CHAPTER LEARNING OBJECTIVES

On completion of this chapter, students should be able to do the following:

- Recognize the requirements for a good theory
- Understand and discuss the strengths and limitations of various theories
- Recognize and discuss the importance of the relationship between theory and practice
- Evaluate research relating to theories of causation

KEY TERMS

Conceptual schemes
Scientific theory
Demonology
Trephining
Classical theory
Free-will approach
Neoclassical approach
Rational-choice theory
Postclassical theory
Deterrence theory
Routine-activities theory
Positivist school of criminology
Biological theories
Atavists
Anomalies
Phrenology
Somatotypes
XYY chromosome
Biosocial criminology
Psychological theories
Personality inventories
Psychoanalytic approach
Id, ego, and superego
Psychopath
Learning theory
Behaviorists
Conditioning
Let us now examine some of the theories that have been developed in an attempt to explain offenses by and against juveniles. It is important to note from the outset that numerous studies over the past 50 years have suggested links between delinquency and child abuse/neglect (Ford, Chapman, Mack, & Pearson, 2006). For example, Scudder, Blount, Heide, and Silverman (1993) noted that the results of their research “suggest that children who break the law, especially through acts of violence, often have a history of maltreatment as children” (p. 321). The results of their research indicate further that “a child abused at a young age is at higher risk for subsequent delinquent behaviors than a nonabused child” (p. 321). Other researchers have arrived at similar conclusions (Siegel & Williams, 2003). Hunter, Figueredo, and Malamuth (2010) found a relationship between exposure to violence and nonsexual delinquency while Way and Urbaniak (2008) found that adolescents engaging in sexually offensive behaviors with prior delinquent behaviors were older and had higher rates of documented childhood maltreatment. In addition, Schaffner (2007, p. 1229) noted that “young women adjudicated delinquent in juvenile court report suffering inordinate amounts of emotional, physical, and sexual trauma in early childhood and adolescence.”

Scientific Theory

Although dozens of conceptual schemes have been proposed in attempts to specify the causes of crime and delinquency, only a few of the more prominent attempts are discussed here.

A scientific theory may be defined as a set of two or more related, empirically testable assertions (statements of alleged facts or relationships among facts about a particular phenomenon [Fitzgerald

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Behaviorists believe that many of the principles learned in the study of animal behavior can be applied to humans.
& Cox, 2002, p. 47]). Although this definition may sound complex, it is really quite simple if we look at it one part at a time. A testable assertion or proposition is simply a statement of a relationship between two or more variables. In an acceptable theory, these assertions or propositions are related in a logical manner so that some other assertions or propositions can be derived (deduced) from others. Here is an example:

**Proposition 1:** All delinquents are from broken homes.

**Proposition 2:** Harry is a delinquent.

**Proposition 3:** Harry is from a broken home.

In this case, Proposition 3 is derived from Propositions 1 and 2; that is, Proposition 3 is said to be explained by Propositions 1 and 2 and is logically correct. Our definition of a theory, however, requires that at least some of the propositions be empirically testable. To be acceptable, then, a theory must be logically correct and must accurately describe events in the real world. Suppose that Harry is not, in fact, from a broken home. Clearly, our explanation of delinquency is erroneous, and our theory must be revised or rejected.

Although conceptual schemes that suggest relationships between variables but do not meet our requirements for theory may be useful stepping-stones in describing delinquency or abuse, only a logically correct and empirically accurate theory will enable us to explain these phenomena. Explanation is central to preventing or controlling delinquency and abuse. All policy and practice in juvenile justice is shaped, intentionally or not, by theory. For example, “get tough” policies are an offshoot of classical theory and hedonism, policies relying on individual or group therapy are based in psychological or social psychological theory, and policies stressing neighborhood improvement, better education, and job opportunities are based on sociological theories.

