A Comparative Perspective on Theories of Delinquent Behavior

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My assignment is to set before this symposium the range of theories of delinquency causation. For many of you sitting here I would guess that the material I am about to present will not be new. Nevertheless it should be worthwhile to have a common set of references before us in the discussion to follow. Since time is short I am going to try to pick out only the major themes in the vast literature on the etiology of delinquency. For the same reason of time, I am going to sketch each major theme only briefly and I am sure I will in some places be guilty of gross oversimplification.

A presentation of this sort requires some kind of order but most of the theories about delinquency do not lend themselves easily to structuring. In textbooks on delinquency we usually find theories presented in one elementary structure which separates sociological theory from psychological theory. In one chapter are presented theories which are designed to explain delinquency as a collective phenomenon; that is, theories which aim to explain delinquency rates as they are distributed through space and time, or to explain delinquency as interdependent behavior variously called the delinquent subculture, the gang, and so forth. Another chapter includes theories to explain the delinquent behavior of an individual with heavy emphasis on motivation. To be honest, my first inclination was to impose the same sociological-psychological structure on my materials. But I have rejected this kind of structure because I think it is undesirable to further the present discontinuities in delinquency theory. Rather I have chosen to order my contribution so that theories about delinquency as a collective phenomenon will be presented along with related theories of individual delinquency.
My choice of a starting point is a fairly arbitrary choice. I suppose I chose to begin with the theory of culture conflict because it seems to be the oldest and still one of the most viable theories of delinquency causation. Following this starting point, I am going to present theoretical themes as one suggests the next.

According to culture conflict theorists, an explanation of delinquent behavior follows from the explanation for cultural groups adopting their own do's and don't's about behavior. Culture conflict theorists assume that a major determinant of individual behavior, if not the major determinant, is the set of conduct norms of the group to which the individual belongs—"belongs" here taken in the sociological sense of membership. Further, culture conflict theorists posit that even within what is usually regarded as a single culture context, like the American culture for example, some subcultural groups differ in their conduct norms from other subcultural groups, and indeed these conduct norms may contradict those of other subcultural groups. According to culture conflict theory, delinquency is created when one subcultural group which dominates the social structure of the wider political unit defines the contradictory conduct norms of other subcultural groups as criminal.

Among the culture conflict theorists we may list Thorstein Sellin, Clifford Shaw, Henry McKay, Sutherland, and more recently, Walter Miller. Let me take Sutherland's variation on the culture conflict theme as an example. Sutherland asserted that delinquency or criminal behavior is never invented as illegitimate behavior. Following from the assumption that the major determinant of behavior is the set of conduct norms of the group to which one belongs, Sutherland proposed that the overwhelming proportion of individual behavior, including the behavior we call delinquent, begins historically as culturally legitimate behavior. Such behavior becomes
delinquent when it is transplanted from a setting in which it is considered legitimate to a setting where it is defined as criminal. Sutherland illustrated this point of view with a case history of a Sicilian immigrant to Chicago who murdered his daughter's seducer, and then was surprised and angry at the authorities who arrested him for having done what was after all the only honorable thing among his countrymen. Sutherland felt that the theory of culture conflict went a long way toward explaining the differential rates of delinquency in urban areas—he pointed out that delinquency rates are high in those areas inhabited by alien groups. Citing data collected by Shaw and McKay, Sutherland concluded that delinquent behavior is characteristic of the children of the immigrants from abroad or from other very different culture areas within the United States. The behavior they exhibit and which is defined as delinquency is not at all delinquent by their standards.

According to culture conflict theorists, then, the explanation for delinquency as a collective phenomenon is no different in principle from an explanation of differences among the customs of the Kwakiutl, the Hopi, and the Watusi.

Let me turn now to what I think is the psychological counterpart to culture conflict theory. Here I think we have theories which explain delinquency in terms of delinquent superegos. Just as the culture conflict theory holds that delinquent behavior is not illegitimate from the point of view of the subcultural group in which it occurs, so the delinquent superego theory holds that delinquent behavior is not wrong from the point of view of the individual delinquent. We meet the delinquent superego in the works of several people. There is the work of Hewitt and Jenkins, who included the socialized delinquent in their typology of maladjusted deviants. We also include the work of Fritz Redl, with his concept of the 'genuine delinquent,' and the
sociologist Albert Reiss, from whose terminology I have taken the concept of the delinquent superego.

Briefly, the theory of the delinquent superego explains delinquent behavior as a consequence of the introjection of a delinquent ego ideal. This theory is directly related to a culture conflict theory in that we think of the introjection of the delinquent superego as the desired consequence of socialization by parents whose norms contradict the norms of a dominant subculture. On the other hand, there is a variation on the theme of the delinquent superego in which the behavioral result is not manifestly intended by the socialization agents. Adelaide Johnson, for example, has proposed a theory of superego lacunae. Johnson has suggested that some parents unconsciously encourage their children to commit themselves to delinquent standards in order that they may act out the delinquent impulses which the parent, who is unable to do so, may then enjoy vicariously.

