thank Dr. Kelly Hardwick for the effort above and beyond that he put into helping me.

Nick Marsing

## PREFACE

This thesis was inspired by the author's five year tenure at a residential treatment facility in northern Utah. Through employment at one of these facilities, the author was able to gain insight into upper-class adolescent delinquents that an "outsider" would not be privy to. During this time, many things were seen, heard, and experienced leading the author to ask the question this thesis is trying to answer, "Why are upper-class adolescents delinquent when, according to most sociological theory, they should not be?" "The limited scope of research examining upper-class delinquency created an opportunity to add to this literature. Some statements made in this thesis come from observations made over the years of the author's employment at this residential treatment facility and are essentially anecdotal. These statements, however, come from the experience of working with privileged delinquent youth and their parents for many years. Furthermore, the knowledge and experience of other staff and advisors who have been in the industry for decades have shaped the validity of such statements.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, it would appear that teenagers have been the source of unique problems and been a cause of a host of concerns. As far back as the early Greek philosophers, teen problems have been addressed in the scrolls. Plato recorded Socrates as saying,

The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers. (as cited in Platt, 1989, p. 42).

Later, William Shakespeare wrote, “I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting” (1623, *The Winter's Tale*, III.iii).

Contrary to Plato and Shakespeare, Rice (1995) suggested that adolescence and adolescent delinquency are relatively new concepts. He implied that the industrial revolution, by changing the dynamics of work and the family, made property crime and other crimes easier. Mennel (1982) suggested that juvenile delinquency emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, confirmed by the first U.S. juvenile court opening in Illinois in 1899. As evidenced by the formation of this court, adolescent antisocial behavior has captured the imagination of policy makers and academics for over 100 years, regardless of how long “juvenile delinquency” has existed or exactly when it emerged.

The search for causes of juvenile delinquency has equally historic roots. In ancient times, it was generally believed that deviance was committed by people who God was testing or punishing, or that deviance was a result of demonic possession. Later, Barkan (2001) told us that the focus of deviance became “witches” and that between the 1400’s and 1700’s approximately 300,000 of them were executed, mostly by being burned at the stake. After the 1700s, during the enlightenment, the view of delinquency moved from a religious and supernatural view to a more scientific perspective. Thinkers of this time believed that deviant individuals rationally calculated the advantages and disadvantages of their actions based on how much pleasure or pain it would cause them. However, Auguste Comte suggested that crime was not a calculated process, but rather was determined by (human) forces beyond an individual’s control. Other scientists of this time attributed deviant behavior to biological sources. Lombroso (1876) suggested that criminals were not as evolutionally advanced as non-criminals. Criminals were *atavistic*, or evolutionary “throwbacks.” Even in the early 1900’s Ernest Hooton (1939) claimed that criminals shared unique phenotypic features and he called criminals “organically inferior.” Other theorists and researchers have suggested that body shape (Sheldon, 1949), family heredity (Rowe & Farrington, 1997), or neurochemicals (Brain, 1994) are directly responsible for criminal behavior.

Most sociological inquiry, however, has focused much of its attention on the lower, or working-classes, suggesting that class-position is the primary “cause” of adolescent problems (Bonger, 1916; Colvin & Pauly, 1983; Engels, 1845; Kvaraceus, 1944; Marx, 1887; Merton, 1938; Patterson, 1991; Reiss & Rhodes, 1961; Sellin, 1938; Spitzer, 1975). Some view lower-class status as not only a cause of problems, but as a

breeding ground for gangs (Miller, 1958). Others attempt to identify the difference between class and race influences on delinquency (Elliot & Ageton, 1980; Cohen, 1965). To the extent that class position is related to adolescent delinquency, sociological theories of crime have little difficulty in helping us understand these behaviors. However, when delinquency is more ubiquitous, and cuts across class lines, sociological theory is largely unable to account for middle- and upper-class delinquency.

While sociology has focused on lower-class offenders, there is a significant, and relatively unnoticed, new trend that has arisen over the last several years in the United States. It is not only lower- and working-class teens that exhibit problem behavior; upper-class teens do as well. Problems in adolescence appear to exist across the economic and privilege strata (Luthar & Sexton, 2004). Just as other teen difficulties such as cheating, drug use, violence, and others have been on rise (Collishaw, Maughan, Goodman, & Pickles, 2004), middle- and upper-class youth problems have escalated to include severe drug use, violence, eating disorders, gang affiliation, as well as increased mental disorders (Levine, 2006). Because of the increase in these problems, as well as an increase in public awareness, a relatively new form of treatment has emerged -- Residential Treatment Centers/Facilities (RTC/RTF) that target middle- and upper-class adolescent offenders.

RTC's that specifically target middle- and upper-class teenagers are part of a mature and evolving industry. Many of the students who attend these new facilities have families with more than sufficient means to pay for their stay (which can be in excess of \$8000 a month). While funding from local mental health agencies or school districts allow students from lower socioeconomic strata to attend these new treatment centers (or

attend treatment centers generally), in many cases attendance at one of these facilities is more readily available to families who have significant incomes as well as influence and status in their communities. For example, in some states, such as New York, parents *can* receive reimbursement for sending their child to an RTC but only after they have obtained the services of a lawyer and essentially demanded the reimbursement.

While there is great diversity in the nature of RTC's, an analysis of such would be beyond the purview of this analysis and lengthy seeing as how these programs can range from several weeks of intense therapy in the wilderness to very lengthy stays at boarding school style facilities. One of the few commonalities amongst RTC's is that youth leave their homes and are boarded at these facilities while receiving treatment (Frensch & Cameron, 2002). Interestingly, there is little public research available on their effectiveness and academia has great difficulty studying these facilities, which leaves a void in the available information on RTC's and concerns for parents and officials (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2006) It is known, however, that youth who attend these facilities often demonstrate chaotic behavior, display a propensity to harm others, engage in inappropriate sexual behavior, and have "difficult" parental relationships (Whitaker, Archer & Hicks, 1998). Furthermore, they appear to come from families with extensive dysfunction (Connor, Doerfler, Toscano, Volungis, & Steingard, 2004).

It is important to note that newer residential treatment facilities that target upper-class youth may be evidence not of the emergence of a new problem but, instead merely the result of broader recognition of a preexisting problem. This is reflected in the fact that the majority of the theories developed to explain adolescent delinquency have

focused almost exclusively on lower social classes or a related construct (Cohen, 1965). However, the existence of upper-class adolescent delinquency is strongly evidenced by the existence of Residential Treatment Centers targeted at treating such teens. Why then, if there is evidence of upper-class adolescent delinquency, has there been little-to-no research that focuses on this group of offenders? Even more disturbing is the relative absence of sociological theory dedicated to this phenomenon. While it would appear that most adolescent delinquents come from the lower and working-classes (Merton, 1938), the existence of a growing number of “elite” adolescent offenders must make any sociologists question their basic theoretical assumptions. Do sociologists show the same differential treatment of class that was demonstrated by the authorities in Chambliss’ (1973) work on “The Saints and the Roughnecks”?

The primary focus of this thesis, therefore, is to attempt to make sense of upper-class adolescent delinquency. Do the “Big Three” theories (strain, control and social learning theory) of delinquency explain the delinquency of privileged adolescents? How much attention have the fields of sociology, criminology, and adolescent delinquency given to upper-class adolescent offenders?

These are questions that need to be examined. Part of the reason they may have been neglected in the past is because of the difficulty researchers face in finding upper-class delinquent populations to study. It is likely that families with money try to prevent their children’s “follies” from being brought into the spotlight. Furthermore, upper-class families have the resources and social capital to keep their children’s behavior part of the “dark figure” of delinquency (Reiman, 2004). Upper-class adolescents who are delinquent may not experience the same formal or “official” punitive measures as other

youth. Instead, and increasingly, these youth are being sent to treatment centers which, for the most part, do not allow research to be conducted on their students. Although these programs generally do not allow research to be done, their presence does raise some very interesting theoretical anomalies. The most notable, as mentioned above, is that there is a growing industry dedicated to the treatment of upper-class delinquent or deviant youth.

Due to the minor amount of research done on this topic, and the apparent lack of theoretical focus or guidance, not to mention the difficulties associated with attempting to conduct research in this area, this thesis will be theoretically oriented. The major problem facing academics interested in exploring upper-class delinquency, at least according to most sociological theories, is that there is no reason to expect that the upper-class should engage in delinquency. In short, “why *would* upper-class youth, who come from privileged backgrounds and appear to have all the advantages of life, be delinquent?”

In mainstream criminology there are three theories that dominate the landscape. These theories have been referred to as “The Big Three” because of their historical importance and their impact on criminological research (Cullen & Agnew, 2006). These theories are strain theory, control theory and differential association or cultural learning theory. The focus of this thesis is on the “Big Three” criminological theories of deviance. This thesis will employ the Big Three theories, which have dominated the discipline for the past several decades, in an attempt to examine and understand upper-class adolescent delinquency.

## CHAPTER II

### STRAIN THEORY AND UPPER-CLASS JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

The first of the “Big Three” theories of delinquency and crime to be examined is strain theory. This theoretical paradigm will be examined by, first, reviewing its pivotal theorists and, second, by presenting a critical evaluation. In short, after a discussion of the theory’s general application to juvenile delinquency, a more in-depth analysis of the applicability of strain theory to the delinquency of upper-class youth will follow.

#### Anomie/Strain and Adolescent Upper-Class Delinquency

##### *Merton’s Anomie/Strain Theory*

The first and most influential strain theorist is Robert K. Merton (1938). Cloward and Ohlin (1960), along with other significant strain theorists such as Cohen (1955), Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) and Agnew (1992), credit Merton’s original statement of anomie/strain theory as the basis upon which all theoretical developments within the paradigm have their roots. Messner (1988) tells us that there are two separate components to Merton’s theory. The first component focuses on the concept of anomie while the second component focuses on how the social structure, for specific segments of society, may contribute to increased strain (motivation). Both of these components can, independently or together, contribute to increases in deviant or criminal behavior. It is important to note that both anomie and strain do not *automatically* lead to delinquent or criminal behavior.

Merton (1938) has suggested that anomie exists when there is an imbalance between culturally defined goals of success and the means of achieving those goals.

Anomie or “normlessness” emerges in a society when there is a disproportionate stress upon the value of specific cultural goals, while at the same time norms that regulate the means by which these goals may be attained are left relatively under-emphasized. What emerges in such societies (mainly capitalist) is a pathological “culture of success.” Such a culture leads to the use of legitimate as well as illegitimate methods as acceptable means to achieving success.

Strain occurs when an individual aspires to the culturally prescribed goals and discovers that the socially appropriate means of achieving those goals are not available to him or her. Merton suggests that while all members of American society are imbued with the same goals, certain segments of society, specifically the lower-classes, are more likely to experience “strain,” due to “blockage” of access to the legitimate means of obtaining those goals. While individuals from the lower-classes maintain a strong desire to achieve culturally induced goals of success, they often have no legitimate means of achieving them; hence, due to the strain and frustration associated with structural blockage, they pursue illegitimate means of achieving culturally defined goals.