As we discuss some theories and conceptual schemes, you may find it useful to assess the extent to which they meet the requirements of our definition and the extent to which they are useful in helping us to understand offenses by and against juveniles. As Klofas and Stojkovic (1995) indicated,

Our ideas about crime—what it means and why it happens—have varied considerably over the past several hundred years. We have changed from (1) viewing crime as the work of the devil to (2) describing it as the rational choice of free-willed economic calculators to (3) explaining it as the involuntary causal effects of biological, mental, and environmental conditions, and then back to (2). (p. 37)

Assessing the state of criminological theory toward the end of the 20th century, Bernard (1990) concluded that not much progress had been made during the prior 20 years in weeding out theories that cannot be supported or in verifying other theories. We hope that we have made progress during the past 20 years, but efforts to develop and empirically test theories remain sporadic. If a trend with respect to theories of juvenile delinquency can be identified, it would appear to be an emphasis on multidimensional, multidisciplinary theories based on the recognition that one-dimensional theories are unlikely to provide explanations for the wide range of delinquent behaviors observed (see, for example, Cruz & Cruz, 2007; Wood & Alleyne, 2010).
Our intent in this chapter is simply to familiarize you with some of the numerous conceptual schemes and to note some of the strengths and weaknesses of these schemes. For those who desire more detailed information about specific theories, the Suggested Readings list at the end of the chapter should prove to be useful.

**Some Early Theories**

**Demonology**

Early attempts to explain various forms of deviant behavior (e.g., crime, delinquency, mental illness) focused on demon or spirit possession (demonology). Individuals who violated societal norms were thought to be possessed by some evil spirit that forced them to commit evil deeds through the exercise of mysterious supernatural power (Moyer, 2001, p. 13). Deviant behavior, then, was viewed not as a product of free will but rather as determined by forces beyond the control of the individual; thus, the demonological theory of deviance is referred to as a deterministic approach. To cure or control deviant behavior, a variety of techniques were employed to drive the evil spirits from the mind and/or body of the perceived deviant.

One process that was employed was **trephining**, which consisted of drilling holes in the skulls of those perceived as deviants to allow the evil spirits to escape. Various rites of exorcism, including beating and burning, were practiced to make the body of the perceived deviant such an uncomfortable place to reside that the evil spirits would leave or to make the deviant confess his or her association with evil spirits. As might be expected, such torture of the body often resulted in death or permanent disability to the individual who was allegedly possessed. In addition, either confession or failure to confess could be taken as evidence of possession. Tortured sufficiently, many individuals undoubtedly confessed simply to prevent further torture. Those who persisted in claiming innocence were often thought to be so completely under the control of evil spirits that they could not tell the truth. Needless to say, the consequences for both categories of accused were frequently very unpleasant.

Many observers believe that belief in spirit possession as a cause of deviance is rare today, but our analysis of news articles over the past few years has turned up numerous articles on ritual abuse of children by persons or groups claiming to have been instructed by deities, typically God or Satan, to commit the acts in question (Bishop, “3 reputed cult members convicted in toddler’s death,” 2010; Charton, 2001; “In this church, the little children suffer,” 2001; “NYC mom arrested,” 2006, p. A8; Stearns & Garcia, 2001). As Klofas and Stojkovic (1995) noted, supernatural bases for crime have not been totally rejected, although they have been largely supplanted by more scientific explanations (p. 39).

Perhaps demonology as an explanation of deviance persists because, in some respects, attempts to deal with deviance thought to be caused by spirits are logical if the basic premise is accepted as true; that is, if one believes that spirit possession causes deviance, it makes sense to drive the spirits away if possible. As is the case with all theories of deviance, this one implies a method of cure or control. Although such an explanation of deviance seems simplistic to criminologists today, it cannot be scientifically disproved and is still clearly accepted as valid by significant numbers of people in a substantial number of countries. Precisely because it cannot be scientifically tested, however, this attempt to explain deviant behavior is of little value from a theoretical perspective.
Classical Theory

During the last half of the 18th century, the classical school of criminology (classical theory, often referred to as a free-will approach) emerged in Italy and England in the works of Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham, respectively. This approach to explaining and controlling crime was based on the belief that humans exercise free will and that human behavior results from rationally calculating rewards and costs in terms of pleasure and pain. In other words, before an individual commits a specific act, he or she determines whether the consequences of the act will be pleasurable or painful. Presumably, acts that have painful consequences will be avoided. To control crime, then, society simply needed to make the punishment for violators outweigh the benefits of their illegal actions. Thus, penalties became increasingly more severe as offenses became increasingly more serious. Under classical theory, threat of punishment is considered to be a deterrent to criminals who rationally calculate the consequences of their illegal actions.

