The social structural theories discussed in the previous section only explain part of the possible reason that Kody Scott chose the path in life he did. Not all who experience the same conditions turn out the same way; indeed, only one of Kody’s brothers ran afoul of the law. The social process theories discussed in this section take us a step further in understanding Kody’s choices. Two of the theories in this section tell us that criminal behavior is learned in association with peers and that we choose to repeat behaviors that are rewarding to us. After he shot and killed the Blood gang members in his initiation, Kody tells us that he lay in bed that night feeling guilty and ashamed of his actions and that he knew they were wrong. Nevertheless, when the time came to do the same thing again, he chose to do what his peers told him to do because he valued their praise and approval more than anything else in life. His fellow Crips also provided him with rationales and justifications for his actions that neutralized his guilt.

Another theory in this section tells us that labels have the power to make us live up to them; we have seen how Kody proudly accepted the label of “Monster” and how he did his best to live up to it. Other theories stress the importance of attachment to social institutions, but he tells us that his “homeboys” were his only family and that his only commitment and involvement were to and with them and their activities.

On a personal level, he plainly lacked self-control; he was impulsive, hedonistic, and angry. Theorists in this chapter tell us that self-control is developed by consistent parental monitoring, supervision, and discipline, but his weary single mother lacked the time, resources, or incentive to provide Kody with proper parenting.
From the youngest age, he came and went as he pleased. His autobiography makes it plain that he was something of a “feral child,” big enough, mean enough, and guiltless enough to be free to satisfy any and all urges as they arose. This section details many of the social processes by which Kody came to be the monster he claims himself to be.

Social process criminologists operate from a sociological perspective known as symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionists focus on how people interpret and define their social reality and the meanings they attach to it in the process of interacting with one another via language (symbols). Social process theorists believe that if we wish to understand social behavior we have to understand how individuals subjectively perceive their social reality and how they interact with others to create, sustain, and change it. The processes most stressed are socialization and cultural conflict; that is, they seek to describe criminal and delinquent socialization (how antisocial attitudes and behavior are learned) and how social conflict “pressures” individuals into committing antisocial acts. Some process theories focus on the reverse process of learning prosocial attitudes and behavior in the face of temptations to do otherwise. All social process theories represent the joining of sociology and psychology to varying extents, even if their authors explicitly deny that this is the case.

**Differential Association Theory**

Differential association theory (DAT) is the brainchild of Edwin Sutherland, whose ambition was to devise a theory that could explain both individual criminality and aggregate crime rates by identifying conditions that must be present for crime to occur and that are absent when crime is absent. His theory attempted to explain more precise mechanisms by which factors such as social disorganization led to crime. Like Walter Miller, Sutherland saw lower-class culture as having its own integrity, and he disdained the phrase “social disorganization” as insulting, substituting “differential social organization.” Although Sutherland explicitly denied the role of psychology in crime and delinquency, his theory is implicitly psychological in that it focuses on the process of becoming delinquent via subjective definitions of reality and attitude formation.

DAT takes the form of nine propositions outlining the process by which individuals come to acquire attitudes favorable to criminal behavior, which may be summarized as follows: Criminal behavior is learned (the motives, drives, and attitudes) in intimate social groups. By emphasizing social learning, DAT wants to guide criminologists away from the notion that criminal behavior is the result of biological or psychological abnormalities or invented anew by each criminal. Criminality is not the result of individual traits or learned from impersonal communication from movies or magazines and the like. The learning of criminal behavior involves the same mechanisms involved in any other learning and includes specific skills and techniques for committing crimes, as well as the motives, rationalizations, justifications, and attitudes of criminals.

The theory asserts that humans take on the hues and colors of their environments, blending in and conforming with natural ease. We view the world differently according to the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of the groups around which our lives revolve. If you think about it, it could hardly be otherwise, particularly in our formative years.
The key proposition in DAT is “A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violations of law over definitions unfavorable to violations of law” (Sutherland & Cressey, 1974, p. 75). Learning criminal conduct is a process of modeling the self after and identifying with individuals we respect and value. Definitions refer to the meanings our experiences have for us; how we see things; our attitudes, values, and habitual ways of viewing the world.

Definitions become favorable to law violation according to the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of exposure to them. That is, the earlier we are exposed to criminal definitions, the more often we are exposed to them, the longer they last, and the more strongly we are attached to those who supply us with them, the more likely we are to commit criminal acts when opportunities to do so arise. As we have already seen, antisocial definitions are more likely to be learned in lower-class neighborhoods. In such neighborhoods, children are surrounded by antisocial definitions (the code of the streets, focal concerns) and cannot help being influenced by them regardless of their individual characteristics.

### Ronald Akers’ Social Learning Theory

Akers’ social learning theory (SLT) goes beyond looking at frequency, priority, duration, and intensity of crime to identify mechanisms by which “definitions favorable” to crime are learned. Akers and his colleague, Robert Burgess (Burgess & Akers, 1966) applied the concepts of operant psychology to the vague “definitions favorable” of DAT. While psychological principles are
central to SLT, Akers (2002) insists that it is in the same sociological tradition as DAT and that it retains all the processes found in Sutherland’s theory, albeit modified and clarified.

**Operant psychology** is a theory of learning that asserts that behavior is governed by its consequences. When we behave we receive feedback from others that we interpret in terms of positive or negative consequences. Behavior has two general consequences; it is reinforced or it is punished. Behavior that has positive consequences for the actor is said to reinforce that behavior, making it more likely that the behavior will be repeated in similar situations. Behavior that is punished is less likely to be repeated.

**Reinforcement** is either positive or negative. The loot from a robbery or status achieved by facing down rivals are criminal examples of positive reinforcement. Negative reinforcement occurs when some aversive condition is avoided or removed, such as the removal of a street reputation as a “punk” following some act of bravado.

**Punishment**, which leads to the weakening or eliminating of the behavior preceding it, can also be positive or negative. Positive punishment is the application of something undesirable, such as a prison term. Negative punishment is the removal of a pleasant stimulus, such as the loss of status in a street gang. The acquisition of Sutherland’s “definitions favorable” to antisocial behavior (or prosocial behavior, for that matter) thus depends on each individual’s history of reinforcement and punishment.

In any peer group, each member of the group has reciprocal effects on every other member via his or her participation in the reinforcement/punishment process. Of course, what is reinforcing for some may be punishing for others. For teens who value the approval of their parents and teachers, an arrest is punishment; for teens who value the approval of anti-social peers, such an outcome is a reinforcer because it marks them officially as a “bad ass.”

The social context is thus an extremely important component of SLT because most learning takes place in the presence of others who provide both the social context and the available reinforcers or punishments.

**Discrimination** is another important component of SLT. Whereas reinforcements or punishments follow behavior, discriminative stimuli are present before the behavior occurs. Discriminative stimuli are clues that signal whether a particular behavior is likely to be followed by reward or punishment. In other words, discrimination involves learning to distinguish stimuli that have been reinforced or punished in the past from similar stimuli you expect will result in the same response in the future. For instance, an unlocked car with the keys in it is a discriminative stimulus that signals “immediate reward” for the criminal, but for the average person who has never previously been rewarded for stealing a car, it probably signals nothing other than how foolish the owner is.

The excerpt from Akers presented in this chapter further explains SLT and how it is similar and different from DAT. Akers believes that his theory explains the link between social structure and individual behavior. For instance, differential social organization places individuals in contexts in which different types of behavior are reinforced or punished and in which social control systems provide different learning environments.

**Social Control Theories**

To ensure a peaceful and predictable social existence, all societies have created mechanisms that we may collectively call social control, designed to minimize nonconformity and deviance. In many senses, both Durkheim’s anomie theory and Shaw and McKay’s ecological
theory are control theories because they point to situations or circumstances (anomie or social disorganization) that lessen control of individuals' behavior. Social control may be direct, formal, and coercive, as exemplified by uniformed symbols of the state. But indirect and informal social control is preferable because it produces prosocial behavior regardless of the presence or absence of external coercion. Obeying society’s rules of proper conduct because we believe that the rules are right and just, not because we fear formal sanctions, means that we have our own internalized police officer and judge in the form of something called a conscience.

Travis Hirschi’s Social Bond Theory

There is a variety of control theories, but most popular and enduring is Travis Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory. Previous theories we have examined assume that crime is something learned by good people living in bad environments, and ask, “What causes crime?” Control theorists believe that this question reveals a faulty understanding of human nature, and that the real question is not why some people behave badly, but why most of us behave well most of the time. After all, children who are not properly socialized hit, kick, bite, steal, and scream whenever the mood strikes them. They have to be taught not to do these things, which, in the absence of training, “come naturally.” In this tradition, it is society that is “good” and human beings, in the absence of the proper training, who are “bad.” Gwynn Nettler (1984) said it most colorfully: “If we grow up ‘naturally,’ without cultivation, like weeds, we grow up like weeds—rank” (p. 313).

Social control theory is thus about the role of social relationships that bind people to the social order and prevent antisocial behavior. Antisocial behavior will emerge automatically if controls are lacking; it needs no special motivating factors because human beings are assumed to be naturally self-centered. The classical assumption of self-interested persons anxious to experience pleasure and avoid pain is still there, but the theory tries to account for why some people pursue their self-interest in legitimate ways and others do not, with primary emphasis on socialization practices that do or do not produce individuals capable of reining in their natural instincts.

The Four Elements of the Social Bond

Hirschi finds that the “typical” criminal is a young male who grew up in a fatherless home in an urban slum, who has a history of difficulty in school, and who is unemployed. From this he deduces that those most likely to commit crimes lack the four elements of the social bond—attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief—that result in conformity with prosocial behavior.

Attachment is the emotional component of conformity and refers to the emotional bonds existing between the individual and key social institutions like the family and the school. Attachment to conventional others is the foundation for all other social bonds because it leads us to feel valued, respected, and admired and to value the favorable judgments of those to whom we are attached. Much of our behavior can be seen as attempts to gain favorable judgments from people and groups we care about. Lack of attachment to parents and lack of respect for their wishes easily spills over into a lack of attachment and respect for the broader social groupings of which the child is a part. Much of the controlling power of others outside the family lies in the threat of reporting misbehavior to parents. If the child has little respect for parental sanctions, the control exercised by others has little effect because parental control has little effect.
Commitment is the rational component of conformity and refers to a lifestyle in which one has invested considerable time and energy in the pursuit of a lawful career. People who invest heavily in a lawful career have a valuable stake in conformity and are not likely to risk it by engaging in crime. School dropouts and the unemployed do not have a strong investment in conventional behavior and therefore risk less by committing crime. Acquiring a stake in conformity requires disciplined application to tasks that children do not relish but which they complete in order to gain approval from parents. Attachment is thus the essential foundation for commitment to a prosocial lifestyle.

Involvement is a direct consequence of commitment; it is a part of an overall conventional pattern of existence. Involvement is a matter of time and energy constrictions placed on us by the demands of our lawful activities that reduce exposure to illegal opportunities. Conversely, noninvolvement in conventional activities increases the possibility of exposure to illegal activities.

Belief refers to the acceptance of the social norms regulating conduct. Persons lacking attachment, commitment, and involvement do not believe in conventional morality. A belief system empty of conventional morality is concerned only with narrow self-interest. It is important to realize that crime is not motivated by the absence of any of the social bonds;
their absence merely represents social deficiencies that result in a reduction of the potential costs of committing crime.

Leanne Alarid, Velmer Burton, and Francis Cullen’s article in this section pits DAT and social bonding theory against one another to see which one better explains self-reported criminal behavior among a sample of incarcerated felons. They found support for both theories, but found that DAT had more consistent effects, especially for men. It was also apparent that the theories predicted differently by gender, with attachment being a stronger predictor of violent crime for females than for males. Note that “criminal friends” was the best overall predictor of the respondents’ own criminal behavior. As we will see later, a major criticism of DAT is that it assumes that criminal friends exert a causal influence on a person’s criminal behavior. Also note the types of questions often asked in self-report studies in the Appendix of this study. Ask yourselves (1) whether these kinds of questions adequately capture criminality among incarcerated felons, and (2) whether asking “Have you ever” seriously conflates individuals who have done these things once or twice and individuals who do these things frequently.

Gottfredson and Hirschi’s Low Self-Control Theory

With colleague Michael Gottfredson, Hirschi has moved away from explaining crime and delinquency in terms of social control and toward explaining it in terms of self-control. Self-control is defined as the “extent to which [different people] are vulnerable to the temptations of the moment” (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 87). The theory accepts the classical idea that crimes are the result of unrestrained natural human impulses to enhance pleasure and avoid pain. Such a pathway to pleasure often leads to crimes, which Gottfredson and Hirschi define as “acts of force or fraud undertaken in pursuit of self-interest” (p. 15). Most crimes, they assert, are spontaneous acts requiring little skill and earn the criminal minimal, short-term satisfaction. People with low self-control possess the following personal traits that put them at risk for criminal offending:

- They are oriented to the present rather than to the future, and crime affords them immediate rather than delayed gratification.
- They are risk-taking and physical as opposed to cautious and cognitive, and crime provides them with exciting and risky adventures.
- They lack patience, persistence, and diligence, and crime provides them with quick and easy ways to obtain money, sex, revenge, and so forth.
- They are self-centered and insensitive, so they can commit crimes without experiencing pangs of guilt for causing the suffering of others. (pp. 89–90)

Low self-control is established early in childhood, tends to persist throughout life, and is the result of incompetent parenting. It is important to realize that children do not learn low self-control; low self-control is the default outcome that occurs in the absence of adequate socialization. Parental warmth, nurturance, vigilance, and the willingness to practice “tough love” are necessary to forge self-control in their offspring. Other factors that may result in low self-control include parental criminality (criminals are not very successful in socializing their children), family size (the larger the family the more difficult it is to monitor behavior), single-parent family (two parents are generally better than one), and working mothers, which
negatively impacts the development of children's self-control if no substitute monitor is provided (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, pp. 100–105).