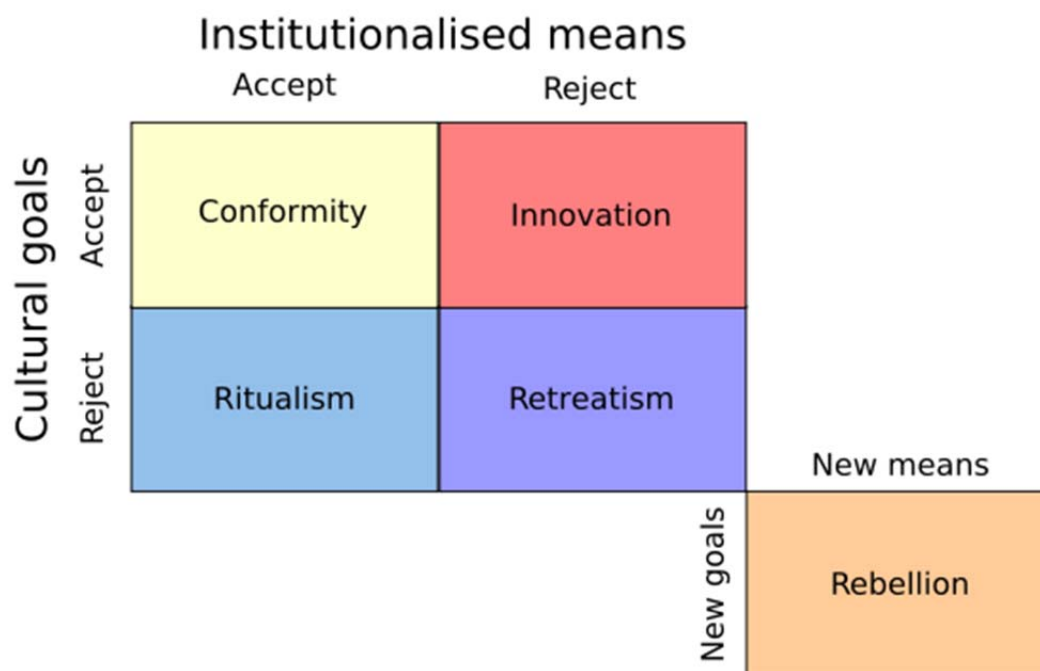
Merton focused on the goal of monetary success in America (Merton, 1938; Ross & Mirowsky, 1987). He suggested that criminal behavior should be the expected outcome when all members of society, regardless of advantage or disadvantage, are competing for the same overarching goal of financial success (1968). This problem is only exacerbated by the class structure of American society creating a less opportunistic environment for the lower-classes to achieve financial goals.

As mentioned above, Merton felt that delinquency and crime were not automatic outcomes to anomie or strain. Instead, he felt that individuals could “adapt” to anomie or



strain in one of five ways. The five basic adaptations he outlined are: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. According to Merton (1938), *conformity* is the most common and widely diffused adaptation. Because the majority of society conforms to the culturally accepted goals and use legitimate means to obtain them, crime is marginal. *Innovation* occurs when an individual accepts the cultural goals but rejects the legitimate means of achieving them. Instead of following legitimate means, these individuals “innovate” by choosing illegitimate means. In *ritualism*, individuals accept the means of achieving the goals, but reject or “give up” on the culturally prescribed goals of success. Thus they may not appear to be deviant. People who “choose” *retreatism* reject both the approved means and goals. They may seem “alien” to the society in which they live (Merton, 1938). Drug addicts and the homeless persons are said to have “chosen” this adaptation. Those who choose the *rebellion* adaptation attempt to change the social structure and culture by devising new goals and means while denouncing the old. All individuals derive satisfaction from the achievement of goals. Since society places such value on these goals, it is easy to understand why those who continually suffer defeat when trying to achieve their aspirations using socially acceptable means would “work for a change in the rules of the game” (Merton, 1938, 1968).

## Robert K. Merton's Deviance Typology



*Figure 1.* Merton's adaptations to anomie and strain

The above is a graphical representation of the possible adaptations that a person may "choose" when confronted with strain. In short, individuals have several "choices" they could make upon which their delinquent or non-delinquent behavior would be predicated. It is also important to recognize that although these may look like personality traits, they are instead responses or adaptations based on a person's acceptance or rejection of the cultural goals as well as the institutional means of achieving them. According to Merton, these are role adaptations that a person begins to take on after repetitive and enduring failures to achieve success through socially approved means (Merton, 1938).

Merton's version of strain is clearly applicable to understanding lower-class delinquency but has obvious difficulty explaining upper-class delinquency since

structural blockage and strain are generally not experienced by the upper-class. Merton (1957) stated “The greater pressure for deviation is exerted on the lower strata” (p. 141). Merton’s theory naturally drifts toward the notion of the lower-classes having much higher rates of delinquency and crime because of differential access to the legitimate means of achieving financial success. This focus unfortunately provides little room for understanding upper-class deviance. Privileged teens usually have the opportunity to achieve culturally prescribed financial goals.

#### *Cloward and Ohlin’s “Opportunity” Theory*

Cloward and Ohlin (1960), building on Merton’s theory, viewed the delinquent subculture as an important and missing part of strain theory. For them, an individual does not simply become criminal. Instead they must become an accepted part of a subculture of deviance, as well as accept the values of that delinquent subculture, in order to find legitimacy for their deviant acts. Cloward and Ohlin, therefore contribute to the development of strain theory by suggesting that many individuals simply desire money without the necessary changes to lifestyle or class-orientation, however, other individuals aspire to a middle-class lifestyle itself. Those who aspire toward “money” without concern for middle-class values (orientation) are more inclined to be criminal.

Cloward (1959) originally viewed “tutelage of a ‘professional’ criminal” as an important part of becoming criminal. O’Connor (2007c) joined Cloward and Ohlin (1960) and clarified that, upon entrance into a criminal subculture, an individual rejects their former lifestyle and conforms to the methods and rules of their new subculture. Some do this by questioning the legitimacy they once placed in the middle-class system.

When individuals find they cannot achieve their aspirations, Simons and Gray (1989) suggested that some find solace in “blaming the system.” When system-blaming does not ease the emotional pain, and individuals cannot achieve their prescribed aspirations, they begin to redefine status and to seek “higher status within their own cultural milieu” (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). This is especially true for adolescents. When they seek to increase their status within their interpersonal culture, they will often turn to delinquent or risk-taking behaviors (Lightfoot, 1997).

Cloward and Ohlin’s view is troubling when we try to apply this theory to upper-class adolescent delinquency. Criminal subcultures, which are in opposition to middle- and upper-class values, do not exist or are less likely to be attractive to wealthy teens, even ones who are feeling cultural strain. According to their theory, upper-class delinquent youth would exhibit no lower-class orientation, have an abundance of money, and not feel pressure to achieve a higher status as lower-class teens.

#### *Cohen and “Status”*

Cohen (1965) criticized Merton’s theory by suggesting that it focused too much on the individual (i.e. goals, aspirations, etc.). He moved the concept of goal achievement and goal setting out of the general cultural milieu where Merton had placed it and set it in a social comparison environment. Cohen said, “The level of goal attainment that will seem just and reasonable to concrete actors, and therefore the sufficiency of available means, will be relative to the attainments of others who serve as reference objects” (1965, p. 6). Cohen’s (1965) conception of delinquency, therefore, is based on social or ‘role’ comparison. He and Ranulf (1938) suggest that indignation and

resentment would result when a person compares themselves to another who is more successful.

According to Merton's theory, when individuals feel strain, they are left to their own devices. Cohen (1955) criticized Merton for this and maintains that role comparisons play an important factor in the decision-making process. Cohen also suggested that people do not simply jump from feeling strain to perusing illegitimate means of achieving their goals. In Cohen's words, delinquent individuals go through a process of, "tentative, groping, advancing, backtracking and sounding out" (Cohen, 1965). After going through this groping and "sounding out" process, individuals come to reject middle-class values, upon which they formerly made their role comparisons, while becoming more delinquent via a building of new definitions (goals) of status (Cohen; Matza, 1964).

Cohen (1965), along with Polk (1969) and Elliot and Voss (1974), further focused on the educational system in the United States suggesting that it embodies middle-class values such as honesty, responsibility, industriousness, courtesy, etc. Thus Cohen's (1965) theory of strain became focused on middle-class values and institutions. In an educational system guided by middle-class values, lower-class youth are confronted with the demands of middle-class "success" but are unable or unprepared to meet those demands. They are forced to abandon the institution primarily responsible for transmitting middle-class values and pursue their own (often delinquent) definitions of success. This can at times be done by joining a criminal subculture as suggested by Cloward and Ohlin (1960). In short, Cohen highlights the concept of status rather than material success.

Once lower-class youth reject middle-class status, Cohen hypothesized that youth who have been pressured by an inability to meet middle-class demands for extended periods, begin to form, through interactions with others, entirely contrary emotions, values, and definitions of success (Cohen, 1965; Eve, 1978; O'Conner, 2007c). Likewise, Stinchcombe (1964) and Berman and Haug (1975) focused on "status prospects" rather than "status origins" (i.e. where a person perceived where they were headed was more important than where they came from). They found that rebellion is lower among career- and college-oriented youth, whereas delinquency will be more common in youth who have a working-class future.

Phillips and Kelly (1979) credit Cohen's theory of school failure as identifying an important catalyst for delinquency. Phillips and Kelly contended that when both school status and social class are controlled for, it is school status which has a greater correlation to adolescent misconduct. Polk (1969) recorded data from white and blue-collar young men and found that even white-collar young men who were academically unsuccessful had increased rates of delinquency. More recently, Thornberry (2004) posited three additional forms of adolescent strain that may cause delinquency. These include becoming popular with their peers (but lack ability or means to achieve it), a desire for autonomy (which is frustrated by the school system), and earning passing grades.

As one looks at Cohen's theory with a desire to understand upper-class adolescent delinquency, there are elements that give insight to, but do not adequately explain this phenomenon. Cohen's theory, while attempting to broaden Merton's original statement, does not, ultimately, contribute to a deeper understanding of middle- and upper-class delinquency. Cohen's theory centers on social role comparison in which lower-class

individuals compare themselves to middle- or upper-class individuals. In this sense, Cohen is unable to explain upper-delinquency because, generally, at least from the strain perspective, people do not look to “downgrade” their status. Adolescents from the middle- and upper-classes look up to those above them and are thus socialized to succeed in the institutions that supply status and success. In short, these youth have the means of achieving their iconic goals. According to Cohen, upper-class teens will not abandon school and it is unlikely that they will associate with those who are part of a deviant subculture.

#### *Further Criticisms of Strain*

Liska (1971) criticized strain theory in that it attempts to measure a construct (stress/strain) which is difficult to conceptualize. Bernard (1987) also identifies additional weaknesses with the theory. He suggests that it does not deal with individual strain and crime, can only use aggregate data, and is too culturally specific, making it impossible to find such groups to study. Another criticism of strain theory suggests that, although it can explain crime in early adolescence, it cannot account for crime over the life-course or the decrease in crime when a teen reaches late adolescence and young adulthood (Agnew, 1997; Gove, 1985; Greenberg, 1977; Hirschi, 1969; Matza, 1964).

Importantly, as outlined above, Robert Agnew (1985) made this observation about the shortcomings of previous strain theories.

A second major criticism of current strain theories deals with the relationship between social class and delinquency. The above strain theories predict that delinquency is concentrated in the lower-class, since low class individuals most often lack the means to achieve economic success or middle-class status. (p. 152)

He then attempted to alter the perception of the theory by introducing his own conceptualization of strain.

### *Agnew's General Strain Theory*

Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992, 1995a, 2006) moved away from the structural sources of strain, and began to focus on the causes of strain via personal experience. Agnew also attempted to merge many disciplines and theoretical orientations into one comprehensive approach to understanding delinquency and crime. Agnew (1992) begins his development of strain theory by contrasting the major theories of crime: control theory presumes that the breakdown of formal and informal social institutions allows individuals to commit crime; social learning theory focuses on the creation of a positive definitions of crime via association with deviant individuals; strain theory focuses on the pressure placed on the individual to achieve goals. Agnew (1995a) then begins to change the focus of strain theory from the societal level to the individual level, attempting to mix sociology with psychology. He posited that strain is what adolescents feel and that delinquency is a maladaptive coping mechanism individuals use when they do not have other coping mechanisms in place.

Agnew's (1992) general strain theory avoids the use of socially constructed goals. Agnew (2006) claimed that, regardless of class position, if a person with poor coping skills is ill-treated, they become frustrated and experience strain related to that ill-treatment and will react with criminal activity. Agnew attempted to broaden the definition of strain by first outlining general processes that lead to strain. These processes include *negative circumstances* producing strain (this is felt differently by each individual), *failure to achieve positively valued goals*, *the loss of positive stimuli*, and



*presentation of negative stimuli.* All of these sources of strain center on a “negative life event.” These negative life events appear to have an immense impact on delinquent behavior in adolescence (Hoffmann & Miller, 1998). Other events or experiences, such as positive relations, can mitigate the effects of strain (Agnew, 2006; Greek, 2007).