By the early 1800s, Beccaria’s approach had been modified in recognition of the fact that not all individuals were capable of rationally calculating rewards and costs. The modified approach, generally referred to as the neoclassical approach, called for the mitigation of punishment for the insane and juveniles (Conklin, 1998, p. 41; Moyer, 2001, p. 27). By definition, the insane were not capable of rational calculation, and juveniles (up to a certain age at least) were thought to be less responsible than adults.

It is important to understand the classical approach because its propositions (punishment deters crime, the punishment should fit the crime, and juveniles and the insane should be treated differently from sane adults) are basic to our current criminal and juvenile justice system.

Rational-Choice Theory

The rational-choice theory or postclassical theory of the 20th century also involves the notion that before people commit crimes, they rationally consider the risks and rewards. A burglar noting no lights on and no police presence at an expensive mansion over several nights might rationally conclude that the risk is relatively low and the potential rewards are worth pursuing and, therefore, may commit the crime. According to the rational-choice model, focusing on the development of rational thought and the application of scientific laws, as well as using empirical research, might help the state to develop policies that better control crime and deviance and thereby improve quality of life (Bohm, 2001, p. 15; Bouffard, 2007; Lanier & Henry, 1998, p. 72; Reid, 2006, pp. 77–78).

This view, that delinquents exercise free will and rationally calculate the consequences of their behavior, fits well with the conservative ideology and the “get tough” approach to delinquency. If delinquency is a product of free will and not predetermined by social conditions, the delinquent may best be deterred by the threat of punishment rather than by the promise of treatment. Gang members who go into the drug business with the clear intent of making a profit by outwitting both their competitors and law enforcement officials may be described as using rational-choice theory.

Deterrence Theory

Deterrence theory is another extension of the classical approach. It focuses on the relationship between punishment and misbehavior at both the individual and group levels. Specific
deterrence refers to preventing a given individual from committing further crimes, whereas general deterrence refers to the effect that punishing one wrongdoer has on preventing others from committing offenses. When we attempt to measure the extent of deterrence, we are actually measuring perceived deterrence—what individuals believe will happen to them (will they be caught? will they be punished? will the punishment be severe?) if they commit offenses. Most authorities appear to agree that the deterrent effects of punishment are greater if the punishment is swift and certain. It appears that the deterrent effect of severe punishment is moderated by celerity (swiftness) and certainty (Reid, 2006, pp. 74–78). With respect to delinquents, we might ask whether the increasingly severe punishments suggested by “get tough” policies are likely to have significant impact on juveniles who do not believe they will be apprehended for their delinquent acts or who do not believe they will be punished if apprehended.

According to Kaufman (2010, p. 27), “The data from longitudinal studies on this question [concerning the deterrent effects of arrest] are robust and consistent. More than a dozen studies found that people who have been arrested are at least as likely to be arrested in the future as those who have not. Thus, rather than being a deterrent, arrest resulted in similar or higher rates of later offending.” Yet another concern with respect to deterrence theory has to do with the fact that in some instances, those about to commit delinquent acts do not consider the possibility of being apprehended or punished (e.g., those under the influence of intoxicants, those who strike out in a passionate or angry state of mind).