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that children acquire or fail to acquire self-control in the first decade of life, after which the attained level of control remains stable across the life course. Subsequent experiences, situations, and circumstances have little independent effect on the probability of offending. Because low self-control is a stable component of a criminal personality, most criminals typically fail in anything that requires long-term commitment, such as school, employment, and marriage, because such commitments get in the way of immediate satisfaction of their desires.

Low self-control is a necessary but not sufficient cause of criminal offending. What accounts for variation in criminal offending are the different opportunities criminals encounter that are conducive to committing crimes. A criminal opportunity is a situation that presents itself to someone with low self-control by which he or she can immediately satisfy needs with minimal mental or physical effort (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, pp. 12–13). Crime is thus the result of people with low self-control meeting a criminal opportunity, and by virtue of differential placement in the social structure, some individuals are exposed to more criminal opportunities than others.

Gottfredson and Hirschi provide further insight into self-control theory in this section in the excerpt taken from their 1990 book introducing their theory.

Labeling Theory: The Irony of Social Reaction

Labeling or societal reaction theory (LT) takes seriously the power of bad labels to stigmatize, and by doing so labels evoke the very behavior the label signifies. The labeling perspective is interesting and provocative; unlike other theories, it does not ask why crime rates vary or why individuals differ in their propensity to commit crime. Rather, it asks why some behaviors are labeled criminal and not others, and thus shifts the focus from the actor (the criminal) to the reactor (the criminal justice system).

LT is often traced to Frank Tannenbaum's *Crime and the Community*, which emphasized that a major part in the making of a criminal is the process of identifying and labeling a person as such—the "dramatizing of evil" (1938, p. 20). Tannenbaum viewed the labeling of a person as a "criminal" as a self-fulfilling prophesy (a definition of something which becomes true if it is believed and acted upon), which means that processing law violators through the criminal justice system, rather than deterring them from future criminal behavior, may embed them further in a criminal lifestyle.

For labeling theorists, crime and other forms of deviance have no objective reality and are defined into existence rather than discovered. There is no crime independent of cultural values and norms, which are embodied in the judgments and reactions of others. To put it simply, no act is by its "nature" criminal, because acts do not have natures until they are witnessed, judged good or bad, and reacted to as such by others.

LT distinguishes between primary deviance and secondary deviance (Lemert, 1974). Primary deviance is the initial nonconforming act that comes to the attention of the authorities. Primary deviance can arise for a wide variety of reasons, but the reasons are of little interest because they have only marginal effects on the offender's self-concept as a criminal or non-criminal, and it is the individual's self-concept that is crucial in labeling theory. Primary
deviance is of interest to labeling theorists only insofar as it is detected and reacted to by individuals with power to pin a stigmatizing label on the rule-breaker. Being caught in an act of primary deviance is either the result of police bias or sheer bad luck; the real criminogenic experience comes after a person is caught and labeled. The central concern of LT is thus to explain the consequences of being labeled.

Secondary deviance results from society's reaction to primary deviance. The stigma of a criminal label may result in people becoming more criminal than they would have been had they not been caught. This may occur in two ways. First, labeled persons may alter their self-concepts in conformity with the label ("Yes, I am a criminal, and will act more like one in future"). Second, the label may exclude them from conventional employment and lead to the loss of conventional friends. This may lead them to seek illegitimate opportunities to fulfill their financial needs and to seek other criminals to fulfill their friendship needs, which further strengthens their growing conception of themselves as "really" criminal. The criminal label becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy because it is a more powerful label than other social labels that offenders may claim.

Xiaoming Chen's article in this section offers an interesting look at the use of labeling and "reintegrative shaming" in China to maintain social control. Chen asserts that shaming has a much greater influence on Chinese behavior than on Western behavior because of China's culture of collectivism versus the Western culture of individualism. Chen sees shaming as a positive tool rather than a negative one for the Chinese because it serves (ideally) to integrate the miscreant back into "respectful" society. Chen also claims that the Chinese penal system claims an astoundingly low (by Western standards) recidivism rate of between 8% and 15% because of its methods.

Sykes and Matza’s Neutralization Theory

Sykes and Matza’s neutralization theory (NT) is a learning theory that attacks DAT’s failure to explain why some people drift in and out of crime rather than being consistently criminal. It also runs counter to the assumption of DAT and the subcultural theories that give the impression that criminal behavior is endowed with positive value and condoned as morally right. It is difficult to believe that criminals do not know “deep down” that their behavior is wrong: “if there existed in fact a delinquent subculture such that the delinquent viewed his behavior as morally correct,” he or she would show no shame when caught, but would instead show “indignation or a sense of martyrdom” (Sykes & Matza, 2002, p. 145). NT suggests that delinquents know their behavior is wrong, but they justify it on a number of grounds. In other words, they neutralize any sense of shame or guilt for having committed some wrongful act, which means that they are at least minimally attached to conventional norms. NT also runs counter to labeling theory because it shows how delinquents resist labeling rather than passively accepting it. Sykes and Matza’s five techniques of neutralization are listed below.

1. Denial of responsibility shifts the blame for a deviant act away from the actor: “I know she’s only six, but she seduced me.”

2. Denial of injury is an offender’s claim that no “real” offense occurred because no one was harmed: “He got his car back, and his insurance covers the damage, doesn’t it?”
3. Denial of victim implies that the victim got what he or she deserves: “I guess I did beat her up, but she kept nagging; hell, she asked for it!”

4. Condemnation of the condemners involves attempts by the offender to share guilt with the condemners (parents, police, probation officers) by asserting that their behavior is just as bad as his or hers is: “You drink booze, I smoke grass; what’s the difference?”

5. Appeal to higher loyalties elevates the offender’s moral integrity by claiming altruistic motives: “I have to cover my homies’ backs, don’t I?”

The motive behind the employment of these techniques is assumed to be the maintenance of a noncriminal self-image by individuals who have committed a criminal act and who have been asked to explain why. Such individuals “define the situation” in a way that mitigates the seriousness of their acts and simultaneously protects the image they have of themselves as non-criminals. A less benign interpretation of the use of these techniques is that rather than trying to protect their self-images, they are seeking to mitigate their punishment, or at least to “share” it with some convenient other. Conversely, intensive interviews with hardcore criminals indicate that they strive to maintain an image consistent with inner-city street codes, not with conventional ones; “they neutralize being good rather than being bad” (Topalli, 2005, p. 798).

**Evaluation of Social Process Theories**

DAT assumes that antisocial behavior is learned, not something that comes naturally in the absence of prosocial training. But as one early critic of DAT asked, “What is there to be learned about simple lying, taking things that belong to another, fighting and sex play?” (Glueck, 1956, p. 94). Individuals certainly learn to get better at doing these things in their associations with other like-minded individuals, but do they have to be taught them, or do they have to be taught how to curb them, what constitutes moral behavior, and how to consider the rights and feelings of others?

DAT is also criticized for ignoring individual differences in the propensity to associate with antisocial peers. Individual traits do sort people into different relationship patterns—as numerous studies of relationship patterns attest (Rodkin, 2000). Differential association may thus be a case of birds of a feather flocking together; their flocking may facilitate and accentuate their activities, but it does not “cause” them.

Mark Warr (2000) criticizes DAT for having a singular vision of peer influence. Warr makes a distinction between two approaches to the influence of delinquent peers—*private acceptance* and *compliance*. Compliance is “going through the motions” without privately accepting the appropriateness of what one is doing. Private acceptance refers to both the public and private acceptance of the attitudes, values, and behavior of the delinquent group. Warr says that DAT “was built squarely on the idea of private acceptance” (p. 7). This implies that pro-offending attitudes become an integral part of the person’s psyche and lifestyle, and thus once a delinquent career is initiated, the person will continue offending across the lifespan. The problem with this is that we know that the great majority of delinquents limit their offending to adolescence (are temporary compliers) and do not become adult criminals (Moffitt & Walsh, 2003).

SLT adds some meat to DAT by specifying how definitions favorable to law violation are learned, although it neglects the role of individual differences in the ease or difficulty with
which persons learn. Some people find general hell raising more exciting (and thus more reinforcing) than others. Some people are more susceptible to short-term rewards because they are especially impulsive, and some are better able to appreciate the long-term rewards of behaving well. Some are more ready to engage in aggressive behavior than others because of the nature of their temperaments and will find such behavior is reinforced in delinquent areas. As Gwynn Nettler (1984) put it, “Constitutions affect the impact of environment. What we learn and how well we learn it depends on constitution. . . . The fire that melts the butter hardens the egg” (p. 295).

All versions of control theory agree that the family is central to the control and developmental mechanisms that affect criminal behavior, and because of this they have been criticized for neglecting social structure (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993). The major criticism of self-control theory arises from the claim that it is a general theory meant to explain all crime. Although many crimes are impulsive spontaneous acts, many others are not. The theory attributes variation in self-control solely to variation in parental behavior and ignores child effects, but the child development literature is unequivocal that socialization is a two-way street in which parental behavior is shaped by the evocative behavior of the child just as much as the child’s behavior is shaped by its parents (Harris, 1998). Low self-control may be something children bring with them to the socialization process rather than a product of the failure of that process, given that a number of studies have found a strong genetic component to low self-control (Bernhardt, 1997; Goldman, Lappalainen, & Ozaki, 1996; Hur & Bouchard, 1997).

Labeling theory comes close to claiming that the original “causes” (primary deviance) do not matter. If the causes of primary deviance do not matter, then efforts to control crime via various structural changes would be abandoned in favor of reliance on labeling theory’s “non-interventionism” (“Leave the kids alone, they’ll grow out of it”). This advice may be prudent for teenage pot smokers or runaways, but hardly wise for teenage robbers and rapists. LT advises that such delinquents should be “treated” rather than “punished.” But since they insist that there is nothing intrinsically bad about any action, what is the point of treatment? What is it that is to be treated?

One of the positive elements of NT is that it softens the overdetermined image of delinquents, many of whom are no more completely committed to antisocial values than they are to prosocial values. Neutralization techniques are not viewed as “causes” of antisocial behavior; rather, they are a set of justifications that loosen moral constraints and allow offenders to drift in and out of antisocial behavior because they are able to “neutralize” these constraints.

One of the major problems with the theory is that it says little about the origins of the antisocial behavior the actors seek to neutralize. To be a causal theory of criminal behavior rather than an explanation of a post hoc process of rationalization, it would have to show that individuals first neutralize their moral beliefs and then engage in antisocial acts. Some studies have found neutralization techniques were able to explain future deviance, but this should not surprise anyone, since persons in a position where they have to explain their offending behavior are more likely than those not in such a position to offend in the future—past is prologue regardless of our explanations of it.

Where we see the cause of crime is where we assume we will find the solution. However, although they deal with different units of analysis, very few policy recommendations not discussed in ecological and strain theories can be gleaned from DAT or SLT. The bottom line
for all subcultural theories is that lower-class neighborhoods harbor values and attitudes conducive to criminal behavior. Thus, if learning crime and delinquency within a particular culture is the problem, then changing relative aspects of that culture is the answer. However, we have already seen that attempts to do that have met with only meager success at best.

Because DAT concerns itself with the influence of role models in intimate peer groups, the provision of prosocial role models to replace antisocial ones is an obvious thought. Probation and parole authorities have long recognized the importance of keeping convicted felons away from each other, making it a revocable offense to “associate with known felons.” As every probation and parole officer knows, however, this is easier said than done. Programs that bring youths together for prosocial purposes, such as sports leagues and community projects, might be high on the agenda of any policymaker using differential association as a guide. But the lure of “the streets” and of the friends they have grown up with remains a powerful force retarding rehabilitation. The good news is that most delinquents will desist as they mature, and the breakup of the friendship group by the incarceration, migration, death, or marriage of some of its members will break the grip of antisocial behavior for many of the remaining members (Sampson & Laub, 1999).

The policy implications derivable from social control and self-control theories have to do with the family. Given the importance of nurturance and attachment, both versions of control theory support the idea of early family intervention designed to cultivate these things. In almost all advanced nations, families with children receive support via family allowances and receive paid maternal leave, but such programs do not exist in the United States, which shows that politics and ideology, more than criminological theory, dictate the direction of criminal justice policy.

Other attempts to increase bonding to social institutions would concentrate on increasing children's involvement in a variety of prosocial activities and programs centered in and around the school. These programs provide prosocial models, teach moral beliefs such as personal responsibility, and keep youths busy in meaningful and challenging ways. Social control theory might recommend more vocationally oriented classes to keep less academically inclined students bonded to school.

Neither version of control theory would advise increased employment opportunities as a way to control crime. The assumption of control theory is that people who are attached and who possess self-control will do fine in the job market as it is, and increasing job opportunities for those lacking attachment and self-control will have minimal effect. Because low self-control is the result of the absence of inhibiting forces typically experienced in early childhood, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1997) are pessimistic about the ability of less powerful inhibiting forces (such as the threat of punishment) present in later life to deter crime. They also see little use in satisfying the wants and needs other theories view as important in reducing crime (reducing poverty, improving neighborhoods, etc.) because crime’s appeal is its provision of immediate gains and minimal cost. In short, “society” is neither the cause of nor the solution to crime.

Gottfredson and Hirschi advocate some of the same policies (e.g., target hardening) advocated by rational choice and routine activities theorists to reduce criminal opportunities. However, the most important policy recommendation is to strengthen families and improve parenting skills, especially skills relevant to teaching self-control. It is only by working with and through families that society can do anything about crime in the long run. Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1997) most important recommendation is stated as: “Delaying pregnancy
among unmarried girls would probably do more to affect the long-term crime rates than all
the criminal justice programs combined” (p. 33).
Labeling theory had an effect on criminal justice policy far in excess of what its empir-
cical support warrants. If it is correct that official societal reaction to primary deviance
amplifies and promotes more of the same, the logical policy recommendation is that we
should ignore primary deviance for the sake of alleviating secondary deviance. Labeling
type recommends that we allow offenders to protect their self-images as noncriminals by
not challenging their “techniques of neutralization.” Juveniles must be particularly pro-
tected from labeling.
The only policy implication of neutralization theory is the exact opposite of that of label-
ing theory: criminal justice agents charged with managing offenders (probation/parole offi-
cers, etc.) should strongly challenge their excuse making. If offenders come to believe their
own rationalizations, rehabilitative efforts will become more difficult. Thus, offenders must be
shown that their thinking patterns have negative long-term consequences for them.