Agnew (2006) suggested that the frustration and anger an individual feels relative to one or more of the above sources of strain can lead a person to crime by decreasing their inhibitions and creating a desire for revenge. Increases in strain lead to an increase in anger, which in turn leads to an increase in crime. Agnew then identifies a host of specific experiences that may trigger strain, frustration, and anger such as not getting a raise, not getting the respect one feels they deserve, having masculinity called to question, inadequate shelter or food, physical assault, divorce, bad marriage, failing grades at school, assault of a friend, anticipating assault, reactions from negative comments, losing a boy/girlfriend, misplacing a valued object, the death of a friend or family member, abuse, neglect, and so forth. Indeed, Agnew identifies innumerable causes of strain. Agnew then attempts to fuse psychology with sociology by introducing three different coping strategies: *cognitive, behavioral and emotional*. Delinquency then becomes a result of negative or weak coping mechanisms. Brenzia (1996) found that those adolescents who feel severe strain and participate in delinquency “experience fewer of the negative emotional consequences of strain than their non-delinquent counterparts” likely due to weak coping ability.

In Agnew’s alteration of strain theory, however, he broadens it so much that his theory becomes, essentially, impotent or useless. Strain causing events are universal – a part of all people’s lives. All individuals have negative life events, but not all individuals

are criminal. Essentially, Agnew's theory surmises that "life" causes strain and therefore crime, and the use of coping strategies again comes back to class distinctions; those from higher classes learn better coping strategies.

### Conclusion and Discussion

In summary, strain theories have a difficult time accounting for upper-class adolescent delinquency. According to Merton's (1938) theory, it is primarily the lower-class that is affected by strain since its members have little opportunity to access the legitimate means to achieve culturally defined goals. One must therefore, assume that strain should not be prevalent in the upper-class. Inexplicably, Merton later (1968) noted that delinquency is not a mystery limited to one social class.

Is strain enough to explain why an individual, especially an upper-class adolescent, turns to crime? Are strain and crime isolated to the lower-classes? Bernard (1984) points out that delinquency is not constrained to the lower-class because aspirations are not a cultural construct, but rather appetites transcend class. Agnew (1995a) questions the relationship between class and delinquency suggesting that delinquency is also common in the middle-class. Some self-report scales of delinquency show less of a discrepancy in commission of delinquent acts by class (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1979). Hirschi and Hindelang (1977) suggested class and race are joined by IQ as a major predictor of delinquency by both official reports and self-report measures, but cannot tell us why even some bright, upper-class kids engage in delinquent and criminal acts. It is fairly clear that strain theory, as it is conceptualized, cannot provide us with an adequate explanation of middle- and upper-class delinquency.

### CHAPTER III

#### CONTROL THEORY AND UPPER-CLASS DELINQUENCY

Strain and control theories have some important and fundamental differences. Whereas strain theory attempts to explain why only some individuals engage in delinquency, control theories seek to explain why the majority of society is not delinquent. Lotz (2005) informed us that strain theory focuses on the inability to meet high aspirations as a cause of crime and control theory identifies high aspirations as a means of promoting normative behavior.

Liska and Reed (1985) suggested that while there are numerous social control theories, which may make it easy to lose sight of their common, identifying characteristics, all control theories assume that the motivation for crime is self-interest, pleasure and profit. All control theories begin from a common assumption of human nature. In short, nature, which is universal, supplies the motivation to delinquency and crime. Therefore, all control theories seek to understand what stops most of us from engaging in socially destructive behavior.

Control theories differ from one another with respect to the specific mechanism that controls individual impulses. For example, Reiss (1951) focused on the causes of delinquency as having their roots in juveniles' deficient ability to exercise self-control whereas Toby (1957), on the other hand, talked about "stakes in conformity" (i.e. whether a person breaks the law is mitigated by how much they have to lose by doing such). Toby's main argument was that some youth are more prone to delinquency because they do not feel they have much to lose. Nye (1958) introduced the family as the nucleus of social control. His premise was that youth who participated in delinquency

were more likely to come from a home where there was complete freedom, or alternatively, no freedom. Nye also detailed three types of control: direct control (direct use of punishments and rewards), indirect control (controls asserted through identification with non-criminals), and internal control (an individual's conscience or guilt). In the 1960s, Reckless (1962) focused on the pushes (pressures) and pulls of delinquency that exist in social networks. Those individuals who had strong containment, with a greater self-concept, or an "internal buffer", were more insulated from the effects of the social network's negative influence.

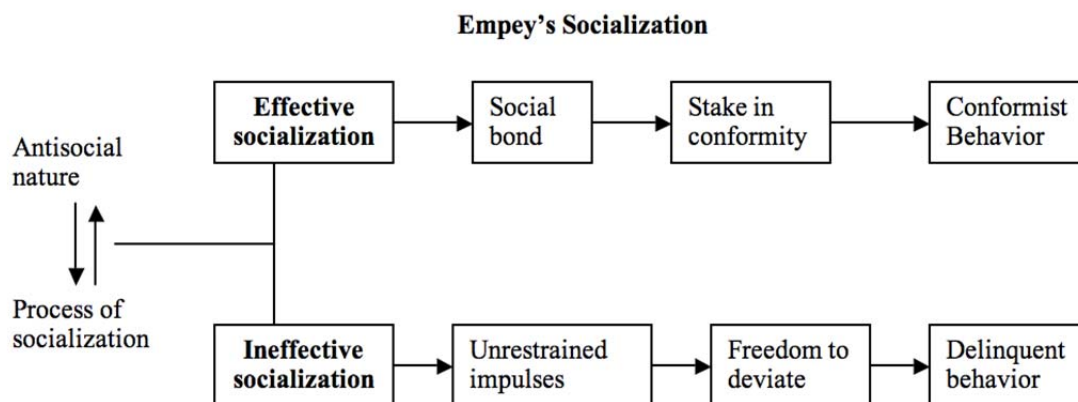
### The Social Bond and Social Control

In 1969, Travis Hirschi developed a theory which became the dominant perspective in most control theory circles. Hirschi's work focused on the "social bond within the family, the school and peers" - a bond made with conventional "others" or institutions through which an individual feels a connection to, or belief in. This bond would restrain individuals from delinquent activity. Hirschi outlined four distinct but overlapping elements to the bond. The four elements of Hirschi's social bond are *attachment, commitment, involvement and belief*.

*Attachment* is a person's affection and sensitivity to others. Attachment is formed by "the internalization of norms, conscience, or superego, which thus leads to the attachment of the individual to others" (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi clarifies that for a person to be deviant they must be willing to act contrary to the desires of the people who comprise the community or society. *Commitment* is the investment that an individual has in conventional society or his or her "stake in conformity." Drawing from Toby's (1957)

theory, Hirschi (1969) suggested that for a person to consider deviant behavior they must first weigh the consequences and possible risk of losing their personal investment in conventional society. *Involvement* is simply keeping busy, with conventional activities that restrict an individual's opportunities for delinquency. Involvement in conventional activities, which occupy time, is a key element of Hirschi's conception of the social bond. This is also emphasized by Sutherland (1973) who said that juveniles who are delinquent are those who do not have the opportunity to satisfy their interest for recreation in a conventional manner. *Belief* is the degree to which a person thinks they should obey the law. Non-delinquents know what society considers to be "good" and "acceptable" conduct (Hirschi, 1969) because they have internalized a belief in the moral validity of conventional norms.

Empey (1982), although a critic of Hirschi, identified the social bond as important and the crux of Hirschi's theory. He developed a graphic representation of how the social bond determines delinquent or conformist behavior (*Figure 2*).



*Figure 2.* Empey's Understanding of The Role of the Social Bond

Wiatrowski, Griswold, and Roberts (1981) agree that conformity is explained through socialization, which is accomplished through the development of Hirschi's four elements of a social bond. The stronger each element, the less likely an individual is to be delinquent.

### Self-Control

Hirschi was later joined by Gottfredson and changed the focus of his previous conceptions of control theory from the social bond to self-control. They (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 87) defined self-control as "the differential tendency of people to avoid criminal acts whatever the circumstances in which they may find themselves ... and the extent to which a person is vulnerable to the temptations of the moment." In an attempt to differentiate a self-control view of criminal activity, Gottfredson and Hirschi suggest that people differ in the extent to which they are restrained from criminal acts. This is different than the concept of criminality which suggests that people differ in the extent to which they are compelled to commit crime.

From Gottfredson and Hirschi's perspective, human nature is one of self-interest, greed, and gratification. Based on this assumption, they suggest that criminal acts require no special needs or motivation and that they are available to everyone. All humans are naturally motivated toward anti-social or deviant acts. Those who are not criminal have self-control.

When examining self-control, it is a natural question to ask, "What are the sources of low self-control?" The primary force controlling low self-control, according to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), is parental socialization. They contend that it is the

parent's responsibility to correctly socialize a child in the earlier and more impressionable years of life. As part of this socializing, they should set clear rules, monitor their children's behavior, recognize rule violations, and sanction such violations consistently. Early parental socialization prevents or promotes development of self-control. Larzelere and Patterson (1990) even found evidence suggesting that parental management could mitigate the effects of SES on delinquency. However, after these earlier years, self-control remains stable over the life-course. A person who has low self-control in later life has an increased propensity toward delinquency.

Based on their understanding of the nature of crime, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) spoke of several elements of self-control that are linked to criminal behavior. For example, since criminal acts provide *immediate gratification* of desires, those with low self-control have a more "here and now" orientation conducive to crime. Since criminal acts provide *simple and easy gratification* of desires (i.e. money without work or sex without courtship) individuals who lack self-control will be rash and impulsive. Also, Hirschi and Gottfredson suggested that criminal acts are *exciting, risky and thrilling*. Thus people who suffer from low self-control will tend to be adventurous and physical. Furthermore, crime provides *few or meager long term benefits* and *requires little skill or planning*. And as with most criminal acts, they often result in *the pain or discomfort of a victim*. Thus people with low self-control will be indifferent or insensitive to the needs and feelings of others and more likely to participate in crime because it fulfills their basic and impulsive needs. In short, the characteristics of low self-control include: impulsiveness, insensitivity, adventurous and a need for immediate gratification. In relation to this last characteristic, delayed gratification in adolescence is considered to be

very important for adjustment later in life (Block & Block, 1980; Funder & Block, 1989; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989).

Gottfredson and Hirschi point out that those with low self-control also tend to have a low tolerance for frustration. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) postulate that those who commit crime will have a difficult time calculating the potential adverse consequences of their actions. They also suggest that other areas of life will be adversely affected by low self-control such as education, occupation, interpersonal relationships, physical health and economic well being. This is even more disconcerting for those who do have low self-control because of the stability of this characteristic over the life course.

Since low self-control is considered to be stable over the life span, it can afflict a person late into their lives. In the long run when a person struggles with low self-control, throughout their lives they will be more likely to continue in crime or behaviors that are similar to crime such as smoking, drinking, or illicit sexual behavior.

### Control Theory Across the Life-Course

Sampson and Laub (1993) contribute to the development of control theory by extending Hirschi's social bonding theory over the life-course and, at least potentially, outlining its impact on self-control. Sampson and Laub's informal social control theory has three main premises: (1) Structural context mediated by informal family and school social controls explains delinquency in childhood and adolescence. (2) There is continuity in antisocial behaviors from childhood through adulthood in a variety of life domains. (3) Informal social bonds to family and employment in adulthood explain changes in criminality over the life-span despite early childhood propensity.