Let us move on now to another major theme among theories of delinquency causation. While the culture conflict theme emphasizes delinquency as a consequence of delinquent norms, the next theme looks to the absence of norms as the condition for delinquency as a collective phenomenon. Of course I refer to theories of anomie. In agreement with the theory of culture conflict, a theory of anomie holds that delinquent behavior is not discriminable from nondelinquent behavior from the point of view of the actor; but whereas the culture conflict theory holds that delinquent behavior is generated by the norms of a group to which the individual belongs, a theory of anomie holds that delinquent behavior is generated by individual motivation unchecked by any shared standards of behavior. Like a theory of culture conflict, a theory of anomie takes as a basic assumption that a major determinant of behavior is the set of norms of the group to which the individual belongs. But a theory of anomie begins from the condition that people
are at best minimally committed to groups and so are left without conduct norms by which their behavior may be guided. This nonmembership condition may either be an individual condition—that is, there are groups to which a person may belong but for one reason or another the individual is not integrated into any of them—or it may be, as in the case of a society in transition, that the traditional groups have broken down and new alignments have not yet emerged with consolidated sets of conduct norms and so there are no sets of groups to which an individual may belong. In such a normless, disorganized condition, the individual's behavior is guided largely by what he needs and wants and his behavior may be delinquent, relevant only to some set of conduct norms external to him.

It seems to me that the psychological counterpart to the theory of anomie, like the psychological counterpart to the theory of culture conflict, also involves the concept of the superego; and as the theory of anomie states the conditions for delinquency as the absence of standards of behavior, so its psychological counterpart states the conditions for delinquency as being the absence of an effective superego. Where a theory of anomie states that the condition for normative control is integration, the psychological approach states that the condition for control is identification. The theory of the defective superego proposes that delinquency occurs when the conditions for adequate identification and consequent introjection of behavior standards are lacking. The condition necessary for identification to take place is generally thought to be an intimate affective relationship between child and socialization agent. That is, the family group is thought of as the keystone of the integrated society.

Another approach in the psychology of the individual delinquent shifts the emphasis from superego functioning to ego functioning. Here I think specifically of that approach represented by Redl and Wineman in their work
own the aggressive child. According to this approach, the superego is relatively intact. It is rather the executive function of the ego which is impaired. In consequence, the individual youngster is unable to actualize restrictions emanating from the superego and keep his impulsiveness in check. He tends to act out his needs directly and seeks immediate gratification in whatever way he can and then feels guilty about it afterward. Redl and Wine-man point to mechanisms through which the ego functions to ward off this consequent guilt, but I won't go into those details here. It is sufficient to stress at this time that the cause of delinquent behavior from this point of view lies in the breakdown of the mental apparatus before the onslaught of the individual's needs.

What sociological theories are relevant to the psychological theory of the defective ego? That is, what sociological theory of delinquency posits social conditions which are conducive to the development of defective egos? Such a sociological theory, it seems to me, would stress some dysfunctionality in a social organization which on the one hand defines legitimate means toward certain goals but then denies these means to youngsters. In consequence, youngsters would be provoked to reach these goals through illegitimate channels, albeit feeling some guilt. This formulation brings to mind a whole set of sociological theories, but it should be pointed out that these theories are not directly relevant to the psychological theory, since the needs or goals involved are of a different nature. The theorists of the defective ego have concerned themselves with youngsters' overwhelming needs for love, security, and self-identity. Sociological theorists usually focus on other kinds of needs altogether.

The set of theories to which we are now brought represents a different emphasis from the theories which have gone before. Up to now the theories I have discussed have explained delinquency in terms of the breakdown in
control. Summarizing the control theories briefly: either the controlling agencies are effective but not really controlling from the point of view of authority, or there are no effective controlling agencies. The theories I am going to present now are theories about provocation to delinquency. Up to this point the question, "Why delinquency?" has been answered in the form, "So why not?" In the materials which follow the question is answered in the form, "So what else would you expect?"