Summary

◆ Social process theories emphasize how people perceive their reality and how these per-
ceptions structure their behavior. DAT is a learning theory that emphasizes the power of peer
associations and the definitions favorable to law violation found within them to be the cause
of crime and delinquency.

◆ SLT adds to DAT by stressing the mechanisms by which “definitions favorable” are
learned. Behavior is either reinforced (rewarded) or punished. Behavior that is rewarded tends
to be repeated; behavior that is punished tends not to be. Discriminative stimuli provide sig-
als for the kinds of behaviors that are likely to be rewarding or punishing, and are based on
what we have learned about those stimuli in the past.

◆ Control theories are in many ways the opposite of DAT and SLT because they don’t ask
why people commit crimes, but why most of us do not. Crime comes naturally to those who
are not either socially controlled or self-controlled. Hirschi speaks of the social bonds (attach-
ment, commitment, involvement, and belief) that keep us on the straight and narrow. These
are not causes of crime; rather they are bonds, the absence of which allows our natural
impulses to emerge.

◆ Gottfredson and Hirschi’s self-control theory moves the focus from social to self-
control, although our experiences within the family are still vital to learn self-control. Low
self-control must be paired with a criminal opportunity for crime to occur.

◆ Labeling theory is not interested in why some people commit crimes (primary
deviance), believing that the only thing that differentiates criminals from the rest of us is that
they have been caught and labeled. The real problem for it is the affixing of a deviant label
because it changes the person’s self-concept, and he or she then engages in secondary deviance
in conformity with the label.

◆ Sykes and Mazda’s techniques of neutralization theory is contrary to labeling theory
because it focuses on individuals’ attempts to resist being labeled criminal by offering justifi-
cations or excuses for their behavior.
EXERCISES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Without indicating a particular theory, does the social structural or social process approach to explaining crime and criminality make most sense to you?

2. Compare differential association theory with control theory in terms of their respective assumptions about human nature. Which assumption makes more sense to you?

3. Is a delinquent or criminal label applied to someone sufficient in most cases to change a person’s self-concept enough to lead him or her to continue offending?

4. Gottfredson and Hirschi claim that parents are to blame for an individual’s lack of self-control. Are there some children who are simply more difficult to socialize than others, and are they, rather than their parents, at fault for their lack of self-control?

5. Why is attachment the most important of the four social bonds?

USEFUL WEB SITES


CHAPTER GLOSSARY

Attachment: One of the four elements of the social bond; the emotional component of conformity referring to one’s attachment to others and to social institutions.

Belief: One of the four elements of the social bond; refers to the acceptance of the social norms regulating conduct.

Commitment: One of the four elements of the social bond; the rational component of conformity referring to a lifestyle in which one has invested considerable time and energy in the pursuit of a lawful career.

Definitions: Term used by Edwin Sutherland to refer to meanings our experiences have for us, our attitudes, values, and habitual ways of viewing the world.

Differential association theory: Criminological theory devised by Edwin Sutherland asserting that criminal behavior is behavior learned through association with others who communicate their values and attitudes.
Discrimination: A term applied to stimuli that provide clues that signal whether a particular behavior is likely to be followed by reward or punishment.

Involvement: One of the four elements of the social bond. A pattern of involvement with prosocial activities that prevents involvement with antisocial activities.

Operant psychology: A perspective on learning that asserts that behavior is governed and shaped by its consequences (reward or punishment).

Primary deviance: In labeling theory, the initial nonconforming act that comes to the attention of the authorities resulting in the application of a criminal label.

Punishment: A process that leads to the weakening or elimination of the behavior preceding it.

Reinforcement: A process that leads to the strengthening of behavior.

Secondary deviance: Deviance resulting from society’s reaction to primary deviance.

Social bond theory: A social control theory focusing on a person’s bonds to others.

Social control: Any action on the part of others, deliberate or not, that facilitates conformity to social rules.

Social learning theory: A theory about learning criminal behavior based on operant psychology’s emphasis on reinforcement and punishment.

Symbolic interactionism: A perspective in sociology that focuses on how people interpret and define their social reality and the meanings they attach to it in the process of interacting with one another via language (symbols).

Techniques of neutralization: Techniques by which offenders justify their behavior (to themselves and others) as “acceptable” on a number of grounds.

**READING**

**Social Learning Theory**

*Ronald L. Akers*

As indicated in the text, Akers’ social learning is an extension of Sutherland’s differential association theory couched in the concepts of operant psychology. In the following portions of Akers’ book, *A Social Learning Theory of Crime*, he outlines both how his theory reformulates Sutherland’s theory and how he extends it. He agrees that criminals become criminal through harboring an excess of definitions favorable to crime, but goes on to more fully describe the nature of these definitions. Akers also argues that crime is learned by imitation of others and through reinforcements provided by others.
Concise Statement of the Theory

The basic assumption in social learning theory is that the same learning process, operating in a context of social structure, interaction, and situation, produces both conforming and deviant behavior. The difference lies in the direction of the process in which these mechanisms operate. In both, it is seldom an either-or, all-or-nothing process; what is involved, rather, is the balance of influences on behavior. That balance usually exhibits some stability over time, but it can become unstable and change with time or circumstances. Conforming and deviant behavior is learned by all of the mechanisms in this process, but the theory proposes that the principal mechanisms are in that part of the process in which differential reinforcement (instrumental learning through rewards and punishers) and imitation (observational learning) produce both overt behavior and cognitive definitions that function as discriminative (cue) stimuli for the behavior. Always implied, and sometimes made explicit when these concepts are called upon to account for deviant/conforming behavior, is the understanding that the behavioral processes in operant and classical conditioning are in operation (see below). However, social learning theory focuses on four major concepts—differential association, differential reinforcement, imitation, and definitions. The central proposition of the social learning theory of criminal and deviant behavior can be stated as a long sentence proposing that criminal and deviant behavior is more likely when, on balance, the combined effects of these four main sets of variables instigate and strengthen non-conforming over conforming acts.

The probability that persons will engage in criminal and deviant behavior is increased and the probability of their conforming to the norm is decreased when they differentially associate with others who commit criminal behavior and espouse definitions favorable to it, are relatively more exposed in-person or symbolically to salient criminal/deviant models, define it as desirable or justified in a situation discriminative for the behavior, and have received in the past and anticipate in the current or future situation relatively greater reward than punishment for the behavior.

The probability of conforming behavior is increased and the probability of deviant behavior is decreased when the balance of these variables moves in the reverse direction.

Each of the four main components of this statement can be presented as a separate testable hypothesis. The individual is more likely to commit violations when:

1. He or she differentially associates with others who commit, model, and support violations of social and legal norms.
2. The violative behavior is differentially reinforced over behavior in conformity to the norm.
3. He or she is more exposed to and observes more deviant than conforming models.
4. His or her own learned definitions are favorable toward committing the deviant acts.

General Principles of Social Learning Theory

Since it is a general explanation of crime and deviance of all kinds, social learning is not simply a theory about how novel criminal behavior is learned or a theory only of the positive causes of that behavior. It embraces variables that operate to both motivate and control delinquent and criminal behavior, to both promote and undermine conformity. The probability of criminal or conforming behavior occurring is a function of the variables operating in the underlying social learning process. The main concepts/variables and their respective empirical indicators have been identified and measured, but they can be viewed as indicators of a general latent construct, for which additional indicators can be devised.
Social learning accounts for the individual becoming prone to deviant or criminal behavior and for stability or change in that propensity. Therefore, the theory is capable of accounting for the development of stable individual differences, as well as changes in the individual’s behavioral patterns or tendencies to commit deviant and criminal acts, over time and in different situations. The social learning process operates in each individual’s learning history and in the immediate situation in which the opportunity for a crime occurs.

Deviant and criminal behavior is learned and modified (acquired, performed, repeated, maintained, and changed) through all of the same cognitive and behavioral mechanisms as conforming behavior. They differ in the direction, content, and outcome of the behavior learned. Therefore, it is inaccurate to state, for instance, that peer influence does not explain adolescent deviant behavior since conforming behavior is also peer influenced in adolescence. The theory expects peer influences to be implicated in both; it is the content and direction of the influence that is the key.

The primary learning mechanisms are differential reinforcement (instrumental conditioning), in which behavior is a function of the frequency, amount, and probability of experienced and perceived contingent rewards and punishments, and imitation, in which the behavior of others and its consequences are observed and modeled. The process of stimulus discrimination/generalization is another important mechanism; here, overt and covert stimuli, verbal and cognitive, act as cues or signals for behavior to occur. As I point out below, there are other behavioral mechanisms in the learning process, but these are not as important and are usually left implied rather than explicaded in the theory.

The content of the learning achieved by these mechanisms includes the simple and complex behavioral sequences and the definitions (beliefs, attitudes, justifications, orientations) that in turn become discriminative for engaging in deviant and criminal behavior. The probability that conforming or norm-violative behavior is learned and performed, and the frequency with which it is committed, are a function of the past, present, and anticipated differential reinforcement for the behavior and the deviant or nondeviant direction of the learned definitions and other discriminative stimuli present in a given situation.

These learning mechanisms operate in a process of differential association—direct and indirect, verbal and nonverbal communication, interaction, and identification with others. The relative frequency, intensity, duration, and priority of associations affect the relative amount, frequency, and probability of reinforcement of conforming or deviant behavior and exposure of individuals to deviant or conforming norms and behavioral models. To the extent that the individual can control with whom she or he associates, the frequency, intensity, and duration of those associations are themselves affected by how rewarding or aversive they are. The principal learning is through differential association with those persons and groups (primary secondary, reference, and symbolic) that comprise or control the individual’s major sources of reinforcement, most salient behavioral models, and most effective definitions and other discriminative stimuli for committing and repeating behavior. The reinforcement and discriminative stimuli are mainly social (such as socially valued rewards and punishers contingent on the behavior), but they are also nonsocial (such as unconditioned physiological reactions to environmental stimuli and physical effects of ingested substances and the physical environment).

Sequence and Reciprocal Effects in the Social Learning Process

Behavioral feedback effects are built into the concept of differential reinforcement—actual or perceived changes in the environment produced by the behavior feedback on that behavior to affect its repetition or extinction, and both prior and anticipated rewards and punishments influence present behavior. Reciprocal effects between the individual’s behavior and definitions or differential
association are also reflected in the social learning process. This process is one in which the probability of both the initiation and the repetition of a deviant or criminal act (or the initiation and repetition of conforming acts) is a function of the learning history of the individual and the set of reinforcement contingencies and discriminative stimuli in a given situation. The typical process of initiation, continuation, progression, and desistance is hypothesized to be as follows:

1. The balance of past and current associations, definitions, and imitation of deviant models, and the anticipated balance of reinforcement in particular situations, produces or inhibits the initial delinquent or deviant acts.

2. The effects of these variables continue in the repetition of acts, although imitation becomes less important than it was in the first commission of the act.

3. After initiation, the actual social and nonsocial reinforcers and punishers affect the probability that the acts will be or will not be repeated and at what level of frequency.

4. Not only the overt behavior, but also the definitions favorable or unfavorable to it, are affected by the positive and negative consequences of the initial acts. To the extent that they are more rewarded than alternative behavior, the favorable definitions will be strengthened and the unfavorable definitions will be weakened, and it becomes more likely that the deviant behavior will be repeated under similar circumstances.

5. Progression into more frequent or sustained patterns, rather than cessation or reduction, of criminal and deviant behavior is promoted to the extent that reinforcement, exposure to deviant models, and norm-violating definitions are not offset by negative formal and informal sanctions and norm abiding definitions.

The theory does not hypothesize that definitions favorable to law violation always precede and are unaffected by the commission of criminal acts. Although the probability of a criminal act increases in the presence of favorable definitions, acts in violation of the law do occur (through imitation and reinforcement) in the absence of any thought given to whether the acts are right or wrong. Furthermore, the individual may apply neutralizing definitions retroactively to excuse or justify an act without having contemplated them beforehand. To the extent that such excuses become associated with successfully mitigating others’ negative sanctions or one’s self-punishment, however, they become cues for the repetition of deviant acts. Such definitions, therefore, precede committing the same acts again or committing similar acts in the future.

Differential association with conforming and nonconforming others typically precedes the individual’s committing crimes and delinquent acts. This sequence of events is sometimes disputed in the literature because it is mistakenly believed to apply only to differential peer association in general or to participation in delinquent gangs in particular without reference to family and other group associations. It is true that the theory recognizes peer associations as very important in adolescent deviance and that differential association is most often measured in research by peer associations. But the theory also hypothesizes that the family is a very important primary group in the differential association process, and it plainly stipulates that other primary and secondary groups besides peers are involved (see Sutherland, 1947, pp. 164–65). Accordingly, it is a mistake to interpret differential association as referring only to peer associations. The theoretical stipulation that differential association is causally prior to the commission of delinquent and criminal acts is not confined to the balance of peer associations; rather, it is the balance (as determined by the modalities) of family, peer, and other associations. According to the priority principle, association, reinforcement, modeling, and exposure to conforming and deviant definitions occurring within the family
during childhood, and such antisocial conduct as aggressiveness, lying, and cheating learned in early childhood, occur prior to and have both direct and selective effects on later delinquent and criminal behavior and associations. . . .

The socializing behavior of parents, guardians, or caretakers is certainly reciprocally influenced by the deviant and unacceptable behavior of the child. However, it can never be true that the onset of delinquency precedes and initiates interaction in a particular family (except in the unlikely case of the late-stage adoption of a child who is already delinquent or who is drawn to and chosen by deviant parents). Thus, interaction in the family or family surrogate always precedes delinquency.