**Routine-Activities Theory**

Routine-activities theory is yet another extension of the belief that rational thought and sanctions largely determine criminal behavior. According to this approach, crime is simply a function of people’s everyday behavior. One’s presence in certain types of places, frequented by motivated offenders, makes him or her a suitable target and, in the absence of capable guardians, is likely to lead to crime (Conklin, 1998, p. 319; Cote, 2002, p. 286; Groff, 2007, p. 75; Lanier & Henry, 1998, p. 82). Plass and Carmody (2005) studied the effect of engaging in risky activities on the violent victimization experiences of delinquent and nondelinquent juveniles. Their results showed that there are some modest differences in the effects of routinely engaging in risky behaviors and the likelihood of violent victimization. There is also research that supports the existence of “hot spots,” or areas in which crimes occur repeatedly over time (Buerger, Cohn, & Petrosino, 2000; Sherman & Weisburd, 1995). In other cases, however, victims’ absence may be critical to the crime in question (e.g., burglary is easier if no one is home). Schreck and Fisher (2004) indicate that the routine-activities perspective suggests that exposure to delinquent peers will enhance risk. Their analysis indicated that family and peer context variables correspond with a higher risk of violent victimization among teenagers, net controls for unstructured and unsupervised activities and demographic characteristics. However, conceptualizing and measuring variables associated with routine-activities theory is critical to determining the validity of the theory (Groff, 2007; Groff, 2008; Spano & Freilich, 2009; Spano, Freilich, & Bolland, 2008).

For a variety of reasons, the classical approach to controlling crime has never been very successful. Although there seems to be some logic to the approach, the premise that the threat of punishment deters crime, at least as currently employed, is inaccurate. There are a variety of possible sources of error in this premise. First, it may be that humans do not always rationally
calculate rewards and costs. An individual committing what we commonly refer to as a “crime of passion” (as in the case of the murder of a spouse caught in an adulterous act or excessive corporeal punishment of a child in a moment of anger) might not stop to think about the consequences. If this individual does not stop to make such calculations, the threat of punishment (no matter how severe) will not affect that person’s behavior. Second, an individual may calculate rewards and costs in a way that appears rational to him or her (but perhaps not to society) and may decide that certain illegal acts are worth whatever punishment he or she will receive if apprehended (as in the case of a starving person stealing food). Finally, the individual may rationally calculate rewards and costs but have no fear of punishment because he or she believes that the chances of apprehension are slight (as in the case of many juveniles involved with alcohol and minor vandalism). If the individual believes that he or she will not be apprehended for his or her illegal acts, the threat of punishment has little meaning. In addition, the individual may believe that even if he or she is caught, punishment will not be administered (as in the cases of juveniles who are aware that most juvenile cases never go to court and of parents who abuse their children in the name of discipline).

For whatever reasons, the classical approach to explaining and controlling crime has not been shown to be successful. It would appear that whatever possibility of success this approach has rests with delivering punishment relatively immediately and with a great deal of certainty. Because our society largely continues to rely on the classical approach, and because neither immediacy of punishment nor certainty of apprehension exists, it is not surprising that we are unsuccessful in our attempts to control crime and delinquency.

In spite of the fact that severe punishment does not appear to lead to desirable behavior, many child abusers obviously believe that such punishment will lead to improved behavior on behalf of their children. Thus, when a child fails to meet the expectations of abusive parents, whether in the area of toilet training, eating habits, schoolwork, or showing proper deference to the parents, emotional and/or physical abuse results. This often leads to lowered self-esteem on behalf of the child, whose performance then suffers even more, leading to more severe punishment on the part of the parents and so forth. This “cycle of violence,” once begun, is difficult to break, and there is at least some evidence that the abused child may later abuse his or her own children in the same ways (Knudsen, 1992, pp. 61–63).

The Positivist School

The positivist school of criminology emerged during the second half of the 19th century. Cesare Lombroso is recognized as the founder of the positivist school and also as the “father” of modern criminology. Lombroso, with other positivists such as Raffaele Garofalo and Enrico Ferri, believed that criminals should be studied scientifically and emphasized determinism as opposed to free will (classical school) as the basis of criminal behavior. Although a number of positivists believed that heredity is the determining factor in criminality, others believed that the environment determined, in large measure, whether or not an individual became a criminal.