Those individuals who commit crimes as adolescents will likely feel the effects later in life as well. Crime rates rise quickly in the teenage years, peak at 16-18 years, and then diminish rapidly (Sampson & Laub, 1993). However, delinquency in adolescence is tied to various negative consequences in adulthood (Glueck, & Glueck, 1968). For example, antisocial and delinquent behavior severs adult opportunities and can cultivate criminal conduct because of damaged or weak social bonds (Laub & Sampson, 1993). These negative consequences as an adult, due to actions in adolescence have been found to be the greatest for lower-class individuals (Hagan, 1991). The middle-class youth who are somehow able to avoid the immediate consequences of their actions appear to suffer little deleterious effects as adults. Hence, being a member of the middle- or upper-class provides insulation from the negative effects of adolescent delinquency in adulthood (Laub & Sampson, 1988).

In adulthood, life events and social ties can counteract the trajectories of an earlier delinquent childhood. Social bonds, especially to employment and a cohesive marriage, are the most effective at stopping criminal activity and can act as turning-points in an individual's life. Gainful employment, for example, may cause the individual to develop an investment in their employment, and thus significantly reduce the likelihood of criminal behavior. However, achieving such a job is difficult if the person participated in delinquency in their youth. A spouse also can contribute to the creation of a social bond in adulthood and decrease the likelihood of delinquency. But previous criminal behavior decreases the likelihood of associating with or finding such a spouse. Upper-class adolescents however, have little worry of these future prospects and may never need to worry about them.

Sampson and Laub (1993) and Liska and Reed (1985) say that, despite neighborhood factors, juvenile delinquency is most strongly related to ties to parents and schools which exert the most social control and therefore keep youth from deviance. However, it has been shown that delinquency affects these relationships as well as being effected by them. School and home relationships are likely to be influenced by an adolescent's behavior and a strained attachment in one area, i.e. school, can lead to strained attachment in the other area, namely, family.

What differentiates Sampson and Laub's theory from that of Gottfredson and Hirschi is the issue of the role of self-control in the genesis and continuity of delinquency and crime as well as the stability of low self-control over the life-course. Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that self-control is *the* cause of crime and is stable throughout the life-course. Sampson and Laub, on the other hand, argue that there are life events and situations that mitigate a person's propensity toward delinquency. Momentous occurrences such as marriage and jobs can "teach" a person self-control and therefore change the course and likelihood of delinquency.

### Control Theory and the Family

The family has been the subject of much focus for control theorists. Since families are the first institution a child encounters and have the longest exposure to, it is the institution which has the most influence on norm adoption (Nye, 1958). From the control perspective, families come under a great deal of scrutiny with respect to the source of those traits which may produce delinquency. Reiss (1951), Hirschi (1969), Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), and Nye (1958) showed that families who do not meet a

child's needs are more likely to produce a delinquent child. Even more prone to delinquency might be those adolescents who feel that there are no consequences for their actions. Such "feelings" almost certainly have their roots in the family. O'Connor (2007a) emphasizes that almost all legal entities and jurisdictions are aware of how much influence the family can have on delinquency.

Discipline in the family has the ability to be beneficial or detrimental to a youth's likelihood of delinquency, depending on attachment. As Patterson (1982) suggested, parental punishment of a child for misbehavior is more effective, and less detrimental, when the children are strongly attached to their parents. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) stated:

Discipline, supervision and affection tend to be missing in the home of delinquents, that the behavior of the parents is often "poor." ... but in this form it does not represent much of an advance over the belief of the general public (and those who deal with offenders in the criminal justice system) that 'defective upbringing' or 'neglect' in the home is the primary cause of delinquency. (p. 97)

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) spent a great deal of time attempting to explain how inadequate parenting practices can increase the likelihood of an adolescent resorting to delinquency. In their theory, they identify areas in which a family can go wrong. These include: the parents not caring for the child, parents seeing nothing wrong with their child's behavior, and no desire to punish their child. Not only do they identify poor parenting practices, but Gottfredson and Hirschi suggested that the parents are responsible for the "minimum conditions ... to teach self-control" which include monitoring child's behavior, recognizing deviant behavior when it occurs and punishing such behavior. Parents with poor parenting skills, among the other factors mentioned, have a powerful influence on the probability of adolescent delinquency. Sampson and

Laub (1993) have also focused on the family as an early influence on delinquency. However, unlike Gottfredson and Hirschi, they feel that other institutions are equally important in conditioning behavior.

### Critiques of Control Theory

A major critique of Hirschi's theory comes from Empey (1982), who says that although control theory may accurately indicate the importance of attachment, there is no way to empirically test such constructs. O'Connor (2007a) reports that Hirschi believes that parsimony and consistency are more important than testability. Why, if everyone feels these impulses to commit delinquent acts, do only a certain few commit them? In his book *Causes of Delinquency*, Hirschi (1969) said, "To say a boy is free of bonds to conventional society is not to say that he will necessarily commit delinquent acts.... All we can say is he is more likely to commit delinquent acts" (p. 28)

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) posited that all people have the same desires to commit crime. The only difference between those who succumb and those who do not is the individual's level of self-control. They suggest that lack of self-control transcends class boundaries as do insufficient parenting practices. This means that a youth, regardless of socioeconomic background, who do not receive the minimum conditions to learn self-control from their parents, will be delinquent.

As a direct rebuttal to Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory, Rankin and Wells (1990) state that juvenile delinquency is "... complex, and multiple causes can often lead to the same behavioral outcome." Just because a person has low self-control, does not mean the person will become delinquent. Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, and Arnekelev (1993) said that

lack of self-control is not sufficient, but that opportunity to commit crime must also be evaluated. The opportunity to be delinquent is ever present; something other than lack of self-control must push a person beyond the breaking point to actual commission of crime. Empey (1982) similarly suggested that the focus of Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory neglects the impact of peers, demographics and structural organization which may have an impact on delinquency.

What would make certain individuals have less self-control, than others, and thus be delinquent? Hirschi and Gottfredson suggested that the source of low self-control is familial and social. While their approach seems to transcend class lines, they are aware that there appears to be significant class differences with respect to delinquency and crime. Instead of confronting the *appearance* of these differences, Gottfredson and Hirschi advocate that there are significant class differences in parenting and therefore in self-control. In essence, they contend that class differences are indirectly responsible for differences in low self-control and that these differences operate through familial factors.

Moving beyond early family influence, Sampson and Laub (1993) focused not on the causes of low self-control but instead, shifted their attention to relationships and institutions in adulthood that (somehow) mitigate the effects of low self-control. Essentially, the development of attachments to significant others or institutions in adulthood may help a person manage the impulses caused by low self-control. The problem with this view, with respect to upper-class adolescent delinquency, is three fold. One, adolescents have not likely had the opportunity to established these types of adult attachments which are so important to Sampson and Laub's perspective. Two, youth in upper economic brackets are much more likely to be certain of college attendance and,

thus, of securing gainful employment (which many may never need to work) relative to their lower-class counterparts. In short, the concern of this thesis is not what happens to upper-class adolescent delinquents later in life, but rather why they are delinquent in the first place. Why can they not exercise self-control?

A continuing critique persists that these control theories pay little attention to the role of socioeconomic status and by so doing fundamentally accept the function that it has traditionally been portrayed as playing in delinquency. In short, none of the control theories question the relationship between class and delinquency. Therefore they accept the role of economic status in delinquency and their theories naturally explain lower-class delinquency and not that of the upper class.

## CHAPTER IV

### SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY AND UPPER-CLASS DELINQUENCY

#### Sutherland's Differential Association Theory

Sutherland (1945) felt that a general theory of crime was more useful than one that focused on specific offenses or behavior systems. Sutherland's "differential association" theory was the genesis of all social learning theories in sociology. Sutherland wrote the first book on criminological theory and introduced differential association in 1939. He revised it and his final version was completed just eight years later without much change. Sutherland's differential association theory has been the basis for a number of other theorists work (Matsueda, 1988) from delinquent subcultures (Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960), to interaction among individuals (Cressey, 1953; Glaser, 1956), to the incorporation of social learning principles (Jeffery, 1965; Burgess & Akers, 1966). Before differential association theory, the prevailing causes of delinquency were thought to be mental disorders, alcoholic parents, social class, inadequate socialization, and so forth (Matsueda). Sutherland (1973) suggested that these characteristics are not causes of crime, but outward symptoms of a yet unexplained problem and a more general theory of crime should be used to explain them.

One of Sutherland's (1973; Sutherland & Cressey, 1978) primary objections to previous explanations of delinquency was that they failed to recognize that the conditions which are said to cause crime should be present when crime is present, and they should be absent when crime is absent. For example, Sutherland and Cressey (1978[1999], p. 237) have stated:

Research studies have shown that criminal behavior is associated, in greater or lesser degree, with such social and personal pathologies as poverty, bad housing, slum-residence, lack of recreational facilities, inadequate and demoralize families, mental retardation, emotional instability, and other traits and conditions.....*Research studies have also demonstrated that many persons with those pathological traits and conditions do not commit crimes and that persons in the upper socioeconomic class frequently violate the law, although they are not in poverty, do not lack recreational facilities, and are not mentally retarded or emotionally unstable.* Obviously, it is not the conditions or traits themselves which cause crime, for the conditions are sometimes present when criminality does not occur, and they also are sometimes absent when criminality does occur [italics added]. (p. 237).

Sutherland suggests that criminal behavior is like any other social behavior. His primary premise is that criminal behavior is learned. To expound on this he developed nine propositions that explain how a person becomes criminal: (1) Criminal behavior is learned; (2) Criminal behavior is learned in interactions with other persons through communication; (3) Learning criminality mainly occurs in within close personal groups; (4) Criminal behavior is learned through simple and complex techniques of committing crime as well as directing motives and attitudes; (5) Individuals learn to define legal codes as favorable or unfavorable; (6) A person becomes delinquent because of overexposure to definitions favoring violation of laws – differential association; (7) Differential association may vary in frequency, intensity, priority, and duration; (8) Learning be criminal uses the same processes as learning any other behavior; (9) General needs or drives do not explain criminal behavior because they are also provide the motivation for non-criminal behaviors.

Sutherland's theory then suggested that deviant behaviors are learned through associations with those who hold positive definitions of deviant behavior. Criminal



behavior has much in common with non-criminal behavior, and must be explained within the same general framework used to explain other human behavior. As Matsueda (1988) highlights, “Some groups define a given law as a rule to be followed under all circumstances; others define that law as a rule to be violated under certain circumstances; still others may define the law as a rule to be violated under virtually all circumstances”

While some data suggests that few people actually hold definitions unconditionally favorable of crime, there are some individuals who hold values conducive to crime (Cullen & Agnew, 2006). Thus, differential association may contribute to an understanding of crime. However, definitions vary in their influence based on four modalities: frequency, duration, priority and intensity. Exposure to definitions favorable to criminal activity that occur more frequently, for a longer period of time, at a younger age, or in a more intense manner become more important in the differential association process (Matsueda, 1988).

Sutherland and Cressey’s theory of differential association strives to explain the link between an individual’s associations with delinquent others leading them to delinquency. What is missing from their theory is an explanation of exactly how these favorable definitions become adopted by those associating with the delinquents. The true process of learning seemed to be a mystery to Sutherland and Cressey. To further expand differential association theory there needed to be a greater understanding of how mere exposure leads to the learning and adoption of delinquent behaviors.

## Bandura and the Psychology of Social Learning

To meet this need, influence came from behavioral and social psychology. In psychology, Albert Bandura's social learning theory stresses the importance of observing and re-enacting the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura (1977) suggested that "learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action" (p. 22). Bandura (1962, 1977) focused less on society and more on the observations individuals make of other individuals performing deviant acts. Bandura believed that delinquency can be learned through behavior modeling, also known as observational learning. This type of learning occurs in four stages:

1. *Attention* – The learner observes another person's behaviors or acts.
2. *Retention* – The learner goes through a process of remembering the behaviors or acts.
3. *Reproduction* – The learner has the opportunity to duplicate the behaviors previously observed.
4. *Motivation*. – The learner goes through all the previous steps then receives some kind of reinforcement (intrinsic or extrinsic) which motivates them to perform the behaviors again.