But this is not true for adolescent peer associations. One may choose to associate with peers based on similarity in deviant behavior that already exists. Some major portion of this behavioral similarity results from previous association with other delinquent peers or from anticipatory socialization undertaken to make one’s behavior match more closely that of the deviant associates to whom one is attracted. For some adolescents, gravitation toward delinquent peers occurs after and as a result of the individual’s involvement in delinquent behavior. However, peer associations are most often formed initially around interests, friendships, and such circumstances as neighborhood proximity, family similarities, values, beliefs, age, school attended, grade in school, and mutually attractive behavioral patterns that have little to do directly with co-involvement or similarity in specifically law-violating or serious deviant behavior. Many of these factors in peer association are not under the adolescents’ control, and some are simply happenstance. The theory does not, contrary to the Gluecks’ distorted characterization, propose that “accidental differential association of non-delinquents with delinquents is the basic cause of crime (Glueck & Glueck, 1950, p. 164). Interaction and socialization in the family precedes and affects choices of both conforming and deviant peer associations.

Those peer associations will affect the nature of models, definitions, and rewards/punishers to which the person is exposed. After the associations have been established, their reinforcing or punishing consequences as well as direct and vicarious consequences of the deviant behavior will affect both the continuation of old and the seeking of new associations (those over which one has any choice). One may choose further interaction with others based on whether they too are involved in deviant or criminal behavior; in such cases, the outcomes of that interaction are more rewarding than aversive and it is anticipated that the associates will more likely approve or be permissive toward one’s own deviant behavior. Further interaction with delinquent peers, over which the individual has no choice, may also result from being apprehended and confined by the juvenile or criminal-justice system.

These reciprocal effects would predict that one’s own deviant or conforming behavioral patterns can have effects on choice of friends; these are weaker in the earlier years, but should become stronger as one moves through adolescence and gains more control over friendship choices. The typical sequence outlined above would predict that deviant associations precede the onset of delinquent behavior more frequently than the sequence of events in which the delinquent associations begin only after the peers involved have already separately and individually established similar patterns of delinquent behavior. Further, these behavioral tendencies that develop prior to peer association will themselves be the result of previous associations, models, and reinforcement, primarily in the family. Regardless of the sequence in which onset occurs, and whatever the level of the individual’s delinquent involvement, its frequency and seriousness will increase after the deviant associations have begun and decrease as the associations are reduced. That is, whatever the temporal ordering, differential association with deviant peers will have a causal effect on one’s own delinquent behavior (just as his actions will have an effect on his peers).

Therefore, both “selection,” or “flocking” (tendency for persons to choose interaction with others with behavioral similarities), and
“socialization,” or “feathering” (tendency for persons who interact to have mutual influence on one another’s behavior), are part of the same overall social learning process and are explained by the same variables. A peer “socialization” process and a peer “selection” process in deviant behavior are not mutually exclusive, but are simply the social learning process operating at different times. Arguments that social learning posits only the latter, that any evidence of selective mechanisms in deviant interaction run counter to social learning theory, or that social learning theory recognizes only a recursive, one-way causal effect of peers on delinquent behavior are wrong.

**Behavioral and Cognitive Mechanisms in Social Learning**

The first statement in Sutherland’s theory was a simple declarative sentence maintaining that criminal behavior is learned, and the eighth statement declared that this involved all the mechanisms involved in any learning. What little Sutherland added in his (1947, p. 7) commentary downplayed imitation as a possible learning mechanism in criminal behavior. He mentioned “seduction” of a person into criminal behavior as something that is not covered by the concept of imitation. He defined neither imitation nor seduction and offered no further discussion of mechanisms of learning in any of his papers or publications. Recall that filling this major lacuna in Sutherland’s theory was the principal goal of the 1966b Burgess-Akers reformulation. To this end we combined Sutherland’s first and eighth statements into one: “Criminal behavior is learned according to the principles of operant conditioning.” The phrase “principles of operant conditioning” was meant as a shorthand reference to all of the behavioral mechanisms of learning in operant theory that had been empirically validated.

Burgess and I delineated, as much as space allowed, what these specific learning mechanisms were: (1) operant conditioning, differential reinforcement of voluntary behavior through positive and negative reinforcement and punishment; (2) respondent (involuntary reflexes), or “classical,” conditioning; (3) unconditioned (primary) and conditioned (secondary) reinforcers and punishers; (4) shaping and response differentiation; (5) stimulus discrimination and generalization, the environmental and internal stimuli that provide cues or signals indicating differences and similarities across situations that help elicit, but do not directly reinforce, behavior; (6) types of reinforcement schedules, the rate and ratio in which rewards and punishers follow behavior; (7) stimulus-response constellations; and (8) stimulus satiation and deprivation. We also reported research showing the applicability of these mechanisms of learning to both conforming and deviant behavior.

Burgess and I used the term “operant conditioning” to emphasize that differential reinforcement (the balance of reward and punishment contingent upon behavioral responses) is the basic mechanism around which the others revolve and by which learning most relevant to conformity or violation of social and legal norms is produced. This was reflected in other statements in the theory in which the only learning mechanisms listed were differential reinforcement and stimulus discrimination.

We also subsumed imitation, or modeling, under these principles and argued that imitation “may be analyzed quite parsimoniously with the principles of modern behavior theory,” namely, that it is simply a sub-class of behavioral shaping through operant conditioning (Burgess and Akers, 1966b: 138). For this reason we made no specific mention of imitation in any of the seven statements. Later, I became persuaded that the operant principle of gradual shaping of responses through “successive approximations” only incompletely and awkwardly incorporated the processes of observational learning and vicarious reinforcement that Bandura and Walters (1963) had identified. Therefore, without dismissing successive approximation as a way in which some imitative behavior could be shaped,
I came to accept Bandura’s conceptualization of imitation. That is, imitation is a separate learning mechanism characterized by modeling one’s own actions on the observed behavior of others and on the consequences of that behavior (vicarious reinforcement) prior to performing the behavior and experiencing its consequences directly. Whether the observed acts will be performed and repeated depends less on the continuing presence of models and more on the actual or anticipated rewarding or aversive consequences of the behavior. I became satisfied that the principle of “observational learning” could account for the acquisition, and to some extent the performance, of behavior by a process that did not depend on operant conditioning or “instrumental learning.” Therefore, in later discussions of the theory, while continuing to posit differential reinforcement as the core behavior-shaping mechanism, I included imitation as another primary mechanism in acquiring behavior. Where appropriate, discriminative stimuli were also specifically invoked as affecting behavior, while I made only general reference to other learning mechanisms.

Note that the term “operant conditioning” in the opening sentence of the Burgess-Akers revision reflected our great reliance on the orthodox behaviorism that assumed the empirical irrelevance of cognitive variables. Social behaviorism, on the other hand, recognizes “cognitive” as well as “behavioral.” My social learning theory of criminal behavior retains a strong element of the symbolic interactionism found in Sutherland’s theory. As a result, it is closer to cognitive learning theories, such as Albert Bandura’s, than to the radical operant behaviorism of B. F. Skinner with which Burgess and I began. It is for this reason, and the reliance on such concepts as imitation, anticipated reinforcement, and self-reinforcement, that I have described social learning theory as “soft behaviorism.”

The unmodified term “learning” implies to many that the theory only explains the acquisition of novel behavior by the individual, in contrast to behavior that is committed at a given time and place or the maintenance of behavior over time. It has also been interpreted to mean only “positive” learning of novel behavior, with no relevance for inhibition of behavior or of learning failures. As I have made clear above, neither of these interpretations is accurate. The phrase that Burgess and I used, “effective and available reinforcers and the existing reinforcement contingencies,” and the discussion of reinforcement occurring under given situations make it obvious that we were not proposing a theory only of past reinforcement in the acquisition of a behavioral repertoire with no regard for the reward/cost balance obtaining at a given time and place. There is nothing in the learning principles that restrict them to prior socialization or past history of learning. Social learning encompasses both the acquisition and the performance of the behavior, both facilitation and inhibition of behavior, and both learning successes and learning failures. The learning mechanisms account not only for the initiation of behavior but also for repetition, maintenance and desistance of behavior. They rely not only on prior behavioral processes but also on those operating at a given time in a given situation.

**Definitions and Discriminative Stimuli**

In The Concept of Definitions, Sutherland asserted that learning criminal behavior includes “techniques of committing the crime which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes very simple” and the “specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations and attitudes” (1947, p. 6). I have retained both definitions and techniques in social learning theory, with clarified and modified conceptual meanings and with hypothesized relationships to criminal behavior. The qualification that “techniques” may be simple or complex shows plainly that Sutherland did not mean to include only crime-specific skills learned in order to break the law successfully. Techniques also clearly include ordinary, everyday abilities. This same notion is retained in social learning theory.
By definition, a person must be capable of performing the necessary sequence of actions before he or she can carry out either criminal or conforming behavior—inability to perform the behavior precludes committing the crime. Since many of the behavioral techniques for both conforming and criminal acts are the same, not only the simple but even some of the complex skills involved in carrying out crime are not novel to most or many of us. The required component parts of the complete skill are acquired in essentially conforming or neutral contexts to which we have been exposed—driving a car, shooting a gun, fighting with fists, signing checks, using a computer, and so on. In most white-collar crime, the same skills needed to carry out a job legitimately are put to illegitimate use. Other skills are specific to given deviant acts—safe cracking, counterfeiting, pocket picking, jimmying doors and picking locks, bringing off a con game, and so on. Without tutelage in these crime-specific techniques, most people would not be able to perform them, or at least would be initially very inept.

Sutherland took the concept of “definitions” in his theory from W. I. Thomas’s “definition of the situation” (Thomas and Thomas, 1928) and generalized it to orienting attitudes toward different behavior. It is true that “Sutherland did not identify what constitutes a definition ‘favorable to’ or ‘unfavorable to’ the violation of law.” Nevertheless . . . there is little doubt that “rationalizations” and “attitudes” are subsumed under the general concept of definitions—normative attitudes or evaluative meanings attached to given behavior. Exposure to others’ shared definitions is a key (but not the only) part of the process by which the individual acquires or internalizes his or her own definitions. They are orientations, rationalizations, definitions of the situation, and other attitudes that label the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified.

In social learning theory, these definitions are both general and specific. General beliefs include religious, moral, and other conventional values and norms that are favorable to conforming behavior and unfavorable to committing any of a range of deviant or criminal acts. Specific definitions orient the person to particular acts or series of acts. Thus, there are people who believe that it is morally wrong to steal and that laws against theft should be obeyed, but at the same time see little wrong with smoking marijuana and rationalize that it is all right to violate laws against drug possession. The greater the extent to which one holds attitudes that disapprove of certain acts, the less likely one is to engage in them. Conventional beliefs are negative toward criminal behavior. The more strongly one has learned and personally believes in the ideals of honesty, integrity, civility, kindness, and other general standards of morality that condemn lying, cheating, stealing, and harming others, the less likely he or she is to commit acts that violate social and legal norms. Conversely, the more one’s own attitudes approve of, or fail to condemn, a behavior, the greater the chances are that he or she will engage in it. For obvious reasons, the theory would predict that definitions in the form of general beliefs will have less effect than specific definitions on the commission of specific criminal acts.

Definitions that favor criminal or deviant behavior are basically positive or neutralizing. Positive definitions are beliefs or attitudes that make the behavior morally desirable or wholly permissible. They are most likely to be learned through positive reinforcement in a deviant group or subculture that carries values conflicting with those of conventional society. Some of these positive verbalizations may be part of a full-blown ideology of politically dissident, criminal, or deviant groups. Although such ideologies and groups can be identified, the theory does not rest only on this type of definition favorable to deviance; indeed, it proposes that such positive definitions occur less frequently than neutralizing ones.

Neutralizing definitions favor violating the law or other norms not because they take the acts to be positively desirable but because they justify or excuse them. Even those who commit deviant acts are aware that others condemn the behavior and may themselves define the behavior as bad. The neutralizing definitions view the act as something that is probably undesirable but, given
the situation, is nonetheless justified, excusable, necessary all right, or not really bad after all. The process of acquiring neutralizing definitions is more likely to involve negative reinforcement; that is, they are verbalizations that accompany escape or avoidance of negative consequences like disapproval by one’s self or by society.

While these definitions may become part of a deviant or criminal subculture, acquiring them does not require participation in such subcultures. They are learned from carriers of conventional culture, including many of those in social control and treatment agencies. The notions of techniques of neutralization and subterranean values (Sykes and Matza, 1957) come from the observation that for nearly every social norm there is a norm of evasion. That is, there are recognized exceptions or ways of getting around the moral imperatives in the norms and the reproach expected for violating them. Thus, the general prohibition “Thou shalt not kill” is accompanied by such implicit or explicit exceptions as “unless in time of war,” “unless the victim is the enemy,” “unless in self-defense” “unless in the line of duty,” “unless to protect others”! The moral injunctions against physical violence are suspended if the victim can be defined as the initial aggressor or is guilty of some transgression and therefore deserves to be attacked.

The concept of neutralizing definitions in social learning theory incorporates not only notions of verbalizations and rationalizations and techniques of neutralization, but also conceptually similar if not equivalent notions of “accounts,” “disclaimers,” and “moral disengagement.” Neutralizing attitudes include such beliefs as “Everybody has a racket”; “I can’t help myself, I was born this way”; “It’s not my fault”; “I am not responsible”; “I was drunk and didn’t know what I was doing”; “I just blew my top”; “They can afford it”; “He deserved it.” Some neutralizations (e.g., nonresponsibility) can be generalized to a wide range of disapproved and criminal behavior. These and other excuses and justifications for committing deviant acts and victimizing others are definitions favorable to criminal and deviant behavior.

Exposure to these rationalizations and excuses may be through after-the-fact justifications for one’s own or others’ norm violations that help to deflect or lessen punishment that would be expected to follow. The individual then learns the excuses either directly or through imitation and uses them to lessen self-reproach and social disapproval. Therefore, the definitions are themselves behavior that can be imitated and reinforced and then in turn serve as discriminative stimuli accompanying reinforcement of overt behavior. Deviant and criminal acts do occur without being accompanied by positive or neutralizing definitions, but the acts are more likely to occur and recur in situations the same as or similar to those in which the definitions have already been learned and applied. The extent to which one adheres to or rejects the definitions favorable to crime is itself affected by the rewarding or punishing consequences that follow the act.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Akers’ social learning theory differ from differential association theory in explaining why associating with delinquent peers usually results in delinquency?

