

Theories of Crime Fall 2008

Introduction to:

Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency* (Transaction Publishers 2002 edition ed.) Berkeley: University of California Press.

Overview

Travis Hirschi has been a maverick criminologist for four decades. His 1969 volume is the single most important empirical book on delinquency.¹ It has been cited over 2,000 times.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s he was one of the most respected and revered and feared criminologists. His reputation soared again in the 1990s with the appearance of the GTOC which you are reading next week. Although there are some giants in our field currently (Sampson, Moffitt), in important (and sometimes unacknowledged) ways they stand on the shoulders of theorists like Hirschi.

This volume does three things. First, the early chapters offer general critiques of several different and prominent-at-the-time theories of delinquency. That thread continues through the volume in different places where the author tests certain key ideas of these theories with his Richmond (CA) data.

Even though these theories might have faded somewhat as delinquency theories, *they are still around* in other forms. For example, although anomie theory may no longer be important for delinquency, it is important for institutional anomie theory (IAT) which you will be reading. Although differential association theory is passé, the General Strain Theory (GST) has strong social learning components.

In short, just because some of the citations are 50 years old, many of the same ideas recur.

Second, the model provides detailed empirical support for a bonding model of delinquency. In providing that support, Hirschi seeks not just to show there is a connection. He also seeks to clarify the processes underlying that connection. **In theory processes are key because they inform you about how the dynamics operate.** They also suggest **intervention points.**

When you look at a variable on the predictor side you want to think about whether it describes a setting condition, that could be linked to many possible causes, or a specific process or mechanism.

Lacking information about key dynamics, multiple mediating mechanisms are possible.

¹ The most important theoretical book would be: Kornhauser, R. R. (1978). *Social sources of delinquency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stated differently, we want to differentiate between causes and causes of causes.

Third, he provides a radically different than previously seen picture of the connection between demographic variables and delinquency. Although the self-report delinquency studies, begun in the 1950s, were becoming pretty well known by this time, his assessment of the delinquency/class relationship is pivotal.² S-R delinquency indicators were revealing very different patterns with structural variables than had the official delinquency indicators widely used in research previously.³

Other Theories

H starts off by grouping all delinquency theories into three groups (4): “strain,” “control or bond” theories, and “cultural deviance.”

For those who are fans of strain theory, you want to pay particularly close attention to his comments about how the theory requires two different variables to get at strain (8), carefully consider results referring to educational aspirations (171-174 for example), his very different definition of anomie (202), and think carefully about the conclusions he reaches about strain theories (225-227) – his data seem to shoot it down in two major ways.

Cultural deviance fans should very closely consider his arguments about how it is too abstract (13-14), and “virtually unfalsifiable” (15). The theory founders more seriously when the data show that the expected class connections with delinquency do not surface (66-75), the impacts of having lower class parents (108), and the relative impacts of lower class culture (vs. variations in intelligence) on the lower class pro-delinquent values discussed by Miller (213-223).

Class

The lack of a relationship between class and delinquency is startling and yet has been observed again and again in self report studies.⁴ It draws into question, then, all of the ecological work based on official delinquency records. How are the patterns behind these records to be explained?

There is an interesting discussion of race differences and how they relate to academic differences and differences in being over policed (75-81). **Table 15 (77)** is particularly

² The first major study on self reported delinquency was: Short, J. F., Jr., & Nye, F. I. (1957-1958). Reported behavior as a function of delinquent behavior. *Social Problems*, 5, 207-213.

³ For the most definitive study of S-R delinquency see: Hindelang, M. J., Hirschi, T., & Weis, J. G. (1981). *Measuring delinquency*. Beverly Hills: Sage. For a widely cited work on official delinquency see: Shaw, C. R., & McKay, H. D. (1942). *Juvenile delinquency and urban areas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Hindelang, M. J., Hirschi, T., & Weis, J. G. (1981). *Measuring delinquency*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

instructive, and has to do with the difference between being picked up by the police and having an official record generated. Guess for which group this is more likely?

Bond Theory

Just one broad thought to start with: be sure you are clear about what moderating or interaction effects are. See the Baron & Kenny piece on Bboard if you are not sure. You want to be clear about whether different parts of the bond create main effects, or interaction effects.

Attachment to parents. This looks important! Notice in particular how H's treatment of the bond is handled (88, 94). It is not an internalization of moral norms. *The bond is in the attachment itself.* Thus it can be variable across times (and places?) within a person. Notice also what is happening with one vs. two parent families (102-103) and his conclusions here about 1 parent households.

Attachment to School. What is going on with capable kids in school (117)? How does the link with perceived competence square with Cloward and Ohlin? Notice that both actual and perceived competence are relevant. Are the delinquent ones indifferent to school, or frustrated, as the strain folks suggest? (122) What is the causal chain going on here with school and delinquency? (132)

Attachment to peers. What is the key question about role of companions (137)? "*Birds of a feather flock together*" but does the feathering come before the flocking or does the flocking come before the feathering? The companionship question is central in delinquency, and different theories have different takes on it (137-138). And it ties in to the question of when the stakes in conformity weaken (138). Note especially the possibility the companionship could be spurious (138). The theories also bring up the question of: is it parent OR peer attachment, with one replacing the other? What do his data show? (143) Is the delinquent respecting/worrying about friends opinions? (148) H's conclusion on stakes in conformity and delinquent friends (157 / 159) is **huge: feathering before flocking.**

Conventional commitments/activities (stakes in conformity) Is there an aspirations / abilities mismatch? (172)

Is the delinquent a striver? (185)

Does he suffer from low expectations?

HOW does the conventional activities involvement bond work? H's answer: see (191) and Homework vs. riding around.

What are the implications for routine activities theory?

Conventional beliefs. H takes on the Neutralization thesis of Sykes and Matza – and comes to some conclusions about the ordering (207). He also looks at respect for police (201,202). What is going on with attitudes toward law? (204)

Context

Evaluations of bonding theory find that it has received **extraordinarily extensive empirical support**.⁵ *An additional value of the theory is that it suggests potential intervention points for preventing delinquency or further delinquency.*

Further, you can see this theory as setting the stage for the career criminal work.

When we get to life course theory and turning points, think about how this links to bonds.

IMHO, basically, turning points can be interpreted as points where bonds were restored, either to conventional peers (spouse), or to a job (substitute job for school). To overstate the point, turning points are nothing more than places in time where a key bond was restored. H specifically addresses how delinquency can wax and wane.

Limits

We will get to these more at the end of the discussion class. Of course the theory has its critics and its limitations. Read Kempf (now Kemp-Leonard) for those details.

To put just one idea out there on one potential limitation: Does it underplay inherent physiological differences between individuals which can lead to differences in aggressiveness in the pre- teen years and maybe differences in delinquency and adult offending later?⁶

Probably. It seems that in some number of cases baseline physiological differences can trump these bonding processes. The fraction of delinquent cases that can be explained physiologically rather than through bonding, however, is unknown, and may be small.

A second question: Is it limited because it is based on boys, and therefore may be less applicable to girls? Perhaps. See Kempf.

⁵ Kempf-Leonard, K. (1992). The Empirical Status of Hirschi's Control Theory. *Advances in Criminological Theory*: (4) 145-187.

⁶ Moffitt, T. E. (1990). Juvenile delinquency and attention deficit disorder: Boys' developmental trajectories from age 3 to age 15. *Child Development*, 61, 893-910.