Through these four stages, the individual gains reinforcement for aggression and delinquency and therefore commits deviant acts.

Bandura (1965, 1969) also suggested that influences such as similarity and consequences influence whether a person would imitate a model. If an observer witnessed a model receiving positive reinforcement, they were more likely to imitate such behavior. On the other hand if they witnessed a model receiving punishment for a behavior, they were less likely to imitate that behavior. He also noticed that models of higher status and similarity were those that subjects were more likely to imitate.

Akers (1985) took Bandura's theory further by explaining how operant conditioning is involved in socially learned aggression. In his view, aggression is learned after direct observation along with direct conditioning and reinforcement. Positive rewards and the avoidance of negative consequences motivate the learning of aggression and delinquency. Akers continued to uncover a process by which people become criminal. First, through differential association with peers, adolescents begin participating in deviant behaviors. Second, newly delinquent individuals avoid punishment and seek reinforcement. Finally, delinquent individuals weigh the potential of future actions based on past experiences to decide if they will be beneficial or detrimental.

The additions provided by Bandura and Akers deepened the understanding of social learning theory. However the implications of their work are that by simply associating with delinquent individuals, one could themselves become delinquent by rejecting society's views of criminal behavior as 'wrong.' This suggests that delinquents are no longer "normal" people who hold "normal" social values and therefore feel no guilt at the commission of crimes.

## Sykes and Matza and Neutralization

In response to this apparent oversight of differential association theory, another prominent addition to Sutherland's theory was made by Sykes and Matza (1957). They disagree with the premise that delinquents have an excess of crime-favorable values. They point out that there are theoretical and empirical problems with this premise. Instead, these researchers show that most delinquents feel some regret and guilt for their actions and that many delinquents show respect for the law-abiding persons in their lives. In other words, the deviant is not free from the conforming demands of the dominant society. No matter how involved in a delinquent subculture, they cannot escape condemnation for their deviance. The demands for conformity cannot be ignored. Few individuals are delinquent all the time. Most people 'drift' between deviant and non-deviant behaviors

Sykes and Matza (1957) postulated that most individuals who commit crime are normal people who exist in the normal "mainstream" culture. But if this is true, how do delinquents and criminals accomplish their delinquent and criminal actions? What is being learned is not pro-criminal values and attitudes, but how to neutralize conventional attitudes. Sykes and Matza identify specific methods that these people use to justify their actions when committing delinquent acts; these methods are called techniques of neutralization. They arise as a means of lessening the effects of shame, guilt and social controls. These techniques include:

- *Denial of responsibility* – the deviant individual is not responsible for his actions.
- *Denial of injury* – no one was hurt in the course of the deviant actions.

- *Denial of the victim* – the victim deserved what they got.
- *Condemnation of the condemners* – changes the focus of blame to those who are condemning, call them hypocrites, or motivated by spite.
- *Appeal to higher loyalties* – The delinquent claims commission of the act was done for “the group” or for a purpose higher than themselves.

Similarly, Cressey (1978) employed the term “rationalization” as he examines how people who are trusted by others and have a view of themselves as trustworthy commit crimes. His usage of the term does not connote what a person does after the action, rather, what adjustments a person must make to their self-image before they commit the act. Davis (1949) identified that the easiest way to do something unacceptable is to “think up a reason.” Cressey also stated that we learn our rationalizations from association with a sub-group.

To test the techniques that Sykes and Matza postulated, McCabe (1992) studied cheating among college students. McCabe utilized the differential association framework of definitions favorable to breaking the rules to study how college students cheat. He felt that definitions or acceptance of cheating can change depending on the situation. LaBeff, Clark, Haines, and Diekhoff (1990) found that students who cheated “fit” into three of Sykes and Matza’s (1957) categories for neutralization: denial of responsibility, condemnation of the condemner and appeal to higher loyalties. In further application of McCabe’s study, LaBeff et al. found that the main reasons students cheated were pressure to get good grades and excessive work load. These two common reasons fall into Sykes and Matza’s “denial of responsibility” and “condemnation of the condemner” techniques of neutralization.

## Other Important Developments to Learning Theory

Several individuals have made additions to Sutherland's theory. Since the original theory of differential association did not specify the exact methods by which people learned to be criminal, Jeffery's (1965) theory of differential reinforcement tried to outline this specific learning mechanism through the ideas of conditioning history, deprivation, satiation, reinforcement and the absence of punishment. This last variable, the absence of punishment, or not getting caught, allows for the perpetuation of the criminal activity because there is only reinforcement and no punishment. Jeffery claimed that, "A criminal act occurs in an environment in which in the past the actor has been reinforced for behaving in this manner, and the aversive consequences attached to the behavior have been of such a nature that they do not control or prevent the response." Jeffery's theory is compatible with the classical school of criminology in that the perceived certainty of punishment, not its severity, is what deters people from criminal acts (O'Connor, 2007b).

Burgess and Akers (1966) also attempted to specify a more detailed process by which individuals learn to become criminal. Their addition started with a critique of Sutherland and Cressey's theory, stating that it was too difficult to submit their theory to empirical tests because of the difficulty operationalizing the concepts for testing. Burgess and Akers attempt to reformulate Sutherland and Cressey's theory so that it was more behaviorally oriented, essentially reconceptualizing the propositions in a more measurable manner. They distill Sutherland's nine propositions of differential association down to seven. The propositions have the same theoretical basis, but Burgess

and Akers show behavioral research supporting each proposition. Their propositions are as follows:

1. Criminal behavior is learned according to the principles of operant conditioning.
2. Criminal behavior is learned both in nonsocial situations that are reinforcing or discriminative, and through social interaction in which the behavior of other persons is reinforcing or discriminative for criminal behavior.
3. The principle part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs in those groups which comprise the individual's major source of reinforcements.
4. The learning of criminal behavior, including specific techniques, attitudes and avoidance procedures, is a function of the effective and available reinforcers, and the existing reinforcement contingencies.
5. The specific class of behaviors which are learned and their frequency of occurrence are function of the reinforcers which are effective and available, and the rules or norms by which these reinforcers are applied.
6. Criminal behavior is a function of norms which are discriminative for criminal behavior, the learning of which takes place when such behavior is more highly reinforced than non-criminal behavior.
7. The strength of criminal behavior is a direct function of the amount, frequency, and probability of its reinforcement. (p. 137-144).

Burgess and Akers (1966) theory was based on the principles of operant conditioning. In doing such, they found that even nonsocial situations, such as the physical effects of drug use, could reinforce criminal behavior. Burgess and Akers articulate that, "Behavior is a function of its past and current environmental consequences." Behavior is maintained because in the past it was rewarded, and has the potential for such in the present. Later Akers (1985) added that their theory is best applied to behavior within groups from which individuals can receive reinforcement, such as gangs, peer groups, or social groups.

Other theorists continue to highlight social learning by suggesting that delinquents "observe and learn in group interactions that some delinquent behaviors are encouraged and rewarded by the group. . . Individuals come to perceive their experiences as rewards or punishments in light of the groups' reactions or responses to them" (Delbert, Huizinga,

& Ageton, 1985, p. 34). An adolescent's peer group often teaches delinquency through positive enforcement of negative behavior and ambivalence toward conforming behavior.

Supplementary support of the social learning theory in the form of the adolescent "party" is given by Vaz (1967), who stated that "... the party is a prominent, socially structured situation for learning particular attitudes and forms of behavior. Similarly, within the youth culture, the party is a group event where the learning and transmission of conduct patterns occur" (p. 215). Acosta (2003) established that peers gain associations through activities and a mutually influential relationship forms between the activities and peer relationships, each influencing the other. For schools or families to inhibit delinquency they need to affect the peer relationships via the activities in which they participate.

It is sometimes suggested that adolescents who associate have like characteristics. Similar adolescents tend to gravitate toward each other. Hence, adolescents who have problems such as poor academic performance, school disciplinary actions, truancy, tardiness, or other similar problems are more likely to have contact with other teens who have analogous troubles (Cornwall & Bawden, 1992; Dishion, Patterson, & Kavanagh, 1992; Meltzer, Levine, Karniski, Palfrey, & Clarke, 1984; Wilgosh & Paitich, 1982). This association, however, can compound the problem. The concepts of "risky shift," "groupthink," and the "Abilene Paradox" in social psychology are more enlightening as to why this association could be problematic. Risky shift is the tendency for groups to take greater risks or be less conservative than individuals by themselves would be. Groupthink, on the other hand, is when group members sense pressure to maintain unanimity, subsequently discouraging critical and independent thinking. Finally, the



Abilene Paradox (also known as pluralistic ignorance) is when outward acceptance of a group decision is demonstrated, although each person inwardly disagrees (Lotz, 2005).

Once adolescents who have had problems start associating with others in a like situation, it may become more difficult for them to pull away from the group influence.

Linden and Hackler (1973) believed that adolescents want to maximize their approval and esteem within their peer group. Hence, youth will avoid acting in ways the group may not approve of, and try to act in ways the group will admire. There are four variables which can determine such actions: the closeness of the actor to his associates, the visibility of the action, the responsiveness of the associates to the action, the behavioral preferences of the group. This variation on Sutherland's theory attempts to link the peer association model of differential association with the attachment model of control theory.

Haynie (2001) agreed that delinquency of friends is influential on an adolescent's delinquency. However, she posits that the structure of the friendship network plays a large role. The adolescent's placement and popularity in the network can influence the amount of control peer delinquency has; the strongest association can be found in cohesiveness; the more cohesive the network, the stronger the influence on delinquency. This is consistent with the findings that examinations of peer groups as either cold or intimate are oversimplified. Friendship groups have vast differences which can have immense effects on the type, intensity and frequency of delinquency (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1986).

Assuming a youth has delinquent friends, Warr (1993) set out to understand if parental relationships can work as an obstruction to delinquency. What he discovered

was that it was not necessarily the relationship that a child has with their parents, but the amount of time they spend with them that can reduce delinquency. The parental attachment variable seems only to help indirectly by influencing the kind of friends teens make, hindering the formation of delinquent friendships. Time with parents either serves as a barrier by prohibiting time to associate with delinquent peers or by providing more exposure to socially approved role models and stronger desire for parental approval. Hirschi (1969) used the term “psychologically present” when describing how parents can influence teen delinquency when they are not present, a position which Warr also reiterates. Warr (1993, p. 247) made an important observation when he said, “Criminologists have long recognized the importance of family and peers in the etiology of delinquency, but these two social influences are commonly analyzed in isolation....” He then added how differential association theorists focus only on the peers and control theorists focus only on the family. Warr (1993, p. 247) continued, “This division makes for a certain intellectual neatness and theoretical contrast, but it seems wholly unrealistic.”

A parent’s knowledge or even suspicion about their child’s participation in delinquency can have adverse effects. When youth participate in delinquency, two types of labeling happen: (1) Parents label their children as delinquent; and (2) Youth perceive their parents as labeling them as delinquents (whether accurate or not). If youth perceive that their parents have labeled them as delinquents, they are more likely to persist in delinquency (Liu, 2000). Many times this identification of a child being delinquent comes from those with whom they associate. Erickson (1979) found that certain offenses happen more often in groups than on an individual basis. Some of the most common

criminal activities that occur in group settings are: property crime, arson, unlawful entry, theft, drinking and drug use.

Matsueda and Anderson (1998) tested the relationship between individual delinquency and peer group delinquency to ascertain which came first: individual delinquency or associations with delinquent peers. What they discovered is that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. Associating with delinquent peers does increase an adolescent's own delinquency but as the "birds of a feather flock together" effect is much stronger, delinquent youth will tend to choose groups who are delinquent. This can cause a downward spiral for some adolescents. Similarly, Neff and Waite (2007) found that among incarcerated adolescent youth social substance use in friendship groups was the preeminent predictor of personal substance abuse.