2. Provide an example of learning that “sticks” resulting from positive and negative reinforcement.

3. How would Akers explain the large differences in crime and delinquency (especially the more serious kinds) between males and females living in the same neighborhood?
In this excerpt from Gottfredson and Hirschi’s *A General Theory of Crime*, they emphasize the classical notion that we all would like to get everything we want with minimal effort. Underlying all criminal and other antisocial behaviors is the inability to do this; that is, the antisocial individual lacks self-control. Gottfredson and Hirschi focus on the family as the critical determinant of self-control. Individuals who fail to learn self-control when they are children ordinarily do not develop it later in life. Unless parents closely monitor their children, self-control will not be learned, and children retain their impulsive and insensitive natures considered to be the default in the absence of training. Gottfredson and Hirschi view crime as a consequence of individuals with low self-control coming into contact with opportunities to commit crime.

**The Elements of Self-Control**

Criminal acts provide immediate gratification of desires. A major characteristic of people with low self-control is therefore a tendency to respond to tangible stimuli in the immediate environment, to have a concrete “here and now” orientation. People with high self-control, in contrast, tend to defer gratification. Criminal acts provide easy or simple gratification of desires. They provide money without work, sex without courtship, revenge without court delays. People lacking self-control also tend to lack diligence, tenacity, or persistence in a course of action. Criminal acts are exciting, risky, or thrilling. They involve stealth, danger, speed, agility, deception, or power. People lacking self-control therefore tend to be adventuresome, active, and physical. Those with high levels of self-control tend to be cautious, cognitive, and verbal.

Crimes provide few or meager long-term benefits. They are not equivalent to a job or a career. On the contrary, crimes interfere with long-term commitments to jobs, marriages, family, or friends. People with low self-control thus tend to have unstable marriages, friendships, and job profiles. They tend to be little interested in and unprepared for long-term occupational pursuits.

Crimes require little skill or planning. The cognitive requirements for most crimes are minimal. It follows that people lacking self-control need not possess or value cognitive or academic skills. The manual skills required for most crimes are minimal. It follows that people lacking self-control need not possess manual skills that require training or apprenticeship. Crimes often result in pain or discomfort for the victim. Property is lost, bodies are injured, privacy is violated, trust is broken. It follows that people with low self-control tend to be self-centered, indifferent, or insensitive to the suffering and needs of others. It does not follow, however, that people with low self-control are routinely unkind or antisocial. On the contrary, they may discover the immediate and easy rewards of charm and generosity.

Recall that crime involves the pursuit of immediate pleasure. It follows that people lacking self-control will also tend to pursue immediate pleasures that are not criminal: they will tend to smoke, drink, use drugs, gamble, have children.
out of wedlock, and engage in illicit sex. Crimes require the interaction of an offender with people or their property. It does not follow that people lacking self-control will tend to be gregarious or social. However, it does follow that, other things being equal, gregarious or social people are more likely to be involved in criminal acts. The major benefit of many crimes is not pleasure but relief from momentary irritation. The irritation caused by a crying child is often the stimulus for physical abuse. That caused by a taunting stranger in a bar is often the stimulus for aggravated assault. It follows that people with low self-control tend to have minimal tolerance for frustration and little ability to respond to conflict through verbal rather than physical means.

Crimes involve the risk of violence and physical injury, of pain and suffering on the part of the offender. It does not follow that people with low self-control will tend to be tolerant of physical pain or to be indifferent to physical discomfort. It does follow that people tolerant of physical pain or indifferent to physical discomfort will be more likely to engage in criminal acts whatever their level of self-control. The risk of criminal penalty for any given criminal act is small, but this depends in part on the circumstances of the offense. Thus, for example, not all joyrides by teenagers are equally likely to result in arrest. A car stolen from a neighbor and returned unharmed before he notices its absence is less likely to result in official notice than is a car stolen from a shopping center parking lot and abandoned at the convenience of the offender. Drinking alcohol stolen from parents and consumed in the family garage is less likely to receive official notice than drinking in the parking lot outside a concert hall. It follows that offenses differ in their validity as measures of self-control: those offenses with large risk of public awareness are better measures than those with little risk.

In sum, people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short-sighted, and nonverbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts. Since these traits can be identified prior to the age of responsibility for crime, since there is considerable tendency for these traits to come together in the same person, and since the traits tend to persist through life, it seems reasonable to consider them as comprising a stable construct useful in the explanation of crime.

**The Many Manifestations of Low Self-Control**

Our image of the “offender” suggests that crime is not an automatic or necessary consequence of low self-control. It suggests that many noncriminal acts analogous to crime (such as accidents, smoking, and alcohol use) are also manifestations of low self-control. Our image therefore implies that no specific act, type of crime, or form of deviance is uniquely required by the absence of self-control. Because both crime and analogous behaviors stem from low self-control (that is, both are manifestations of low self-control), they will all be engaged in at a relatively high rate by people with low self-control. Within the domain of crime, then, there will be much versatility among offenders in the criminal acts in which they engage.

Research on the versatility of deviant acts supports these predictions in the strongest possible way. The variety of manifestations of low self-control is immense. In spite of years of tireless research motivated by a belief in specialization, no credible evidence of specialization has been reported. In fact, the evidence of offender versatility is overwhelming.

By versatility we mean that offenders commit a wide variety of criminal acts, with no strong inclination to pursue a specific criminal act or a pattern of criminal acts to the exclusion of others. Most theories suggest that offenders tend to specialize, whereby such terms as robber, burglar, drug dealer, rapist, and murderer have predictive or descriptive import. In fact, some theories create offender specialization as part of their explanation of crime. For example, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) create distinctive subcultures
of delinquency around particular forms of criminal behavior, identifying subcultures specializing in theft, violence, or drugs. In a related way, books are written about white-collar crime as though it were a clearly distinct specialty requiring a unique explanation. Research projects are undertaken for the study of drug use, or vandalism, or teen pregnancy (as though every study of delinquency were not a study of drug use and vandalism and teenage sexual behavior). Entire schools of criminology emerge to pursue patterning, sequencing, progression, escalation, onset, persistence, and desistance in the career of offenses or offenders. These efforts survive largely because their proponents fail to consider or acknowledge the clear evidence to the contrary. Other reasons for survival of such ideas may be found in the interest of politicians and members of the law enforcement community who see policy potential in criminal careers or “career criminals.”

Occasional reports of specialization seem to contradict this point, as do everyday observations of repetitive misbehavior by particular offenders. Some offenders rob the same store repeatedly over a period of years, or an offender commits several rapes over a (brief) period of time. Such offenders may be called “robbers” or “rapists.” However, it should be noted that such labels are retrospective rather than predictive and that they typically ignore a large amount of delinquent or criminal behavior by the same offenders that is inconsistent with their alleged specialty. Thus, for example, the “rapist” will tend also to use drugs, to commit robberies and burglaries (often in concert with the rape), and to have a record for violent offenses other than rape. There is a perhaps natural tendency on the part of observers (and in official accounts) to focus on the most serious crimes in a series of events, but this tendency should not be confused with a tendency on the part of the offender to specialize in one kind of crime.

Recall that one of the defining features of crime is that it is simple and easy. Some apparent specialization will therefore occur because obvious opportunities for an easy score will tend to repeat themselves. An offender who lives next to a shopping area that is approached by pedestrians will have repeat opportunities for purse snatching, and this may show in his arrest record. But even here the specific “criminal career” will tend to quickly run its course and to be followed by offenses whose content and character is likewise determined by convenience and opportunity (which is the reason why some form of theft is always the best bet about what a person is likely to do next).

The evidence that offenders are likely to engage in noncriminal acts psychologically or theoretically equivalent to crime is, because of the relatively high rates of these “noncriminal” acts, even easier to document. Thieves are likely to smoke, drink, and skip school at considerably higher rates than nonthieves. Offenders are considerably more likely than nonoffenders to be involved in most types of accidents, including household fires, auto crashes, and unwanted pregnancies. They are also considerably more likely to die at an early age.

Good research on drug use and abuse routinely reveals that the correlates of delinquency and drug use are the same. As Akers (1984) has noted, “compared to the abstaining teenager, the drinking, smoking, and drug-taking teen is much more likely to be getting into fights, stealing, hurting other people, and committing other delinquencies.” Akers goes on to say, “but the variation in the order in which they take up these things leaves little basis for proposing the causation of one by the other.” In our view, the relation between drug use and delinquency is not a causal question. The correlates are the same because drug use and delinquency are both manifestations of an underlying tendency to pursue short-term, immediate pleasure. This underlying tendency (i.e., lack of self-control) has many manifestations, as listed by Harrison Gough (1948):

- unconcern over the rights and privileges of others when recognizing them would interfere with personal satisfaction in any way;
impulsive behavior, or apparent incongruity between the strength of the stimulus and the magnitude of the behavioral response; inability to form deep or persistent attachments to other persons or to identify in interpersonal relationships; poor judgment and planning in attaining defined goals; apparent lack of anxiety and distress over social maladjustment and unwillingness or inability to consider maladjustment qua maladjustment; a tendency to project blame onto others and to take no responsibility for failures; meaningless prevarication, often about trivial matters in situations where detection is inevitable; almost complete lack of dependability . . . and willingness to assume responsibility; and, finally, emotional poverty. (p. 362)

This combination of characteristics has been revealed in the life histories of the subjects in the famous studies by Lee Robins. Robins is one of the few researchers to focus on the varieties of deviance and the way they tend to go together in the lives of those she designates as having “antisocial personalities.” In her words:

We refer to some one who fails to maintain close personal relationships with anyone else, [who] performs poorly on the job, who is involved in illegal behaviors (whether or not apprehended), who fails to support himself and his dependents without outside aid, and who is given to sudden changes of plan and loss of temper in response to what appear to others as minor frustrations. (1978, p. 255)

For 30 years Robins traced 524 children referred to a guidance clinic in St. Louis, Missouri, and she compared them to a control group matched on IQ, age, sex, and area of the city. She discovered that, in comparison to the control group, those people referred at an early age were more likely to be arrested as adults (for a wide variety of offenses), were less likely to get married, were more likely to be divorced, were more likely to marry a spouse with a behavior problem, were less likely to have children (but if they had children were likely to have more children), were more likely to have children with behavior problems, were more likely to be unemployed, had considerably more frequent job changes, were more likely to be on welfare, had fewer contacts with relatives, had fewer friends, were substantially less likely to attend church, were less likely to serve in the armed forces and more likely to be dishonorably discharged if they did serve, were more likely to exhibit physical evidence of excessive alcohol use, and were more likely to be hospitalized for psychiatric problems (1966, pp. 42–73).

Note that these outcomes are consistent with four general elements of our notion of low self-control: basic stability of individual differences over a long period of time; great variability in the kinds of criminal acts engaged in; conceptual or causal equivalence of criminal and noncriminal acts; and inability to predict the specific forms of deviance engaged in, whether criminal or noncriminal. In our view, the idea of an antisocial personality defined by certain behavioral consequences is too positivistic or deterministic, suggesting that the offender must do certain things given his antisocial personality. Thus we would say only that the subjects in question are more likely to commit criminal acts (as the data indicate they are). We do not make commission of criminal acts part of the definition of the individual with low self-control.

Be this as it may, Robins’s retrospective research shows that predictions derived from a concept of antisocial personality are highly consistent with the results of prospective longitudinal and cross-sectional research: offenders do not specialize; they tend to be involved in accidents, illness, and death at higher rates than the general population; they tend to have difficulty persisting in a job regardless of the particular characteristics of the job (no job will turn out to be a good job); they have difficulty acquiring and retaining friends; and they have difficulty meeting the demands of long-term financial commitments.
(such as mortgages or car payments) and the demands of parenting. Seen in this light, the “costs” of low self-control for the individual may far exceed the costs of his criminal acts. In fact, it appears that crime is often among the least serious consequences of a lack of self-control in terms of the quality of life of those lacking it.

**The Causes of Self-Control**

We know better what deficiencies in self-control lead to than where they come from. One thing is, however, clear: low self-control is not produced by training, tutelage, or socialization. As a matter of fact, all of the characteristics associated with low self-control tend to show themselves in the absence of nurturance, discipline, or training. Given the classical appreciation of the causes of human behavior, the implications of this fact are straightforward: the causes of low self-control are negative rather than positive; self-control is unlikely in the absence of effort, intended or unintended, to create it. (This assumption separates the present theory from most modern theories of crime, where the offender is automatically seen as a product of positive forces, a creature of learning, particular pressures, or specific defect. We will return to this comparison once our theory has been fully explicated.)

At this point it would be easy to construct a theory of crime causation, according to which characteristics of potential offenders lead them ineluctably to the commission of criminal acts. Our task at this point would simply be to identify the likely sources of impulsiveness, intelligence, risk-taking, and the like. But to do so would be to follow the path that has proven so unproductive in the past, the path according to which criminals commit crimes irrespective of the characteristics of the setting or situation.

We can avoid this pitfall by recalling the elements inherent in the decision to commit a criminal act. The object of the offense is clearly pleasurable, and universally so. Engaging in the act, however, entails some risk of social, legal, and/or natural sanctions. Whereas the pleasure attained by the act is direct, obvious, and immediate, the pains risked by it are not obvious, or direct, and are in any event at greater remove from it. It follows that, though there will be little variability among people in their ability to see the pleasures of crime, there will be considerable variability in their ability to calculate potential pains.

But the problem goes further than this: whereas the pleasures of crime are reasonably equally distributed over the population, this is not true for the pains. Everyone appreciates money; not everyone dreads parental anger or disappointment upon learning that the money was stolen. So, the dimensions of self-control are, in our view, factors affecting calculation of the consequences of one’s acts. The impulsive or short-sighted person fails to consider the negative or painful consequences of his acts; the insensitive person has fewer negative consequences to consider; the less intelligent person also has fewer negative consequences to consider (has less to lose).

No known social group, whether criminal or noncriminal, actively or purposefully attempts to reduce the self-control of its members. Social life is not enhanced by low self-control and its consequences. On the contrary, the exhibition of these tendencies undermines harmonious group relations and the ability to achieve collective ends. These facts explicitly deny that a tendency to crime is a product of socialization, culture, or positive learning of any sort.