The positivists emphasized the need for empirical research in criminology, and some stressed the importance of environment as a causal factor in crime. Although their methodology was unsophisticated by modern standards, their contributions to the development of modern criminology are undeniable. Lombroso may also be considered, earlier in his career at least, as one of the founders of the biological school of criminology.
Biological Theories

Biological theories of delinquency were initially based on the assumption that delinquency (criminality) is inherited. Over the past century, the approach has tended to emphasize more the belief that offenders differ from nonoffenders in some physiological way (Conklin, 1998, p. 146). This approach has offered a number of different explanations of delinquency, ranging from glandular malfunctions to learning disabilities, to racial heritage, to nutrition. Rafter (2004) noted that today biological explanations are again gaining credibility and are joining forces with sociological explanations in ways that may make them partners in explaining crime and delinquency. She advised (and we agree) students of crime and delinquency to become familiar with the biological tradition that includes physiognomists, phrenologists, Lombroso, Goddard, Hooton, the Gluecks, and Sheldon, among others. By studying where these fore-runners of contemporary biological theories came from, we can determine how they developed, what they contributed, and where they went astray. As we examine some of these explanations, keep in mind our definition of an acceptable theory.

Cesare Lombroso’s “Born Criminal” Theory

Lombroso (1835–1909) became known for the theory of the “born criminal.” As a result of his research, he became convinced at one point in his career that criminals were atavists or throwbacks to more primitive beings. According to Lombroso, these born criminals could be recognized by a series of external features such as receding foreheads, enormous development of their jaws, and large or handle-shaped ears. These external traits were thought to be related to personality types characterized by laziness, moral insensitivity, and absence of guilt feelings.

Individuals with a number of these criminal features or anomalies were thought to be incapable of resisting the impulse to commit crimes except under very favorable circumstances. Many of Lombroso’s assumptions can be traced to the influence of Darwinism (which provided a means of ranking animals as more or less primitive) at the end of the 19th century and to the influence of phrenology (the study of the shape of the skull) and physiognomy (the study of facial features) as they related to deviance (Conklin, 1998, pp. 146–147; Reid, 2006, pp. 62–63).

Later in his career, Lombroso modified his approach by recognizing the importance of social factors, but his emphasis on biological causes encouraged many other researchers to seek such
causes. Lombroso remains important today largely because of his attempts to explain crime scientifically rather than as a result of his particular theories.

Other Biological Theories

Following Lombroso, there have been a number of attempts over the years to find biological or genetic causes for crime and delinquency. Identical-twin studies were conducted based on the belief that if genetics determines criminality, when one twin is criminal, the other will also be criminal. In general, these studies provide evidence that genetic structure is not the sole cause of crime given that none of them indicates that 100 percent of the twins studied were identical with respect to criminal behavior. Research on the relationship between genetics and crime in twins continues nonetheless. The results of twin studies conducted over the past 75 years do seem to indicate that there may be a genetic factor in delinquency/crime, but the exact nature of the relationship remains undetermined (Fishbein, 1990).

The next logical step in studying the relationship between heredity and crime involved studies of children adopted at an early age who had little or no contact with biological parents. Would the offense rates and types of the children more closely resemble those of the adoptive parents or the biological parents? Evidence suggests a hereditary link, but it is very difficult to separate the effects of heredity and environment (Bohm, 2001, pp. 36–41). Jones and Jones (2000) concluded that the similar behavior of the twins they studied might have more to do with the contagious nature of antisocial behavior than with heredity. They noted that the more antisocial behavior present in a family or community in which boys grew up, the greater the risk that boys will be affected. Unnever, Cullen, and Pratt (2003) studied the relationships among attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), parenting, and delinquency and concluded that the effects of ADHD on delinquency are affected by low self-control. Wright and Beaver (2005) noted that genetic research has demonstrated that ADHD and other deficits in the frontostriatal system of the brain are related to heredity. Their research tested whether the role of parents in creating low self-control was important once genetic influences are taken into account. Based on a sample of twins, they found that parenting activities demonstrate a weak and inconsistent effect. These authors concluded that researchers have often failed to address genetic influences in parenting studies.