May (2003) reviewed others work and reported that association with people, especially peers who are deviant or criminal, is one of the strongest predictors of participating in delinquency. He goes on to explain how individuals participate in deviant behavior because of how the group rewards them for those acts. He also points out that some theorists now say that not only does the reward come from external stimuli but also internally. Such rewards may be manifest in immediate gratification of desires or more evidently in thrill-seeking. He said some acts may be "intrinsically pleasurable" and also pointed to the neuropsychological high that some of these behaviors may elicit.

### Critiques of Social Learning Theory

The question of which came first, the delinquency of the child leading them to the delinquent group or the delinquent group of friends leading the child to delinquency is

one of the more outstanding criticisms of differential association theory. Researchers such as Matsueda and Anderson (1998), and Neff and Waite (2007) have tried to answer this question, but have found no conclusive results. As Matsueda and Anderson pointed out, delinquent youth gravitating towards other delinquent youth happens frequently, but the more pertinent question is not about the youth who are already deviant, but those who perceptively start conforming to the group and, thus, *become* delinquent.

How many friends does it take to become delinquent? Lotz (2005) suggests that group processes are very powerful and Matsueda (1988) has shown that the frequency, duration, and intensity of contact with delinquent definitions influence the adoption of such values. Haynie and Osgood (2005) found that adolescents engage in higher rates of delinquency if they have delinquent friends, but also point out that unstructured socializing time adds to delinquent tendencies. They suggest that peer influence may be less powerful than previous studies portray, and that the different domains of an adolescent's life (family, school, friends, etc.) do not necessarily mediate each other. Another criticism of differential association theory questions where definitions favorable to crime come from.

Kornhauser (1978) critically points out that cultural deviance theories (in which she includes differential association) are based on six flawed assumptions. These are: human beings are completely plastic; social order must come from perfect consensus or it disintegrates into subcultures; deviance or crime is completely relative; conventional culture and subculture have equally powerful influences; behaviors are never delinquent only subcultures are. Kornhauser showed that social learning theory makes claims about

society and human nature which questions its power as an adequate explanation of delinquency.

Other critiques come from O'Connor (2007b), who pointed out that not everyone who associates with criminals becomes criminal. Unfortunately, Sutherland, who criticized other theories because he felt they did not adequately explain crime, failed to recognize this. Additionally, Jeffery (1990) accurately criticized Akers' work because it ignores the role of opportunity in criminal behavior. All learning theories have revolved around the notion that simple association with criminals can influence one to criminality and that humans are always perfectly "socialized" into social groups. However, it is possible that some individuals may be unwilling, unable, or resistant to socialization at the same time that opportunity can increase or decrease the likelihood of criminal activity independent of social association.

Although supporters of differential association theory, Jeffery (1990) and Akers (1998) have pointed out that Sutherland's and even Akers' original theories of social learning do not take into account individual differences. Different social situations will elicit different responses for different individuals. Individuals vary physiologically, psychologically, historically, and these differences may very well influence how an individual reacts to certain group pressures. This leads to one of the most outstanding arguments when trying to utilize differential association theory to explain upper-class adolescent delinquency; Sutherland and Cressey's theory focuses around *associations*. Their work has roots in the Chicago School approach (Cullen & Agnew, 2006) and, therefore, they assume that teens will associate with those physically proximate to them. Elite youth live in neighborhoods that have less social disorganization, less criminal

organization, less exposure to criminal values, less violence and delinquency problems, less heterogeneity with respect to cultural influences. Therefore, differential association is less applicable to understanding upper-class adolescent delinquency.

One last question with regards to differential association is why and how do people form the associations they have? What draws them to specific groups? Especially if a youth is not delinquent, what might draw him or her to a group of friends that are delinquent? Wealthy youth are less likely to be exposed to definitions in favor of criminality, so where do they come in contact with them, how do they come to associate with other delinquents, and how is it they fall prey to the temptations of deviance?

Still, some possible and convincing (anecdotal) answers come from troubled teens themselves. Most of the delinquent students with whom this author has dealt over the last five years were with peers when they were committing delinquent acts. Almost without exception, when these troubled teens were creating their relapse prevention plans, they identified their friends as a source of trouble. They needed to avoid them if they truly wanted to evade the same problems. This does not suggest that such associations are a necessary condition of delinquent behavior. Nor does it suggest that deviant values were learned from these associations. What it does suggest, at the very least, is that such association likely facilitate, rather than cause, delinquent behavior. Thus upper-class delinquency remains problematic for differential association since, according to this theory, exposure to an excess of definitions favorable to crime seems much less likely for this group of adolescent offenders.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The three most prominent theories explaining crime and delinquency fall short when trying to account for upper-class adolescent delinquency. This phenomenon is not new and sociology is no longer unaware of it. However, little theoretical or empirical work has been dedicated to learning more about the delinquency of elite adolescents. It seems that this problem is much like the proverbial “blind-men” and the elephant. In a review of eight deviance and criminology textbooks, all but one had sections dedicated to “white-collar crime” or “privileged deviance” (Cullen & Agnew, 2006). In those, the discussion was not of upper-class delinquency, but rather corporate crime (Pontell, 2005; Thio & Calhoun, 2005) or examined how “the elite” had the power to create or define crime as well as to control crime-control agencies (Berger, 1991; Kelly & Clarke, 2003; Lotz, 2005; McLaughlin, Muncie, & Hughes, 2005; Traub & Little, 1999). Laizos (1972, p. 105) reviewed numerous textbooks and found that, “The really powerful, the upper-classes and the power elite... are left essentially unexamined by these sociologists of deviance.”

The question of why upper-class youth become delinquent has importance since it is becoming apparent that upper-class delinquency exists. Recently, authors in psychology have begun to examine the false notion of perfection surrounding the upper-class. Luthar, along with several colleagues recognize the limited awareness of issues surrounding upper-class adolescents. Luthar and her associates, at least, show that the major issues which face these youth are substance abuse, anxiety and depression, unhealthy need for acceptance from peers, conduct disorder, and lack of closeness to

parents (in particular their mothers) (Luthar, 2003, 2005; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2004). The causes, according to this research, are pressures to achieve and isolation. Marano (2005) also reported, in a longitudinal study, that upper-class teens have a host of adjustment problems, in many cases, more than lower-class peers. This study identifies the familial pursuit of material wealth and mal-attachment with parents as the major cause of adolescent problems. When the question was posed as to why these kids have such serious problems when they can easily afford the therapy they need, the answer was an unwillingness of parents to explore problems that are an inconvenience to themselves, their privacy, potential embarrassment, and a desire to preserve image. Kasser and Ryan (1993) showed that aspirations for wealth are negatively associated with adjustment and well-being, and more highly associated with lower global adjustment and behavioral disorders.

On February 19th of 2007 “Contra Costa Times” reported that the California's Healthy Kids Survey had just been administered and showed that adolescents from their (affluent) county were more likely than their peers from a less affluent county to have problems with alcohol and illicit drugs. Pressure for success and disconnectedness were identified as the primary causes of this delinquency. Another suggested contribution to their delinquency was the means these youth had available to them that allowed for easy access to drugs and alcohol (i.e. cars, money, time) – means not often available to lower-class teens. Other news articles have recently emerged concerning upper-class delinquency. Fitzgerald (2002) wrote an article on the adolescent drinking problem in a wealthy suburb of New York. Smith (2002) reported on underage drinking among affluent youth in Florida. Scott (2003) also made a similar report stating that the police



in Florida and surrounding states had contended with an immense amount of these problems, mainly because affluent teens have access to cars and money. Colaveccio-Van-Sickler (2003) documented community concern for drug use among their teens in an upper-class Florida community. Pittman (1985) went so far as to say that wealth is not good for children. Among other drawbacks, he argued that it is addictive because it amplifies a sense of what is sufficient, belittles the adolescent's accomplishments and creates barriers for relationships.

Not only have articles been written for scholarly journals, but several psychologists have written books dealing with the subject. Kindlon (2001) wrote a book focusing on affluence and its relationship to raising children who have "character." Levine (2006) used her years of experience, along with any available data, to write her book *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*. In this book, she talks about how, in her private practice, she has seen a recent rise in the number of affluent youth with problems. She wanted to be assured that it was not just a series of isolated incidents and, after speaking with her colleagues, she found that therapists across the nation are experiencing the same trend.

More detailed analysis suggest that upper class students who enter treatment often possess similar characteristics. These include: poor impulse control, proneness to harm others, chaotic behavior, destruction of property, physical threats (Whitaker, Archer, & Hicks, 1998), poor parental relationships, depression, anxiety (Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Becker, 2002), a belittling of accomplishments (Pittman, 1985), and nearly all examined

had some form of adjustment problems (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Levine, 2006; Luthar, 2003; Marano, 2005).

### Social Perception of Upper-Class Delinquency

When Chambliss (1973) followed two gangs of delinquent youth, he stumbled on information which helps us to further understand the delinquency of upper-class adolescents. Chambliss associated with, followed and interviewed youth from these groups. One gang was made up of middle/upper-class youth and the other of lower/working-class youth. After observing them for 2 years, Chambliss reported on how each group acted, how each was treated, and how they were viewed by their community. What he found was that both gangs had a relatively similar level of delinquency, yet the gang of upper-class adolescents was treated remarkably different by the rest of society. The upper-class boys (The Saints) left school regularly, mistreated local business owners, got drunk, drove in a dangerously erratic manner, cheated in school and would frequently steal for thrills. However, in spite of their misconduct, the community viewed them as “good boys” who were well dressed, had cars, and were just “sowing their wild oats.” They were rarely caught, and in the rare instance that they were, they would politely beg for mercy and were never penalized. Teachers were often aware of their cheating in the classroom yet did little to punish or prevent it. As a matter of fact, if one of the boys had a low grade some teachers would give them a higher grade saying, “I know he could have done better.”

The other group of boys that Chambliss observed was the working-class group (The Roughnecks). They were also delinquent, but the community viewed them in an

entirely different manner. Community members viewed these boys as lazy drunkards who were rude to girls and stole from local business owners. The community was always well aware of the Roughnecks' involvement with the police. These boys were rarely able to leave the local community because they did not own cars, so they frequented local businesses. Their main purpose in stealing from these businesses was for the money, not thrills. They were usually not as drunk as the community perceived, in part because they could often not afford to purchase alcohol. Their involvement with the police was often on trumped up charges based on circumstantial evidence; only on occasion would the police actually catch the boys involved in criminal activity. Another major difference was that the Roughnecks were in regular attendance at school. However, their grades were not as high as those of the Saints and the teachers shared the community's negative viewpoint of the boys.

Chambliss (1973) noted that the primary difference between the two gangs was not so much the level of delinquency (for which he says the upper-class Saints were more delinquent) as it was the visibility of the delinquency. The Saints, because they had cars and money, were able to remove their delinquency from the vision of their community whereas the Roughnecks could be seen at all times by members of their community. He also notes their negative demeanor when interacting with authority figures as impacting the perception of the boys.

One of the most important findings Chambliss' work was his identification of the bias a community holds toward certain segments. When a lower-class boy is drunk or steals, he is delinquent. When an upper-class youth participates in the same activities he has simply made a mistake. Chambliss (1973) stated that, with regards to policing,

The answer lies in the class structure of American society and the control of legal institutions by those at the top of the class structure. Put quite simply, if the police treat middle-class delinquents (or cocaine snorting college students) the same way they treat lower-class delinquents (or black ghetto crack users) they are asking for trouble from people in power. If, on the other hand, they focus their law enforcement efforts on the lower-classes they are praised and supported by "the community": that is, the middle and upper-class white community. (p. 29).

Chambliss was not the first to identify such differences. Similar results were uncovered earlier by Sutherland (1945), Clinard (1952), and Cressey (1953) who found that there was a "white-collar criminality." Business men would commit crimes that were not prosecuted because they were largely undetected. If they were detected, "the status of the business man, the trend away from punishment, and the relatively unorganized resentment of the public against white-collar crime" minimized punishment because of the status of the offender or because of the apathy of the public. Another study by Wallerstein and Wyle (1947) was done with 1700 middle-class individuals who were "respectable" members of society. Over 90% who were questioned confessed to breaking one or more of the 49 laws on record for New York and several of these individuals had also committed felonies. Yet very few of them had been caught, prosecuted, or penalized.