The traits composing low self-control are also not conducive to the achievement of long-term individual goals. On the contrary, they impede educational and occupational achievement, destroy interpersonal relations, and undermine physical health and economic well being. Such facts explicitly deny the notion that criminality is an alternative route to the goals otherwise obtainable through legitimate avenues. It follows that people who care about the interpersonal skill, educational and occupational achievement, and physical and economic well-being of those in their care will seek to rid them of these traits.

Two general sources of variation are immediately apparent in this scheme. The first is the variation among children in the degree to which they manifest such traits to begin with. The
The Nature of Criminality

Section 5  

The major cause of low self-control thus appears to be ineffective child-rearing. Put in positive terms, several conditions appear to produce a socialized child. Perhaps the place to begin looking for these conditions is the research literature on the relation between family conditions and delinquency. This research (e.g., Glueck & Glueck, 1950) has examined the connection between many family factors and delinquency. It reports that discipline, supervision, and affection tend to be missing in the homes of delinquents, that the behavior of the parents is often “poor” (e.g., excessive drinking and poor supervision (Glueck & Glueck 1950, pp. 10–11); and that the parents of delinquents are unusually likely to have criminal records themselves. Indeed, according to Michael Rutter and Henri Giller, “of the parental characteristics associated with delinquency, criminality is the most striking and most consistent” (1984, p. 182).

Such information undermines the many explanations of crime that ignore the family, 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 crime.

To put these standard research findings in perspective, we think it necessary to define the conditions necessary for adequate child-rearing to occur. The minimum conditions seem to be these: in order to teach the child self-control, someone must (1) monitor the child’s behavior; (2) recognize deviant behavior when it occurs; and (3) punish such behavior. This seems simple and obvious enough. All that is required to activate the system is affection for or investment in the child. The person who cares for the child will watch his behavior, see him doing things he should not do, and correct him. The result may be a child more capable of delaying gratification, more sensitive to the interests and desires of others, more independent, more willing to accept restraints on his activity, and more unlikely to use force or violence to attain his ends.

When we seek the causes of low self-control, we ask where this system can go wrong. Obviously, parents do not prefer their children to be unsocialized in the terms described. We
can therefore rule out in advance the possibility of positive socialization to unsocialized behavior (as cultural or subcultural deviance theories suggest). Still, the system can go wrong at any one of four places. First, the parents may not care for the child (in which case none of the other conditions would be met); second, the parents, even if they care, may not have the time or energy to monitor the child’s behavior; third, the parents, even if they care and monitor, may not see anything wrong with the child’s behavior; finally, even if everything else is in place, the parents may not have the inclination or the means to punish the child.

So, what may appear at first glance to be non-problematic turns out to be problematic indeed. Many things can go wrong. According to much research in crime and delinquency, in the homes of problem children many things have gone wrong: “Parents of stealers do not track ([they] do not interpret stealing ... as 'deviant'); they do not punish; and they do not care” (Patterson 1980, pp. 88–89; see also Glueck & Glueck, 1950; McCord & McCord, 1959; West & Farrington, 1977). Let us apply this scheme to some of the facts about the connection between child socialization and crime, beginning with the elements of the child-rearing model.

**The Attachment of the Parent to the Child**

Our model states that parental concern for the welfare or behavior of the child is a necessary condition for successful child rearing. Because it is too often assumed that all parents are alike in their love for their children, the evidence directly on this point is not as good or extensive as it could be. However, what exists is clearly consistent with the model. Glueck and Glueck (1950, pp. 125–128) report that, compared to the fathers of delinquents, fathers of nondelinquents were twice as likely to be warmly disposed toward their sons and one-fifth as likely to be hostile towards them. In the same sample, 28 percent of the mothers of “delinquents “were characterized as “indifferent or hostile” toward the child as compared to 4 percent of the mothers of non-delinquents. The evidence suggests that stepparents are especially unlikely to have feelings of affection toward their stepchildren (Burgess, 1980), adding in contemporary children will be “reared” by people who do not especially care for them.

### Parental Supervision

The connection between social control and self-control could not be more direct than in the case of parental supervision of the child. Such supervision presumably prevents criminal or analogous acts and at the same time trains the child to avoid them on his own. Consistent with this assumption, supervision tends to be a major predictor of delinquency, however supervision or delinquency is measured.

Our general theory in principle provides a method of separating supervision as external control from supervision as internal control. For one thing, offenses differ in the degree to which they can be prevented through monitoring; children at one age are monitored much more closely than children at other ages; girls are supervised more closely than boys. In some situations monitoring for some offenses is virtually absent. In the present context, however, the concern is with the connection between supervision and self-control, a connection established by the stronger tendency of those poorly supervised when young to commit crimes as adults.

### Recognition of Deviant Behavior

In order for supervision to have an impact on self-control, the supervisor must perceive deviant behavior when it occurs. Remarkably, not all parents are adept at recognizing lack of self-control. Some parents allow the child to do pretty much as he pleases without interference. Extensive television viewing is one modern example, as is the failure to require completion of homework, to prohibit smoking, to curtail the use of physical force, or to see to it that the child actually attends school.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain how Gottfredson and Hirschi’s low self-control theory fits in with Sowell’s constrained vision we examined in Section 1.

2. Gottfredson and Hirschi appear to believe that all children are equally ready and able to learn self-control. Do you believe that this is so? Are different children different in their readiness to be socialized?

3. After you have read Xiaoming Chen’s article below, discuss possible reasons for the differences in American and Chinese crime rates from the perspective of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s low self-control theory.

READING

Social Control in China

Applications of the Labeling Theory and the Reintegrative Shaming Theory

Xiaoming Chen

Xiaoming Chen’s article provides us with a fascinating look at Chinese culture as it relates to crime control via shaming and reintegration of criminals. Chen delineates the underlying philosophy and functions of social control in the Chinese society. This topic is particularly interesting because specific control functions are grounded in a unique macro-control system, which is totally different from that typical of Western countries. He also scrutinizes the implications of labeling theory and reintegrative shaming theory, as they are elaborated in the West, and tests their sensitivity to cross-cultural differences. Although some caveats are in order, the evidence presented within the Chinese context tends to support reintegrative shaming theory rather than labeling theory.

Social Control: Chinese Philosophy and Perspectives

In every society, a normative order must be accompanied by a formal and informal structure for maintaining this normative order. Although crime and social control are universal facets of social life, every society exercises a cultural option when it develops a specific way of looking at crime and delinquency and a characteristic mechanism for controlling them. China offers a valuable context for...
extending previous—mainly American and European—research because of the profound social and cultural differences between Chinese society and Western societies.

Social control is found wherever and whenever people hold each other to certain standards. The concept of social control has appeared in various radical, critical, or revisionist writings about crime, delinquency, and law over the past three decades. Social control and crime cannot be studied in the abstract, but certain abstract concepts do have general applicability. Although social control takes many forms and appears in many places, it always is a manifestation of the same essence. “Social control” should be considered as a generic term for response to nonconformity, including both perception of and reaction to rule breaking. In other words, it includes the formal and informal ways society has developed to help ensure conformity to social norms. Social control takes place when a person is induced or forced to act according to the values of the given society, whether or not it is in accordance with his or her own interests. The aims of social control are “to bring about conformity, solidarity, and continuity of a particular group or society” (Young, 1942, p. 898). Due to different cultures and traditions, there exist different models of social control in different societies. Compared with the West, Chinese society has developed a very different model of social control. As Xin Ren (1997) stated,

The most important distinction, perhaps, is the efforts of the Chinese state to control both the behavior and the minds of the people. Social conformity in the Chinese vocabulary is not limited to behavioral conformity with the rule of law but always moralistically identifies with the officially endorsed beliefs of social standards and behavioral norms. Perhaps it goes against the free-will notion of the classical theory of criminology or perhaps it is socialist totalitarianism. Whatever it is, the Chinese tradition of so-called “greatest unity” has always attempted to achieve ultimate uniformity of both mind and act within Chinese society. (p. 6)

Brief Reviews of Labeling and Reintegrative Shaming Theories

Labeling theory holds the view that formal and informal societal reactions to delinquency can influence delinquents’ subsequent attitudes and behavior. This was recognized early in the 1900s. Frederick Thrasher’s work on juvenile gangs in Chicago was one of the first instances in which the consequences of official labels of delinquency were recognized as potentially negative. Thereafter, Frank Tannenbaum introduced the term “dramatization of evil,” in which he argued that officially labeling someone as a delinquent can result in the person becoming the very thing he is described as being. Edwin Lemert (1951) developed the concepts of primary and secondary deviance, which became the central elements of the first systematic development of what has come to be known as labeling theory. These concepts all stress the importance of social interactions in the development of self-images and social identities.

Labeling theory attempts to account for the mutual effects of the actor and his audience. The theory is concerned not only with what the actor and reactor do, but also with how each one’s actions affect the behavior of the other. It is thus clear that one of the most central issues with labeling theory is the connection between behavior and the societal reaction to it.

An issue with labeling theory is the matter of how the label is handled by the labelee. The importance of groups and associations in the actor’s reception of societal reactions to his behavior is emphasized. For example, Howard Becker (1973, p. 37) thought that a final step in the career of a deviant is the identification with an “organized deviant group.” It suggests that group support of a labeled deviant may either push him
further into an identity as a deviant or serve as a catalyst for a transformation from a socially shunned role to a more positive social status.

The origins of the reintegrative shaming theory may be traced to John Braithwaite’s (1989) publication of *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*. Here, he wrote,

> The first step to productive theorizing about crime is to think about the contention that labeling offenders makes things worse. The contention is both right and wrong. The theory of reintegrative shaming is an attempt to specify when it is right and when wrong. The distinction is between shaming that leads to stigmatization—to outcasting, to confirmation of a deviant master status—versus shaming that is reintegrative, that shames while maintaining bonds of respect or love, that sharply terminates disapproval with forgiveness, instead of amplifying deviance by progressively casting the deviant out. Reintegrative shaming controls crime; stigmatization pushes offenders toward criminal subcultures. (pp. 12–13)

Reintegrative shaming theory is about the positive effectiveness of reintegrative shaming and the counterproductiveness of stigmatization in controlling crime. Individuals should be confronted in the communities to which they belong and reintegrated back into them rather than cast out of the community. Otherwise, they may be driven into one of the variety of criminal subcultures that are available. Generally, the reintegrative shaming theory and practice aim at maximizing shame while maintaining community links and providing opportunities for the offender to make amends to those injured. According to John Braithwaite (1989), crime is best controlled when members of the community are the primary controllers through active participation in both shaming offenders and concerted efforts to reintegrate them back into the community of law-abiding citizens.

Interestingly, the Chinese system seems to rely greatly on benefits of labeling in preventing and controlling juvenile delinquency. Evidence available from Chinese society will be used to assess the main tenets of these theories and to probe both their cultural specificity and possible universality. A closer, cross-cultural look at these theories may prove illuminating for both Western and Chinese scholars. Given, however, the cultural disparity between the Western and Chinese ways of thinking, theoretical concepts have to be contextualized and explored differently in each culture.

LT: The primary factor in the repetition of delinquency is the fact of having been formally labeled as a delinquent.

RS: Shaming carries a risk of alienating the first-time offender if it is not combined with positive reintegrative efforts. These efforts are more likely to succeed in a society tied by strong informal bonds.

The Chinese approach to delinquency assumes that labeling a delinquent does not necessarily produce his or her secondary deviance in spite of the existence of an effect of official labels on delinquent identities and behavior. In Chinese society, it is recognized that the social reaction to delinquency (labeling) may have both positive and negative effects, but a greater emphasis is placed on its potential for positive effects. In China, stigma is regarded as a great deterrent; it is shameful and therefore people try to avoid it. It is also believed that labeling contributes to rehabilitation. In Chinese society, on being labeled deviant, a person is subject to negative reactions and moral condemnation from society and is initially removed from his or her normal position in society and assigned
a special role—a distinctive deviant role. This strategy is expected to force the individual to feel “pain” and recognize that he or she indeed has some problems and therefore become motivated to rehabilitate himself or herself.

This process of labeling takes place in a distinct cultural context, however. Chinese society is a highly interdependent and relatively communitarian society in which individual survival depends on the survival of groups, and the functioning of groups depends on the capacity of their members to cooperate (Wrong, 1994). In such a society, social comparison becomes a major concern of members of society. Individuals care profoundly about what others think of them and their positions in the social world.

Because individuals strongly depend on others for fulfillment of basic needs, pride and shame serve as indicators of the strength of the individual’s social connection to others in Chinese society. Because of this sense of interdependence, the Chinese have the greatest esteem for those who make progress in accepting conventional norms. The role of a (positively labeled) model is always emphasized. To the Chinese people, to be praised as a model citizen—as the chaste widow or the dutiful son were praised by Confucians—is regarded as the most legitimate and desirable form of reward because it moves others to imitate and respect them. This thought continues to exert a strong influence in present China. Many officials of correctional institutions are convinced that the use of models provides the most desirable mode of learning and is especially effective because peer respect is a powerful human need. Therefore, the inmates are urged to learn from good examples. Emulated models may be living or dead, national or local. A model may exhibit general virtues, such as “selflessly serving the people,” or particular ones, such as “working or study hard.” The other side of this emphasis on the model is to encourage people to become models themselves. Inmates thus are exhorted to act as models for other inmates. Those chosen as models of neatness, productivity, helpfulness, or some other virtue are often lauded at many different occasions, and others are encouraged to follow their example. For example, there are blackboards in almost every correctional institution that display inmates’ good deeds. Many officials believe that the model’s example helps to develop an entrenched attitude, which is far more stable than a fear of punishment.

For social control to be effective, however, the effect of negative labeling and shame is also emphasized. The effect of shaming lies not only in deterrence but also reintegration. Although at first, shaming can stigmatize and alienate the juvenile offender when the community expresses disapproval not only of the act but also of the person, need to regain or protect one’s social status is a strong motivation for conforming behavior. This is facilitated by the subsequent reintegrative efforts of the collective.