One theory about provocations to delinquency may be called a theory of innovation. It has been proposed to explain delinquency as a collective phenomenon. According to a theory of innovation, delinquency is generated when the norms of a social organization determine goals for individuals within that organization but make the means to these goals differentially available to its members. That is to say, all youngsters are motivated to strive for certain goals but not all youngsters are allowed the legitimate means to be successful. Under this condition, according to the theory, youngsters are provoked to avail themselves of illegitimate means to reach legitimate goals. Among the proponents of this innovation theory we may list Robert Merton, Lloyd Ohlin, and Richard Cloward. Let me illustrate the innovation theory briefly by presenting part of the theory proposed by Ohlin and Cloward. According to these two, the major goal relevant to delinquency is status in the socio-economic structure of the society. However, it is clear that upward mobility paths are relatively more accessible to boys of the middle than to boys of the working class. According to Ohlin and Cloward, delinquency is generated by this difference in the opportunity structure among boys in different social classes in America. For example, in one part of their theoretical analysis, they hypothesize that where a stable criminal organization is available for boys to join, boys will embark on delinquent careers by becoming apprentices, running members, pushing dope, and the like.
When we search for a counterpart to this innovation theory among theories to explain individual delinquency we find none in the delinquency literature. This is not to say that the psychological theory lacks the concepts with which to build this kind of theory. It seems to me that theories about detour behavior, decision-making and the like, if invoked to explain delinquent behavior, would be an innovation theory on the psychological level, but the theorists of individual delinquency have not availed themselves of these concepts. I might speculate that the reason they have not is that the concepts in theories of detour behavior or decision-making come from a rational model. Psychologists concerned with delinquency have rather selected their concepts from irrational theories of human behavior, particularly from psychoanalytic theories. Let me illustrate this point by presenting next a psychological theory of delinquency which begins with the same kind of condition as an innovation theory on a sociological level but which comes to quite different conclusions. The condition, as before, is the presence of an inaccessible goal. For psychological theorists this condition is the paradigm for frustration. It has been proposed that the prepotent response in this condition is aggression, so what I am speaking about now are the psychological theories of delinquent behavior based on the frustration-aggression hypothesis. I know of no psychological theorist who has played on the frustration-aggression theme citing as the blocked goal something akin to economic opportunity, social status, or upward mobility. Psychologists generally do not attend to these kinds of goals. The goals which have been relevant in psychological theories of delinquency tend rather to be in the nature of love, attention, and security. A good example of the frustration-aggression hypothesis using goals more characteristic of psychological theory is in the work of Healy and Bronner. Their theory proposes that delinquency is generated out of the frustrating conditions
of disturbed parent-child relationships. Delinquency is seen here as a consequence of a child not feeling loved or secure in his family group. Now I should point out that Healy and Bronner also regard disturbed parent-child relations as inimical to the process of identification and consequently as a source of weakened controls, as well as a source of provocation. Nevertheless, it seems to me their theory is an excellent example of how the frustration-aggression hypothesis has been employed in psychological theories of delinquency.

The last theory I would like to discuss with you is again a theory of provocation. While it is intended to explain delinquency as a collective phenomenon, specifically the rise of the delinquent subculture, it seems to me that it is an appropriate theory with which to conclude this discussion because it combines both psychological and sociological concepts. The theory I speak of is Albert Cohen's theory of the delinquent subculture. Cohen posits the same condition as do Ohlin and Cloward as the one primarily responsible for the generation of delinquency--namely, the differential accessibility of higher status positions in the economic structure. However, where Ohlin and Cloward adopt a rational model and suggest that delinquency is a form of innovation, Cohen's theory is based on an irrational model and in fact makes liberal use of the psychoanalytic concept of reaction formation. Where Ohlin and Cloward interpret delinquent behavior as a manipulation of the means to the goal of higher status, Cohen interprets this same behavior as a manipulation of the goal itself. Where Ohlin and Cloward interpret delinquent behavior as illegitimate means to this goal, Cohen interprets delinquent behavior as a denial of the goal itself. For Cohen, delinquent behavior voids the goal of upward status in two ways. First, delinquent behavior consists for the most part in the wanton destruction of property. In this very act of destruction, delinquent behavior is an expression of
disdain for property and a derogation of its value. It is in this sense that Cohen regards delinquent behavior as a reaction formation, as a denial of the goal which cannot be achieved. At the very same time that delinquent behavior destroys inaccessible criteria for status, it creates other criteria for status which economically disadvantaged youngsters can achieve, namely criteria of daring, recklessness, courage, and strength. Thus, while voiding the criteria of status in the wider social organization, delinquent behavior is a means of achieving status among peers. It is that peer culture whose set of conduct norms encourages delinquent behavior which Cohen terms the delinquent subculture. And now it should be apparent that we have come full circle. For Cohen's theory of the delinquent subculture is after all another variant on the theme of culture conflict. The conflict in this case, however, is not regional. It is in part intergenerational and in part class conflict.

It seems to me that the theories I have discussed represent the major themes in explanations of delinquency causation. Let me conclude now with a word of hope. I have tried to show that the theories intended to explain delinquency as a collective phenomenon and the theories intended to explain individual delinquency are not, after all, removed from one another in the nature of the dynamics they propose. If it is true that the sociological and the psychological theories are not so far apart as I believe many people have suspected they are, then I trust we will be encouraged to search for the links between the sociological and the psychological conditions which give rise to delinquent behavior. It seems to me that such a search is bound to be fruitful at this time. It will be fruitful on the one hand because of the more complete understanding we may gain of delinquent behavior as such, and because specification of such links will, I believe, provide firmer bases for delinquency control programs. It seem to me, further, that an understanding of the links will provide important clues for our general understanding of the whole relationship between social structure and personality.