This ambivalence toward the criminality of the white, middle- and upper-classes has also been researched in justice and law publications. Some of the first reports of police discretion toward adolescent delinquency came from Piliavin and Brair (1964). They brought focus to this issue and found that among other characteristics, the ones the police noticed the most were the youth's race, grooming, and demeanor. They also reported a racial arrest bias by the police. Even the Office of Juvenile Justice and

Delinquency Prevention (2007) recognizes that “both the police and the juvenile court system make assumptions based on observable character and labels.”

The quality, effectiveness, and impartiality of the juvenile justice system has been questioned for some time (Carter, 1979; Field, 1993) and it has been found that class discrimination, in favor of the middle and upper-classes, is still prevalent in policing practices, police reactions to delinquency and the legal systems overall treatment of offenders (Brown, 1985; Carter). Reiman (2004) dedicated an entire book to focusing on the social class and race discrepancies that exist in the American justice system. He posited that at every level of the justice system those individuals who are of a higher class are treated differently. Everything from being given more warnings by police to judicial leniency appears to influence the visibility of upper-class juvenile delinquency. Reiman claimed that the criminal justice system “weeds out” the well-to-do so that those on the other end of the social economic status spectrum are those who end up in jail. Reiman (2006, p. 104) also showed that “for the *same criminal behavior*, the poor are more likely to be arrested; if arrested, they are more likely to be charged; if charged, more likely to be convicted; if convicted, more likely sentenced to prison; and if sentenced, more likely to be given longer prison terms than members of the middle and upper-classes.”

Thornberry (1973) found that for similar offenses lower-class adolescents were more likely to face formal repercussions for their crimes than their affluent counterparts. For the more elite adolescents, it was more likely that their parents would be called and they were less likely to be institutionalized if they had similar offenses and records as the lower-class teens. Sampson (1986) similarly found that on a neighborhood level, lower-

class adolescents were more likely to have a police record even though the type and frequency crime commission was similar.

When analyzing what variables have an impact on discrimination in juvenile courts, Carter (1979) found that a previous criminal record was not the most important variable. When dealing with status offenses, the most important variable became social class. When it came to sentencing, lower-class youth were more likely to be recommended institutional placement than their wealthier counterparts. Self-reported encounters with police, studied by Brown (1985), follow the observations of Chambliss (1973) and Carter (1979) by showing that upper-class youth who have encounters with police are treated differently and not charged as often as lower-class youth. Tittle, Villenez, and Smith (1978) analyzed data from over 350 instances of criminal studies and found that there was a slight negative relationship between class and criminality. However, self-report studies and more recent data suggest the relationship may be weaker than ever.

RTCs appear to be the potential next incarnation of the Saints and Roughneck with respect to the differential treatment of young delinquents. Crime and delinquency exist at both ends of the social strata, yet for decades the focus has been on the delinquency of the lower-classes. While not well studied, it might appear that the lack of research is related to an ability of the elite-class to conceal the misdeeds of their teenagers. All the while, the residential treatment center possibly acting as a shielding mechanism for these upper-class youth. If an upper-class adolescent does get in some kind of trouble, they may not be as likely to receive public trial or sentencing, instead they appear more likely to be sent to a little known private RTC where they receive

different treatment and they do not suffer the same consequences as a lower status youth, keeping society unaware of their actions.

Reiman (2004) also supported the assertion that information on these subjects is becoming more difficult to find. Information on differential treatment of socioeconomic classes is becoming more rare while that same information about race is in abundance. He goes on to say that criminal behavior is widespread among the middle- and upper-class. If an upper-class teen does make it to court, they often have options that other, less privileged youth don't have.

#### Difficulty in Studying Adolescent Delinquency

Although an awareness of this problem appears to date back as far as Sutherland (1945) and Merton (1938), there has been little sociological work dedicated to understanding it. In answering the question why, it is important to recognize the difficulty in trying to study upper-class adolescent delinquency. Among other difficulties, some of the more prominent follow. There is no specific theory to explain this phenomena and any theory by itself does not account for delinquency in the upper-class. Having no theoretical orientation driving a study may produce data, but it is data without context or meaning. Also, when dealing with data, there is little sociological or empirical research on the subject of upper-class problems, at least until the last few years. To some extent, this is understandable because it is difficult to research a population that does not want the negative aspects of their behavior to be in the public eye and has the resources, and social power, to ensure that such things are kept private. So, the problem does not appear to exist. This is perhaps the biggest obstacle. As was demonstrated earlier, there is differential treatment in the justice system starting with the police and

working its way up to the courts. This means there is little official data to show a problem and even less to study.

### Deficiencies of the Big Three

#### *Strain Theory*

The deficiency in strain theory lies in the assumptions the major theorists make that strain is largely isolated in the lower-classes. Merton (1938) focused on not being able to meet culturally prescribed aspirations, because of class-based structural “blockage.” Thus, lower-class boys are “forced” to use illegitimate means as the primary source for obtaining material success. Cohen (1965) directed his focus to the study of the development and influence of a lower-class delinquent subculture. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) center their conceptualization of strain leading to delinquency on an individual’s opportunity to gain access and acceptance into a delinquent subculture.

The major focus of strain theories has historically been on the lower- and working-classes. The obvious problem with this is that the middle- and upper-classes appear to have the means to achieve the culturally defined goals yet delinquency still exists and may be on the rise within these groups.

#### *Control Theory*

Social control theory has difficulty explaining upper-class adolescent delinquency because it accepts the perception that class matters and therefore must assume that the lower-classes are less effective at controlling its members. Control theory assumes that, generally, members of the upper-class are conforming and non-criminal.



### *Differential Association Theory*

Sutherland and Cressey's (1978) explanation of differential association suggests that delinquents associate with those who hold definitions, values, rationalizations, and attitudes that are in favor of crime. The challenge, both socially and geographically, that faces this theory when trying to explain upper-class adolescent delinquency is that these youth are not likely to be associating with groups who hold definitions contrary to mainstream values nor are they likely to carry an abundance of such values, etc.

### Application of Elements from the Big Three

As it has been discussed throughout this thesis, one theory in-and-of-itself cannot account for upper-class adolescent delinquency, yet each, at least potentially, may contribute to a better understanding. Therefore it would be advantageous to move away from a "black or white" approach to explaining upper-class adolescent delinquency. It is not requisite that a single theory account for delinquency. There are *parts* of the theories we examined that, if used in conjunction, will help to clarify the picture of upper-class adolescent delinquency. Since each theory was individually critiqued in previous sections, it would now be imperative to examine the compatibility of components of the aforementioned theories and uncover what fundamental concepts aid in understanding upper-class adolescent delinquency.

Sutherland's theory focused on associations with those who hold positive definitions of deviant behavior and although upper-class youth may not regularly associate with members of a delinquent subculture that holds contrary definitions, they do have delinquent friends. Rather recently Lightfoot (1997) reported that adolescents use

risky behavior to elevate their status within their own group. Combine this with what Luthar (Luthar, 2003; Luthar, 2005; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2004) mentions about poor attachment and recent media attention portraying wealthy youth in trouble, and one can begin to see how an adolescent with delinquent peers might be attracted to delinquency. Indeed, it is possible that upper-class sub-cultural influences, ones with no discernable counter-values with respect to success goals, play a key role in upper-class delinquency.

When Chambliss (1973) observed, “Sometimes they stole as a group and coordinated their efforts; other times they stole in pairs. Rarely did they steal alone.” He demonstrated that delinquency is more likely in groups than individually. While it is clear that delinquent friends are not the sole cause of delinquency, it would seem that delinquent friends facilitate delinquency. Certain forms of delinquency are only possible in groups or in interaction with others and delinquency may increase in group-settings independent of learning. Yet, learning must remain a key aspect or condition of delinquency since children are not born with culturally specific cognitive frameworks of motivation and action. To some extent, adolescents must, at the very least, learn how to neutralize conventional values and feelings of guilt.

The techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) were employed daily by the students at the RTC where the author worked. Often times students would be asked why they were in a treatment center and their responses were nearly textbook neutralizations: “My parents hate me” (condemnation of the condemner), “I was just doing\_\_\_\_\_ and wasn’t hurting anyone” (denial of the victim), and “I don’t know”

(denial of responsibility).” Based on observations of student conversations, the usage of these techniques was also common before they were admitted to treatment.

Many of the youth with whom the author worked often expressed the sentiment that their parents would take care of any problems, just as they had always done. It would seem that feeling that they are immune to the consequences of their actions is more important than an overabundance of delinquent definitions in explaining these youth’s delinquency. Harris, Duncan, and Doisjoly (2002) examined the effects of “nothing to lose attitudes,” based on a belief that there would be few consequences, on risky behaviors such as early sexual activity, drugs and weapon use in adolescents. The results were mixed, but ultimately they found support for their hypothesis that the “nothing to lose” attitude increases risky (and delinquent) behaviors.

Patterson’s (1982) research indicates that early onset delinquency begins in the home. He shows that “the child discovers that aversive behaviors can work wonders; they shut down the aversive behaviors of other family member. The child’s aversive acts are many and diverse, including, arguing, attacking, blaming, bragging, demanding, fighting, irritability, moodiness, screaming, sulking, swearing, throwing tantrums, teasing and threatening. Having gone through thousands of trials, the antisocial child becomes as skilled as a drill sergeant at coercion” (Lotz, 2005). Patterson also suggests that some parents express irritation in many ways, but, in the face of a coercive or “difficult” child, will not say “stop” or “no” when appropriate. Instead, they make empty threats, with no repercussions. These techniques and their reinforcement are indicative of social learning theory, and are clearly present in many of the student’s relationships with their parents with whom the author has worked.

Traub and Little (1999) discuss linking the strain and differential association traditions. When individuals do not have an established deviant subculture with which to associate, several individuals with like problems may join together to create a group to which they can make comparisons and references.

The general conceptions of strain discussed in the literature chapters are not terribly applicable to upper-class delinquents. However, the fundamental idea behind strain theory can prove useful in certain applications. Much of Luthar's (Luthar, 2003; Luthar, 2005; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2004) work focused on two elements driving upper-class youth to delinquency. One was poor relationships/attachments with parents, the other was pressure to achieve. This pressure to achieve does produce strain in an adolescent's life. But, as with Agnew's approach, the cause cannot be strain per se because of its ubiquitous nature. Instead, the certain aspects of the upper-class culture contribute to differences in coping. Luthar (Luthar, 2003; Luthar, 2005; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2004) also mentions perfectionist strivings as adding to delinquent propensity. Polk (1969) found that middle-class adolescents who were academically unsuccessful had higher rates of delinquency. If these youth are striving to be perfect academically, or in other arenas, and are not succeeding, they may resort to delinquency.

Another form of strain that might be applicable in a more psychological manner is strain for attention. Emotionally these teens crave attention, but prescribed methods for achieving it have not proven effective. Levine (2006) discusses how the pursuit of material wealth may make parents seem physically and emotionally distant; hence some of these elite teens may participate in delinquency to gain attention.

Control theory, as proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), is particularly illuminating when studying upper-class youth. The idea that low self-control contributes to delinquent participation makes us focus our inquiry more squarely on the parenting of the delinquent child. The family should be one of the areas of major scrutiny. The parents inability to bond with their children, lack of praise, expectations of perfection, sporadic rule enforcement and lack of punishments can all be elements which contribute to an adolescent's delinquency and, as it will be shown, these traits exist in the upper-class.

Undeniably, it does help to be aware that those who commit crime have lower self-control; following the path of least resistance is something that an upper-class adolescent would be very accustomed to. Living a life of luxury may lead to some of the traits Hirschi and Gottfredson found in people who are criminal: impulsivity, insensitivity, adventurousness and a need for immediate gratification. The criminality of these upper-class adolescents could be the result of their expectation of rewards they do not receive. Therefore Greek (2007) suggests that when an individual's achievements are less than they projected, strain increases. Being raised with the proverbial silver spoon in their mouth, effort and achievement discrepancy could be a stressor for upper-class youth.