Shaming is particularly meaningful in societies with strong social bonds. In China, people, especially juveniles, are closely attached to their family, school, and neighborhood. Strong social bonds make shame have a greater effect on offenders because shame is the emotional cognate to the social bond and shame is felt when the bond is threatened. Once a person is shamed, the shame is often also borne by his or her family and, although to a lesser degree, by neighborhood and school. Under these circumstances, juvenile offenders as well as their families, schools, and neighborhoods endure painful humiliation. This situation can force shamed persons to regret their behavior because they accrue greater interpersonal costs from shame.

Shaming is powerful and where there is power, there is also a risk. John Braithwaite and Stephen Mugford (1994) argued that stigmatization and exclusion are the most significant risks of shaming. Braithwaite (1989) pointed out that shame can take dramatically different forms. They range from stigmatizing or disintegrative shaming that brings a degradation in social status to RS. He further explained,
rates. Yet shaming can be counterproductive if it is disintegrative rather than reintegrative. Shaming is counterproductive when it pushes offenders into the clutches of criminal subcultures; shaming controls crime when it is at the same time powerful and bounded by ceremonies to reintegrate the offender back into the community of responsible citizens. (p. 4)

Indeed, a shame-induced negative, or delinquent, self-image has a detrimental effect on some juveniles. In China, some informal or formal control measures, such as early social-educational intervention and confinement in a work-study school or juvenile reformatory, result in considerable stigma. This may persist even though these measures do not attempt to demean and humiliate offenders and emphasize reintegration into the community following treatment at an institution. For example, trials of those who are 18 years of age and younger are not open to the public. Clearly, this provision of the Law on Criminal Procedure is intended to protect juveniles from stigmatization and increase the possibility that a rehabilitated offender becomes again part of the community. In addition, social-educational teams, which are composed of not only their parents, relatives, teachers, colleagues, and neighbors, but also the police, may be assigned to monitor and help reintegrate the returning delinquent. Concrete measures are supposed to be selected according to the nature of the offender and the offense to “suit the remedy to the case” (a Chinese proverb). For different cases, there are different educators and methods, ranging from heart-to-heart talks to group study of the Party and governmental documents, laws and regulations; to public discussion of the deviant’s problems and offering of suggestions and criticisms; to visiting factories, farms, and historical and cultural sites and solving young people’s practical problems, such as housing, schooling, employment, and so on.

Although many measures have been taken, it is impossible to erase stigma completely. Once stigmatized with a deviant label, some juveniles, especially those from broken families, may lose love, dignity, and respect. In some areas, many schools, factories, and other institutions are reluctant to accept youngsters with a criminal or delinquent past. These young people usually have fewer opportunities to enter school, to find jobs, to join the army, even to establish a family. Thus, they may experience a sense of injustice at the way they are victimized by agents of social control. This situation may indeed influence some juvenile offenders to have more negative attitudes toward society, become more involved with delinquent peers, and regard themselves as more delinquent. Under these circumstances, deviance becomes and is rationalized as a defensible lifestyle, which is difficult to change. This partly explains the phenomenon of recidivism in China.

LT: Formal labels eventually alter a person's self-image to the point at which the person begins to identify himself or herself as a delinquent and acts accordingly.

RS: Shaming may damage a person’s self-esteem if it is directed at the individual identity not the act and is not followed by positive reintegrative ceremonies.

According to the Chinese experience, whether one resists the negative effects of labeling and becomes positively influenced by the label depends not only on the labelee themselves but also on the efforts of the whole society. On one hand, stigmatization by certain agents of social control can indeed increase the attraction of outcasts to subcultural groups that provide social support for crime. On the other hand, concerted efforts of the community can change this situation. In China, the belief that society is both a cause and a victim of crime and delinquency confers on society the right and duty to be involved in such matters. Intrusion into other people’s lives is taken for granted and viewed positively. It is perceived as
a sign of caring rather than meddling. To the Chinese mind, offenders come from society and will eventually go back to the society. Social education is an indispensable factor in the process of the reform. People believe that participation of the whole society in reforming offenders will greatly accelerate the process of socialization of offenders. Therefore, an unusually broad range of citizens and groups are drawn into the process. The deep-seated interdependency and communitarianism in Chinese society and culture are also conducive to the public support and enthusiasm for dealing with any problems affecting the community. Therefore, Chinese crime control does not just work from the top down through the formal criminal justice system but, and above all, from the bottom up.

Families, friends, neighbors, schools, work unit, and the police intervene at the first sign of possible trouble. Chinese people do not mind only their own business; they prefer to handle crime and juvenile problems in their neighborhood rather than hand them over to professionals. As a result, almost all members of the society seem to have become active controllers of crime and delinquency. Families, neighborhood communities, work units, and schools act as positive solvers of problems instead of silent observers. Their active participation is believed to have great effect on improving the offenders’ legal and moral conscience, heightening their immunity to delinquent influences, decreasing attractive opportunities for participation in subcultures, and reintegrating them back into the community of law-abiding citizens.

As the first line of defense against criminal activity, the family and the grassroots community organizations play the most important role. In the vast majority of cases, delinquents are put under the supervision of their families and the relevant local authority—neighborhood committee, school, or work unit (depending on the delinquent’s status). According to Article 17 of the Criminal Code of China, parents or guardians of offenders under the age of 16 have the obligation to discipline their children. Under the watchful eyes of those with whom the delinquents have the most frequent daily contact, they are encouraged to reform and develop a sense of social responsibility, which will lead to their reintegration into the society.

Various specialized organizations, through their local branches, also take a hand in urging delinquents to rehabilitate themselves. Many state or regional leaders and other high-ranking officials often visit the institutions and show interest in inmates’ study, labor, and life. Different levels of the People’s Congress, government, and other organizations, such as labor unions, the Young League, women’s associations, even military organs, all are assisting reformatories with reforming delinquents. For example, one naval school of the People’s Liberation Army in Shanghai established a link with a local juvenile reformatory. The school regularly sent its staff members and students to the reformatory. Not only did they give lectures on Chinese history, tradition, and moral and spiritual civilization but also conducted many kinds of cultural and entertainment programs for inmates. Furthermore, they organized inmate visits to their school and enabled the offenders to watch their military training. Perhaps, mass involvement in reforming delinquents is one of the most striking aspects of the Chinese justice system that differentiates it from Western models.

Unlike in the RS approach, however, the deliberate focus of labeling in China seems to be both on the offense and the offender. Offenders are first labeled deviants and educated to understand that what they have done has detrimental psychological, social, and economic consequences for victims and also for themselves and other parties and to assume responsibility for what they have done. Then they are shown concern and love, accompanied by attempts to solve their practical problems, such as housing, schooling, and employment. This two-stage
approach both expresses community disapproval and symbolizes reacceptance of offenders while offering a practical basis for reintegrating offenders. Thus, community not only reaffirms the normative order by shaming offenders but also provides them with opportunities for conventional reintegration.

In China, educating and helping offenders, especially juvenile delinquents, has become one of the main tasks of the police who are working in neighborhood police stations. They always work closely with local government, factories, enterprises, schools, neighborhoods, and other institutions to maintain public order, “prevent, reduce and forestall crimes through ideological, political, economic, educational, administrative and legal work,” and create a better social environment (Gao, 1983, p. 4). They not only provide community surveillance but also conduct many education programs at the neighborhood level, such as distributing legal materials and educating the residents in the neighborhood about laws and rights; holding community meetings to discuss justice and social problems; preparing messages involving legal and crime prevention matters and persuading residents of the necessity of rules for public security and individual protection; and visiting offenders and their families, friends, and relatives to determine what the problem is, seek solutions outside of the criminal justice system, and help them solve such problems as unemployment. In some cases, according to Leng (1977), the police station in a neighborhood community may draw up a contract between the juvenile and his or her parents, the neighborhood, and the school. If the juvenile meets the terms of the contract within a specified time, then a certificate of good behavior is issued to the youngster, and the case is considered closed. If the adolescent does not meet the terms of the contract or commits a new violation, then the contract is extended or revised. Although the emphasis is on the collective nature of the treatment program—it is more than just an agreement between the juvenile and the police—direct involvement by the police is also intended as a reminder that an arrest can still be effected if the juvenile offender strays further from the beaten path. The aim is to put greater pressure on delinquents. In reality, although the police participate directly in the early intervention, they are not concerned with law and punishment as such but rather with helping offenders become law-abiding and useful citizens. The mere presence of the police is considered to be able to strengthen intervention and has in fact become an integral part of it. The extent and the diversity of activity performed by the Chinese police indicate that policing not only is a prime force in enforcing the criminal law but also plays an important role in the elaborate system of informal social control.

Although the judicial shame penalties, such as public exposure and debasement penalties (generally achieved by associating the offender with a noxious activity) that exist in the United States do not exist currently in China, China does have some judicial options, such as mass trials and sentence-pronouncing rallies, which can reach the same effect as shame penalties. They are designed to convey moral condemnation and inform the public about the offense and the offender to elicit public shaming of the offender. In the Chinese social environment, these legal measures can work as both a specific and general deterrent of possible future transgressions. With respect to young people, the educational sessions conducted by juvenile courts before disposition of cases may have a similar effect.

The Chinese experience suggests that informal and quasi-informal social education, including various education and training programs operated by parents, relatives, friends, or a relevant collectivity, has a greater effect on the juvenile’s future behavior and self-identification than sanctions imposed by a remote legal authority. Social education can induce juveniles to recognize the harmfulness of their conduct and eventually to rehabilitate themselves. This is
especially true in Chinese society because of its collectivist nature.

Through many kinds of education and help, and through positive inducement rather than merely criticism or negative incentives, the vast majority of the young people initially labeled as criminals or delinquents eventually leave these deviant statuses well and truly behind them. This is indicated by the low rate of recidivism in China. A number of different sources suggest that recidivism rates among those released from reformatories are between 8% and 15% (Li, 1992, p. 55). In spite of different estimates, it is clear that the recidivism rate is quite low. From the limited data available, it is difficult to judge what causes low recidivism rates for the released inmates; however, community involvement, tight social control, and postrelease surveillance and rehabilitation all should be regarded as contributing factors.

## Conclusion

The limitations of LT are quite clear in the light of Chinese experience. LT ignores the cultural characteristics of different countries. For example, the concept of shaming is consistent with the cultural ethos of Chinese collectivism rather than Western individualism. Therefore, LT assertions regarding the relationship of a formal delinquency label and secondary deviance do not seem particularly relevant to the Chinese experience. Rather, the Chinese experience tends to support the RS theory developed by John Braithwaite—the collectivist nature, strong social bonds, effective informal social control, and emphasis on social education all make shaming a positive rather than negative tool of social control in Chinese society.

## References


## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would the methods described in this article work in America? Why or why not?

2. Given that China executes proportionately far more criminals than any other nation, how do you think Chen would reconcile this with his claim that rehabilitation is the goal of the Chinese criminal justice system?

3. What is the influence of collectivism vs. individualism in relation to crime control?
Gender and Crime Among Felony Offenders

Assessing the Generality of Social Control and Differential Association Theories

Leanne Fiftal Alarid, Velmer S. Burton, Jr., and Francis T. Cullen

This article by Alarid, Burton, and Cullen assesses the general applicability of two of the theories presented in this chapter—differential association and social control theories. Their sample consists of 1,153 newly incarcerated male and female felons, a big improvement over sampling high school and college subjects. Their findings support both theories' claims that they are “general” theories of crime. They also found that differential association theory had more consistent effects, especially for men. For females, parental attachment was more important for explaining violent crime than it was for men.

Since the 1969 publication of Hirschi’s *Causes of Delinquency*, social control or control theory and differential association or “cultural deviance” theory have competed vigorously against one another for the status of the preeminent microlevel sociological theory of crime.

A key concern is the generality of social control and differential association theories. These perspectives typically have been seen as having the ability to explain various forms of crime for all people (see, e.g., Akers 1998). Clearly, the theoretical power of each of these perspectives hinges on their ability to achieve the status of a general theory. Accordingly, a central empirical and thus theoretical issue is whether social control and differential association theories can explain criminal behavior that extends beyond the delinquency found among community samples of youth.

Research on social control theory with adult samples also suggests that adult social bonds may reduce criminal behavior (Sampson and Laub 1993). Even so, the empirical literature assessing whether social control and differential association theories can explain adult criminal behavior remains limited, especially when one searches for studies that include in their analyses measures of both theoretical perspectives. Among the few adult studies testing social control versus differential association theory, the results show mixed support for both perspectives. Thus, two studies using community samples of adults found stronger support for differential association theory (Burton 1991; Macdonald 1989), while another study revealed that social control theory was better able to account for variation in arrests for men and women drug offenders (Covington 1985).

Even with this research, however, there are typically two limitations. First, especially with adult samples, studies often do not explore whether the effects of variables measuring traditional criminological theories vary by gender. Traditional theories have been criticized for their perceived inability to explain female criminality and for ignoring how gender-related factors—such as patriarchal power relations—differentially shape the involvement of gender groups in crime.

victimization (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1992). In turn, it is argued that scholars should formulate separate or different theories of crime for women (Leonard 1982).

In light of the status of the existing research, the current study attempts to test the generality of social control and differential association theories to a population that has been infrequently studied: young adult felons drawn from the inner city. Social control and differential association theories were selected because they have been found, among existing sociological theories, to have the most consistent empirical support in studies of juveniles. Social control theory is also used to explain adult crime in recent important studies (Horney et al. 1995; Sampson and Laub 1993). These theories both predict that their effects will be general—that is, they will account for variation in offending and that this effect will hold for males and females.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to test the generality of social control and differential association theories with a sample of young adult felons drawn from the inner city. The study also has the advantage of including males and females. Using a self-report survey, the study examines both overall offending and involvement in specific forms of criminal conduct. By testing the two theories against each other, the central focus will be to discern which theory—if not both theories—can explain variation in offending among young adult men and women felony offenders from an urban area. That is, are social control and differential association theories mainly explanations of juvenile delinquency, or can they help account for participation in crime among young adult male and female felons?