Richard Dugdale made the Jukes family a famous test case for inherited criminality during the late 1800s when he demonstrated that over generations this family had been characterized by criminality. Dugdale believed that crime and heredity were related, but his own admission that over the years the family had established a reputation for deviant behavior points to the possibility that other factors (e.g., learning and labeling) might be of equal or greater importance in explaining his observations (Dugdale, 1888).

Other researchers, including Kretschmer (1925), Sheldon (1949), and Glueck and Glueck (1950), turned to studies of the relationship between somatotypes (body types) and delinquency/criminality. Causes of delinquency and body type were thought by Sheldon to be biologically determined, for example, and selective breeding was suggested as a solution to delinquency. The Gluecks continued the body type tradition of explaining delinquency but included in their analysis a variety of other factors as well. The basic conclusion of the Gluecks’ work with respect to body type and crime is that a majority of delinquents are muscular as opposed to thin or obese. One possible explanation for this conclusion, which does not require any assumptions
about biological determination, is that juveniles who are not particularly physically fit recognize this fact and, therefore, consciously tend to avoid at least those delinquent activities that might require strength and fitness. In addition, measurements of body type are rather subjective, and the data presented by the body typists do not account for different individuals with the same body type being delinquent, on the one hand, and nondelinquent, on the other.

Over time, emphasis in the biological school has shifted. Studies examining the relationships among learning disabilities, chromosomes, chemical imbalances, and delinquency have emerged. We have already discussed some of the literature on the relationship between learning disabilities and delinquency in Chapter 3. Here we simply state that many learning disabilities, as typically conceived, are psychosocial (as opposed to biological) in nature. Others are more clearly organic in nature, and there is some evidence that brain dysfunctions and neurological defects are more common among violent individuals than among the general population. Such individuals seem to have defects in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain, and these may lead to loss of self-control. Other dysfunctions include dyslexia (the failure to attain language skills appropriate to intellectual level), aphasia (problems with verbal communication and understanding), and attention deficit disorder (manifested in hyperactivity and inattentiveness). Satterfield (1987) found that children who are hyperactive are several times more likely to be arrested during adolescence than are children without the disorder. None of these disorders, at this point, has been shown to be directly causally related to delinquency. In fact, Satterfield found that arrest rates for hyperactive children were affected by social class, with those from the lower social class being more likely to be arrested. In addition, many learning-disabled children adapt and find ways to overcome the handicap. Perlmutter (1987) suggested that there is little middle ground and indicated that those who are not able to overcome the disability appear to be at risk for developing emotional and behavioral difficulties as adolescents. Fishbein (1990) summarized the relationship between learning disabilities and delinquency by stating that low IQ and/or learning disabilities are not inherently determinants of delinquency. However, without proper intervention, juveniles may become frustrated in attempting to pursue mainstream goals without the skills to achieve them and eventually succumb to delinquent behavior.

During the 1960s, a number of researchers explored the relationship between the presence of an extra Y chromosome in some males and subsequent criminal behavior. Mednick and Christiansen (1977) found that roughly 42 percent of the XYY chromosome cases identified in Denmark had criminal histories, compared with only 9 percent of the XY population. Research is still being conducted on the possible relationship between chromosomes and criminality, although little if any work has been done specifically on the relationship between delinquency and chromosomes.

Currently, it is safe to say that a direct relationship between chromosome structure and criminality has not been scientifically established and that many of the studies conducted to date are characterized by serious methodological problems.

Jeffery (1978, 1996), Booth and Osgood (1993), and Denno (1994) viewed behavior as the product of interaction between a physical environment and a physical organism and believed that contemporary criminology should represent a merger of biology, psychology, and sociology. The basis for this argument, biosocial criminology, is that most contemporary criminologists believe that criminal/delinquent behavior is learned but neglect the fact that learning involves physical (biochemical) changes in the brain. These researchers contend that although criminality is not
inherited, the biochemical preparedness for such behavior is present in the brain and will, given a particular type of environment, produce criminal behavior (Fishbein, 1990; Nichols, 2004; Turkheimer, 1998; Walsh, 2000).