Parental and familial influences have a big impact on an adolescent, no matter their class. Reiss (1951) shows that families who do not meet a child's needs are more likely to produce a delinquent child. The idiosyncrasies of the upper-class family are that they have no difficulties meeting or exceeding the physical needs of their child. However, Luthar (Luthar, 2003; Luthar, 2005; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar &

Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2004) and Levine (2006) have shown that it is not necessarily attention to the physical needs of a child that limit or produce delinquency in adolescents. With the established financial security, there appears to be a lack in Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) minimum conditions to teach self-control. Many parents who send their children to residential treatment facilities have not had the opportunity to monitor the child's behavior closely. Many fall short in recognizing deviant behavior when it occurs or in punishing such behavior.

As stated earlier, even more prone to delinquency might be those adolescents who feel that they receive minute or no consequences for their actions (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Nye, 1958; Reiss, 1951). The youth with whom this author has worked are stereotypical of being guided by this misconception. Many of them have parents who rescue them from any consequences incurred by their actions. By their own admission, some of these youth say they have done things they know might get them in trouble but that they were not worried because their parents would bail them out. Even while in treatment, their parents still try to minimize negative penalties, even though it is directly against what residential staff and therapists are doing to help the student

For many theorists of delinquency and crime, understanding this phenomenon seems to be an all or nothing proposition, which, unfortunately, frequently results in a limited understanding. Combining several elements of certain theories, however, can give a more complete explanation of upper-class juvenile delinquency than attempting to use just one theory. The premise of this thesis was that none of the "Big Three" theories of delinquency had the ability to account for upper-class adolescent delinquency. This is correct in that no single theory can explain this, but by using all three theories together,

an understanding can be achieved. The following model presents just such an integration:

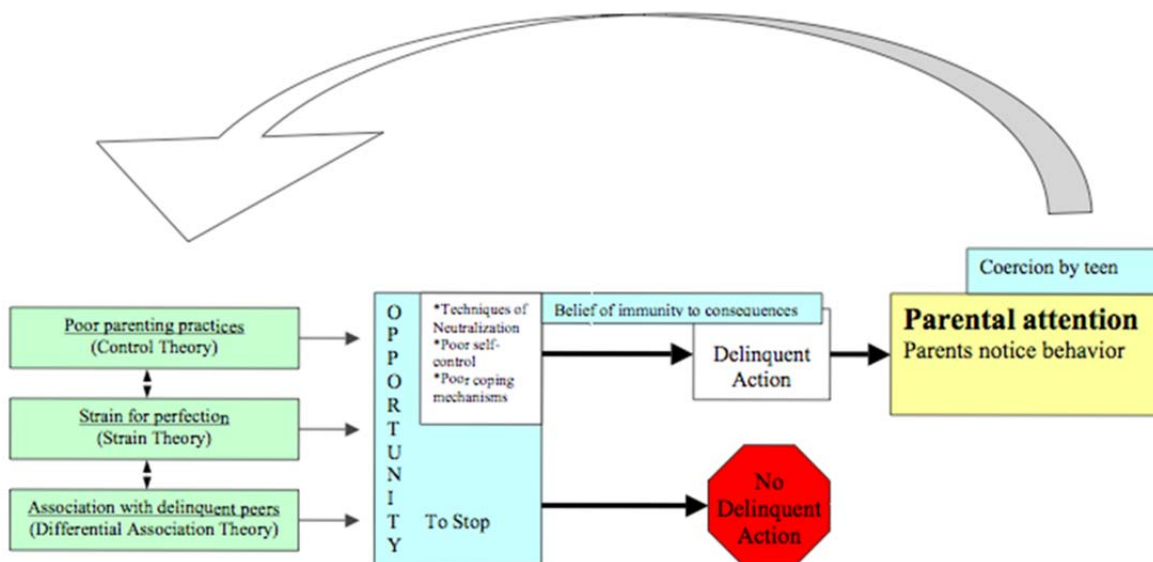


Figure 3. An integrated model of upper-class delinquency

To explain how the process of combining elements of the three theories works, one can see that the elements of each theory themselves do not cause delinquency, but are necessary preexisting conditions to delinquency. The removal of one of these factors may still provide adequate conditions for criminal actions, but it weakens the likelihood because of the interplay between all of them. When they are all present, opportunities may arise on a more frequent basis for an adolescent to commit a criminal or deviant act.

At this point the adolescent must choose the path they will take. If for some reason he does not take the opportunity to participate in delinquency, then the process stops there. However, if he begins to consider the delinquent opportunity his poor self-control now becomes more evident, he may also employ techniques of neutralization or insufficient coping mechanisms to alleviate any mental or emotional negations of the

intended delinquency. For the upper-class adolescent these factors are exacerbated by the belief that consequences will be nullified by their parent's involvement or the use of their social position.

Hence all these factors are likely to contribute to the actual commission of a delinquent act. After the act is committed (assuming it is discovered) the parents are upset. They now change the family dynamic to one where the teen's delinquent behavior is the focus. The undivided attention that teen now receives, however, although maladaptive, is desirable. The adolescent recognizes this attention and begins to manipulate or coerce his parents. The parents begin the cycle again by employing their poor parenting practices to try to discipline the teen. They reconfirm their desires for perfection from their child, and the cycle continues.

This is not to say that the commission of delinquent acts is a rationally made choice. In many instances, the adolescent is not even aware that they have poor coping abilities or that they are using techniques of neutralization. However, for the process to develop into a cycle of delinquency, the teen does have to be aware, at some level, what they are doing.

Based on the information provided by Luthar and colleagues (Luthar, 2003; Luthar, 2005; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2004) as well as what has been demonstrated throughout the preceding pages, an accurate and complete understanding of what causes upper-class adolescent delinquency has evaded criminological theorists. In part, this may be due to an embedded tendency in sociology to examine problems from a discipline-specific approach. Subsequently, parts of each theory examined do have merit and should not be entirely dismissed. However,



each part alone cannot be viewed as the “cause” of delinquency, but instead plays more of a contributory role. The following are components from these theories that do aid in understanding this phenomenon:

1. *Pressure: (Strain)* All of Luthar’s work and that of her colleagues’ shows that parental pressure has a strong correlation with upper-class adolescent delinquency. Among the youth worked with by the author it was common to have parents constantly pushing for the achievement of high ambitions. Even in instances such as therapy, parents would push students to achieve their therapeutic goals faster and better. Strain theory can be effective in helping to understand how this leads elite adolescents to delinquency.

2. *Family/Parenting: (Control)* Not only does Luthar’s work show parenting to be a very important factor, but many sociological theories also stress the importance of the family and parenting on adolescent’s delinquency or prevention thereof. Absentee parents, poor attachment and lack of rules or discipline in the home are all elements that can cause a child to be disconnected and can lead to delinquency for fulfillment of desires not met at home. Upper-class youth must see consequences to their actions.

3. *Peer influence: (Differential Association)* For all the pressure and family factors, if a teen does not have delinquent associations, they are far less likely to persistently commit delinquent acts. Peer influences are powerful forces, but mere contacts are inadequate to produce delinquency. The adolescent must have a model for deviant actions. There must also be some form of encouragement toward or reinforcement of delinquent actions, and social punishment for the avoidance of delinquency. This level of influence could easily lead to conformity and when such

happens, if the teen is still uncertain, techniques of neutralization can be employed to compensate.

### A Call for More Theory and Research

Upper-class juvenile delinquency is not a new problem, but has not been brought to light until recently. Traditional theories by themselves fall short of explaining this unique problem. Combinations of some theoretical elements make for greater understanding, but ultimately there needs to be much more research in the sociological and criminological disciplines dedicated to understanding this problem. Once an understanding is gained of upper-class delinquency a greater understanding of delinquency in general will follow.

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## APPENDIX

### **The Beloved Students**

The following section will highlight nine students with whom the author has had the opportunity to work. All these youth had unique personalities, and showed varying amount of progress while in treatment. They were all from wealthy families, had delinquent friends, and were either pressured by their parents to achieve great success or were discouraged because their parents had no faith in them and were ambivalent about what they did. Realizing that nine students may not be completely representative of all upper-class delinquents, the author choose these students because they illustrate characteristics similar to many other youth that have been observed through the work of this author over the past five years.

Student one was a young man who came from a very wealthy family. His family owned a nationally-recognized company. He was an intelligent student. He had received good grades throughout most of his schooling and had completed several upper-level courses. However, he had problems at home. He was very manipulative toward his parents and was considered a ring leader for the delinquent activities of his peers. He had additional problems which stemmed from his illicit drug use. Although he had friends who were delinquents, (by therapist report) he was actually the one who was the negative influence.

Student two was a young man who had become heavily involved with drugs and violence. He had been skipping school for some time to participate in delinquent activities with his friends. School was of no interest to him and even while in treatment

he exhibited no desire to change. He knew that when he turned 18 he was going to inherit 3.8 Million dollars with which he planned to open an auto shop, his life's aspiration.

Student three was a young woman whose primary concerns were money and beauty. She had a very religious family. Her light drug use was not her primary problem. The main reason she was admitted to treatment was eating disorders and familial discord. She was obsessed with being beautiful and having the most expensive clothing. As a solution to her problems, her parents gave her a seemingly unending supply of money.

Student four was a boy whose father was a very powerful figure in his home state. The young man had been in trouble several times, but never suffered any real consequences to his behavior because of his father's influence. He had been heavily involved in drugs and was the cause of severe problems in his family. He returned home, before treatment was completed, by convincing his parents that he had changed, only to re-offend in a few weeks. He "contracted" with his father that he would stay clean so long as he did not have to return to treatment. After this boy turns 18 and successfully completes high school, his trust fund will allocate nearly \$30,000 a month for the rest of his life.

Student five was a girl who came from a wealthy family. She was in and out of treatment several times. While at the treatment center, she was a source of trouble. Her main problem was heavy drug use and complete intolerance of her parents. She left the facility stating that she was going to use heroin and cocaine and no one could stop her.

Student six was a young girl whose mother was very wealthy. Her mother never had to work and spent her time doing leisure activities. Her mother was more concerned about being a friend to her daughter than a parent and therefore would take her on extravagant trips and provide her with drugs. The girl had a desire to be clean and sober, with few oppositional tendencies. However she bent to every whim of her friends.

Student seven was a young man from a very religious family. In his early teens he started acting out and doing drugs. His family was also very prominent in the state he was from. This young man was hopeful he could change. He recognized that in order to do so he had to stay away from his former peer group.

Student eight was an adolescent boy whose parents were well off, but not extremely wealthy. His family moved several times in an attempt to take him away from some of his delinquent friends. He worked to be accepted into the upper-class popular group by wearing the correct clothes and becoming friends with the right people. He was always a very subversive influence in the treatment community. When admitted, his father asked how the facility was going to meet his sexual needs. His parents were completely taken aback when they were told he was expected to remain abstinent. This young man was also very intelligent. He scored extraordinarily high on the SAT's. However, he used this intelligence to undermine his treatment program

Student nine was an adolescent girl whose father was very wealthy. She was only concerned about change if it had an immediate benefit to her. She was a drug addict, and caused numerous familial problems. She made very little therapeutic progress as evidenced by her making similar and significant bad decisions throughout her stay. The day she left she got high.



In working at this facility, my time was spent with not only the students, but also with their therapists. Discussions often focused on what the main causes of the student's delinquent acts were. Although multiple "causes" were identified, it was usually decided that either the parents (the way they parent, apathy, over-involvement, pressure) or peers had driven the youth to make the choices leading to treatment. These students are the epitome of those discussed in this thesis. However, this still leaves the question why is this phenomenon just now beginning to come into the public awareness? Part of the answer begins with an examination of differential treatment of members from different classes.