Method

The procedures were used to test differential association and social control theory with 1,153 felony women and men in a community corrections program. Data for this study were gathered from felons sentenced to a residential court-ordered boot camp program in Harris County, Texas. Of the 1,153 felons, 1,031 men and 122 women indicated that the vast majority lived in the inner city or surrounding urban area at the time of arrest for their most recent conviction. Men and women were both between the ages of 17 and 28 years, with the average age calculated at 19.5 for men and 20.6 years for women. The African American composition of both samples was identical (44 percent).

Dependent Variables

Dependent variable measures for the analysis were originally derived from Elliott and Ageton’s (1980) scale of delinquent behaviors offenses found in the National Youth Survey (NYS). We adjusted certain measures to apply to our young adult sample. Respondents were asked whether they had ever committed 35 different deviant and criminal acts. Our prevalence dimension of crime measures offense participation or the number of crime types committed. Other researchers have preferred the use of the prevalence measure of variety (see Table 5.2).

In the current study, one point was assigned if a respondent admitted involvement in a specific act; if respondents did not admit involvement, no points were assigned. The general crime scale was summed to obtain a composite score, which ranged from 0 to 35. Items in the general crime scale have been employed in previous tests of criminological theories using samples of adults (Burton et al., 1993). In addition, we distinguished type of criminal behavior by dividing the offenses into three subscales: violent, property, and drug. Table 5.3 shows the means, standard deviations, and reliability for all dependent and independent variables used in the analysis.

Independent Variables

The items used in this study to measure social control and differential association variables were all drawn from previous theoretical tests (e.g., Burton et al. 1998). Participants in our sample responded to each item by using a 6-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly agree (6) to strongly disagree (1).
### Table 5.1  Prevalence of Self-Reported Criminal Behavior: "Have You Ever . . . ?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Property crime subscale (15 items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Avoided paying at restaurants, the movie theater, etc.?</td>
<td>29 (23.8)</td>
<td>346 (33.7)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Knowingly bought, held, sold stolen property?</td>
<td>50 (41)</td>
<td>531 (51.8)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Taken someone else's vehicle without their permission?</td>
<td>33 (27)</td>
<td>379 (36.9)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Taken anything ($5 or less) from your job?</td>
<td>11 (9)</td>
<td>152 (14.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Taken anything (between $5 and $50) from your job?</td>
<td>11 (9)</td>
<td>118 (11.5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Taken anything (over $50) from your job?</td>
<td>3 (2.5)</td>
<td>102 (10.0)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Taken anything ($5 or less) from someone (other than work)?</td>
<td>46 (37.7)</td>
<td>317 (31.0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Taken anything (between $5 and $50) from someone (other than work)?</td>
<td>25 (20.5)</td>
<td>306 (30.0)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Taken anything (over $50) from someone else (other than work)?</td>
<td>31 (25.4)</td>
<td>346 (33.7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Damaged/destroyed property belonging to relative/family of origin?</td>
<td>15 (12.3)</td>
<td>166 (16.2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Purposely damaged/destroyed property belonging to an employer?</td>
<td>2 (1.6)</td>
<td>59 (5.7)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Purposely damaged/destroyed property belonging to spouse/partner/friend (someone other than family of origin or an employer)?</td>
<td>22 (18.0)</td>
<td>327 (31.9)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Broken into a building/vehicle?</td>
<td>25 (20.5)</td>
<td>423 (41.2)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Stolen or attempted to steal a motor vehicle?</td>
<td>19 (15.6)</td>
<td>314 (30.6)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Thrown objects at cars/property?</td>
<td>41 (33.6)</td>
<td>419 (40.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drug crime subscale (11 items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Drank alcoholic beverages before age 21?</td>
<td>92 (75.4)</td>
<td>788 (76.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Drove a car while drunk?</td>
<td>51 (41.8)</td>
<td>471 (46.0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Bought/provided beer/liquor for someone under 21?</td>
<td>51 (41.8)*</td>
<td>340 (33.2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Had marijuana/hashish?</td>
<td>86 (70.5)**</td>
<td>572 (55.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Used hallucinogens/LSD?</td>
<td>26 (21.3)</td>
<td>226 (22.0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Had amphetamines?</td>
<td>17 (13.9)</td>
<td>129 (12.6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Had barbiturates?</td>
<td>14 (11.5)</td>
<td>91 (8.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Had heroin?</td>
<td>6 (4.9)</td>
<td>32 (3.1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Had cocaine?</td>
<td>60 (49.2)**</td>
<td>278 (27.1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Sold marijuana?</td>
<td>34 (27.9)</td>
<td>359 (35.2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Sold hard drugs (cocaine, crack, heroin)?</td>
<td>46 (37.7)</td>
<td>435 (42.5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Social Control Theory

Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory was originally formulated to rival differential association or “cultural deviance” theory as an explanation of why some juveniles conform and others engage in delinquency. More recent research has applied this perspective to adult criminality. Social control theory asserts that individuals with strong ties to family and friends will be protected from criminal involvement. In this study, we measure the adult social bond by marital attachment, attachment to parents, attachment to friends, involvement, and belief.

Marital/partner attachment. Attachment to a significant other of the opposite sex by cohabiting or marriage is perceived as providing informal social control by protecting individuals from participation in criminal and other antisocial activities.

Attachment to parents. We include three items to measure attachment to parents to determine the effect of longstanding connections to parents by gender:

Attachment to friends. The bond to friends is an important part of conventional attachment.

Involvement. Involvement in conventional activities is measured by how much free time individuals have.

Belief. Finally, the conventional bond is measured by moral belief in the law, specifically in the police.

Differential Association Theory

According to Sutherland’s (1947) theory of differential association, individuals develop internalized definitions that are favorable or nonfavorable toward violating the law. As individual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violent crime subscale (9 items)</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Been involved in a gang fight?</td>
<td>25 (20.5)</td>
<td>232 (22.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Used physical force to get money from a relative/family of origin?</td>
<td>4 (3.3)</td>
<td>48 (4.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Used physical force to get money from someone at work?</td>
<td>1 (0.8)</td>
<td>35 (3.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Used physical force to get money from someone, a family member, or someone at work?</td>
<td>12 (9.8)</td>
<td>151 (14.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hit or threatened to hit a relative/member of family of origin?</td>
<td>42 (34.4)</td>
<td>337 (32.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Hit or threatened to hit someone at work?</td>
<td>5 (4.1)</td>
<td>144 (14.0)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Hit or threatened to hit friend/partner/spouse?</td>
<td>80 (65.6)**</td>
<td>528 (51.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Had or tried to have sex with someone against their will?</td>
<td>1 (0.8)</td>
<td>31 (3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting/killing them?</td>
<td>30 (24.6)</td>
<td>264 (25.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Women, n = 122; men, n = 1,031.

*p < .05; **p < .01.
exposure to procriminal values, patterns, and associates increases, the likelihood of criminal involvement also increases. As in previous studies, we use three differential association variables to measure the likelihood of criminal exposure: individual definitions toward the law, others’ definitions toward the law, and number of criminal friends.

**Individual definitions toward crime.** The five-item scale measuring individual definitions toward crime examined an individual’s degree of tolerance for criminal behavior.

**Others’ definitions toward crime.** According to Sutherland (1947), criminal behavior is influenced primarily through exposure to other individuals holding definitions favorable toward violating the law.

**Criminal friends.** Many empirical tests of differential association theory have relied on the number of criminal associates as evidence of interaction with criminal members within an individual’s primary group.

### Findings

#### Social Control

Table 5.4 shows that three out of five social control variables were significantly related to the overall measure of criminal behavior for the sample. Attachment to peers was significantly and positively related to criminal behavior. Attachment to parents and involvement in conventional activities were significantly and inversely related to involvement in criminal behavior. Those who got along well with their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Women (n = 122)</th>
<th>Men (n = 1,031)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (17–28 years)</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity (percentage)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African/American</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal education (years)</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital/partner attachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(percentage attached)</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children (percentage)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>69.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three or more</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income (in dollars)</td>
<td>16,800</td>
<td>27,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current conviction (percentage)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 5.2 Sample Characteristics     |               |                 |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|

---

**Note:**

- The data presented in Table 5.2 represents a sample of 122 women and 1,031 men.
- The measures of social control include attachment to peers, attachment to parents, and involvement in conventional activities.
- The measures of criminal involvement include drug, person, and property offenses.
parents and considered them an important part of their lives were less likely to engage in criminal behavior. Furthermore, respondents who were immersed in time-consuming activities (i.e., work, family, and community activities) were also less likely to commit crimes.

One of the strongest predictors for a woman’s involvement in crime was whether she lived with a mate or was married. The significance of this relationship was not in the predicted direction of social control theory, which would hypothesize that family relationships, including marriage, insulate against criminal involvement. On the other hand, marital attachment was not significant for predicting men’s criminal behavior.

One factor that was significantly related to men’s participation in crime was peer attachment. Young men who were attached to their friends were more likely to engage in criminal behavior—a relationship in the direction opposite to that predicted by social control theory.

### Table 5.3 Individual Dependent and Independent Variables by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number of Items</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Sample F-Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General crime</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>8.57 (5.12)</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent crime</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>1.64 (1.25)</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property crime</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>2.98 (2.60)</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug crime</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>3.96 (2.55)</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital/partner attachment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.32 (0.47)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental attachment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>15.25 (2.98)</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer attachment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>6.84 (2.91)</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>6.44 (2.89)</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>8.88 (2.41)</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential association</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual definitions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>10.97 (4.95)</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others’ definitions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>9.50 (3.79)</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.87 (1.66)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01.
Other studies have interpreted peer attachment and increased criminal involvement as indirect support for differential association theory, depending on whether the friends were delinquent (Conger 1976).

### Differential Association

In Table 5.4, others’ definitions and criminal friends significantly predicted both male and female involvement in crime. A difference of slopes test on criminal friends indicated there were no significant differences between women and men; the effect of criminal friends on participation in crime is similar for men and women.

Individual definitions, although in the expected direction for women, were significant only for men. Furthermore, for men, differential association variables had stronger effects than social control theory variables in predicting their participation in crime. For women, there was some tendency for the social control variables to have stronger effects. The overall explanatory power for both theories in the model for women was $R^2 = .51$ and for men was .29.

### Control Variables

Race/ethnicity significantly predicted criminal involvement for women and men. Specifically, Anglo men and women were more likely to have been involved in crime than non-White individuals. Age was not a significant predictor of overall rates of criminal behavior. To more
precisely measure the nature of gender differences and similarities for overall crime, a separate $t$-test for independent samples was conducted using unstandardized partial regression coefficients while using gender as the grouping variable. Results indicated that the mean for the men (9.88) was significantly higher than for women (8.56) for the general crime scale.

**Discussion**

Both social control theory and differential association theory appear to have general effects. The support for differential association is especially strong and consistent: The three differential association variables are significantly related to the general crime scale drug, property, and violent crime subscales. Note that many studies that assess differential association use only the single measure of “number of delinquent peers.” Some additional support for differential association theory can be drawn from the positive relationships of peer attachment to all the crime measures for the sample. Furthermore, to the extent that the members of the sample are likely to have delinquent friends, then such attachment might be viewed as an indicator of differential association.

The findings for the social control measures are less impressive but nonetheless offer support for the perspective. Parental attachment had a consistent negative relationship to all of the crime measures for the sample. It appears, therefore, that bonds to parents have continuing effects on serious felons into early adulthood.

The analyses suggest that the “traditional” criminological perspectives can account for offending across the genders. This is not to say, however, that gender-specific theories could not expand our understanding not only of female crime but also of male criminal participation (see, e.g., Messerschmidt 1993). Still, the data reveal that differential association and social control variables—have similar effects across male and female felons. In fact, for every crime measure, the amount of explained variation is higher for the female sample than it is for the male sample.

The effects of social control variables were stronger for the women than for the men. We found that the effects of parental attachment significantly and inversely affected males’ offending, but the impact of parental attachment on females was significantly stronger for participation in violent offenses. This difference between men and women was not found for property crime, and parental attachment was not significant for male drug crime participation. The effect of lack of parental attachment as a significant predictor of female violent crime is especially noteworthy for furthering our understanding of female offending.

In closing, the analyses reported here lend continuing support to the traditional theories of social control and, especially, differential association/social learning. Importantly, the data support the claim that these are “general” theories, explaining variations in self-report criminality among felony offenders and across men and women.

**References**


**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What do the authors mean by a “general theory” of crime? Do you think either of the theories assessed really fits the bill?

2. The Appendix is presented to show you the kinds of items often used in self-report studies. How honest do you think the newly incarcerated felons were in answering?

3. Why do different variables affect males and females differently?
CRITICAL THEORIES

Marxist, Conflict, and Feminist

At the heart of the theories in this section is social stratification by class and power and how it generates conflict. The theories address how those at the top of the social heap pass laws to maintain their privileged position and how those at the bottom often violate those laws to improve their position. These theories are thus the most “politicized” of all criminological theories. Sanyika Shakur, a.k.a. Kody Scott, came to embrace this politicized view of society as he grew older and was converted to Afrocentric Islam. Shakur was very much a member of the class Karl Marx called the “lumpenproletariat,” which is the very bottom of the class hierarchy. Many critical theorists would view Shakur’s criminality as justifiable rebellion against class and racial exploitation. Shakur wanted all the material rewards of American capitalism, but he perceived that the only way he could get them was through crime. He was a thoroughgoing egoist, but many Marxists would excuse this as a trait in him nourished by capitalism, the “root cause” of crime. From his earliest days, he was on the fringes of a society he plainly disdained. He frequently referred to whites as “Americans” to emphasize his distance from them, and he referred to black cops as “Negroes” to distinguish them from the “New African Man.” He called himself a “student of revolutionary science,” referred to the 1992 L.A. riots as “rebellion,” and advocated a separate black nation in America.

Even at a less politicized level, conflict concepts dominated Shakur’s life as he battled the Bloods and other Crip “sets” who had interests at odds with his set. It is easy to imagine his violent act as the outlets of a desperate man struggling against feelings of class and race inferiority. Perhaps he was only able to achieve a sense of power when he held the fate of another human being in his hands. His