More recent studies on the relationship among genetics, the environment, and delinquency have yielded interesting results. For example, one attempt to link molecular genetic variants to adolescent delinquency identifies three genetic predictors of serious and violent delinquency that gain predictive precision when considered together with social influences, such as family, friends, and school processes (Guo, Roettger, & Cai, 2008). The authors note that social influences such as family, friends, and school seem to impact the expression of specific genetic variants to influence delinquency, and they conclude that understanding both the socioeconomic-cultural components and the genetic components of delinquency is crucial (see In Practice 4.1).

There have been numerous other attempts to explain both delinquency and crime in terms of biology, genetics, and biochemistry. As early as 1939, Ernest Hooton wrote of the consequences of biological causes of crime for rehabilitation and control of offenders. According to Hooton (1939), if criminality is inherited, the solutions to crime lie in isolation and/or sterilization of offenders to prevent them from remaining active in the genetic pool of a society. A third alternative is extermination (which Hooton opposed), and a fourth is the practice of eugenics (Rafter, 2004). At various times, European societies have isolated (e.g., Devil’s Island, the Colonies), sterilized, and exterminated offenders. Experiments with eugenics are certainly possible but raise serious ethical and moral issues. The extent to which genetic engineering becomes acceptable as a means of dealing with a wide variety of social problems will likely determine its use in controlling criminality if genetic deficiencies or abnormalities are shown to be causes of crime and delinquency (see In Practice 4.1). Recent developments that have made it possible to create human genetic blueprints, hailed as one of the greatest scientific contributions of the 21st century, make it likely that if there is a genetic link to crime, it will be discovered (Friend, 2000).

**IN PRACTICE 4.1**

**Study Finds Genetic Link to Violence, Delinquency**

(Reuters)—Three genes may play a strong role in determining why some young men raised in rough neighborhoods or deprived families become violent criminals, while others do not, U.S. researchers reported on Monday.

One gene called MAOA that played an especially strong role has been shown in other studies to affect antisocial behavior—and it was disturbingly common, the team at the University of North Carolina reported.

People with a particular variation of the MAOA gene called 2R were very prone to criminal and delinquent behavior, said sociology professor Guang Guo, who led the study.

“I don’t want to say it is a crime gene, but 1 percent of people have it and scored very high in violence and delinquency,” Guo said in a telephone interview.
His team, which studied only boys, used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a U.S. nationally representative sample of about 20,000 adolescents in grades 7 to 12. The young men in the study are interviewed in person regularly, and some give blood samples.

Guo’s team constructed a “serious delinquency scale” based on some of the questions the youngsters answered.

“Nonviolent delinquency includes stealing amounts larger or smaller than $50, breaking and entering, and selling drugs,” they wrote in the August issue of the American Sociological Review.

“Violent delinquency includes serious physical fighting that resulted in injuries needing medical treatment, use of weapons to get something from someone, involvement in physical fighting between groups, shooting or stabbing someone, deliberately damaging property, and pulling a knife or gun on someone.”

**Genes Plus Environment**

They found specific variations in three genes—the monoamine oxidase A (MAOA) gene, the dopamine transporter 1 (DAT1) gene and the dopamine D2 receptor (DRD2) gene—were associated with bad behavior, but only when the boys suffered some other stress, such as family issues, low popularity and failing school.

MAOA regulates several message-carrying chemicals called neurotransmitters that are important in aggression, emotion and cognition such as serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine.

The links were very specific.

The effect of repeating a grade depended on whether a boy had a certain mutation in MAOA called a 2 repeat, they found.

And a certain mutation in DRD2 seemed to set off a young man if he did not have regular meals with his family.

“But if people with the same gene have a parent who has regular meals with them, then the risk is gone,” Guo said.

“Having a family meal is probably a proxy for parental involvement,” he added. “It suggests that parenting is very important.”

He said vulnerable children might benefit from having surrogates of some sort if their parents are unavailable.

“These results, which are among the first that link molecular genetic variants to delinquency, significantly expand our understanding of delinquent and violent behavior, and they highlight the need to simultaneously consider their social and genetic origins,” the researchers said.

Guo said it was far too early to explore whether drugs might be developed to protect a young man. He also was unsure if criminals might use a “genetic defense” in court.

“In some courts (the judge might) think they maybe will commit the same crime again and again, and this would make the court less willing to let them out,” he said.

Psychological Theories

The human mind has long been considered a source of abnormal behavior and, therefore, crime (Lanier & Henry, 1998, p. 113). Early varieties of psychological theories of delinquency and crime focused on lack of intelligence and/or personality disturbances as major causal factors. Several of the early pioneers in the psychological school were convinced that biological factors played a major role in determining intelligence; therefore, they could be considered proponents of both schools of thought. Goddard’s (1914) studies of the Kallikak family and the intellectual abilities of reformatory inmates, for instance, led him to conclude that feeblemindedness, which he believed to be inherited, was an important contributing factor in criminality. He suggested that “eliminating” a large proportion of mental defectives would reduce the number of criminals and other deviants in society. Similarly, Goring (1913) focused on defective intelligence and psychological characteristics as basic causes of crime in his attempt to refute Lombroso and the other positivists. As we indicated previously, research concerning the relationship between defective intelligence, IQ, or learning disabilities and delinquency continues. Problems concerning the reliability and validity of IQ tests and personality inventories, as well as other methodological shortcomings, continue to plague such research, and the psychological school as a whole has taken other directions. Still, many believe that those who commit heinous crimes must be emotionally disturbed—different from the rest of us in some identifiable way.

Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalytic Approach

Sigmund Freud, born in 1856, spent most of his life in Vienna, Austria. He is regarded as the founder of the psychoanalytic approach to explaining behavior that relies heavily on the techniques of introspection (looking inside one’s self) and retrospection (reviewing past events). Freud’s theories were introduced in the United States during the early 1900s. Freud divided personality into three separate components: the id, ego, and superego. The function of the id, according to Freud, is to provide for the discharge of energy that permits the individual to seek pleasure and reduce tension. The id is also said to be the seat of instincts in humans and not thought to be governed by reason. The ego is said to be the part of the personality that controls and governs the id and the superego by making rational adjustments to real-life situations. For example, the ego might prevent the id from causing the individual to seek immediate gratification of his or her desires by deferring gratification to a later time. The development of the ego is said to be a product of interaction between the individual’s personality and the environment and is thought to be affected by heredity as well. The superego is viewed as the moral branch of the personality and may be equated roughly with the concept of conscience. Both the ego and the superego are thought to develop out of the individual’s interactions with his or her environment, whereas the id is said to be a product of evolution.

In general, deviance is viewed as the product of an uncontrollable id, a faulty ego, or an underdeveloped superego or some combination of the three. Therefore, those who commit a criminal or delinquent act do so as the result of a personality disturbance. To correct or control
this behavior, the causes of the personality disturbance are located primarily through introspection and retrospection, with a particular emphasis on childhood experiences, and then are eliminated through therapy.

Freud is one of the most important figures (if not the most important figure) in the history of psychology. There are, no doubt, many cases where psychoanalytic techniques prove to be effective in therapeutic treatment. As a system for explaining the causes of deviance, however, Freudian psychology has several shortcomings. First, the existence of the id, ego, and superego cannot be demonstrated empirically. Second, instincts, which Freud viewed as the driving forces in the id, are thought by many behavioral scientists to be extremely rare or nonexistent in humans. Third, there seems to be faulty logic among practitioners using Freud’s system. They accept the premise that those who commit deviant acts must be experiencing personality disturbances; that is, they employ circular reasoning rather than logical deduction (Akers, 1994, p. 85; Lanier & Henry, 1998, p. 117). In response to the question, “How do you know X has a disturbed personality?” they might answer, “Because he committed a deviant act, he must have been experiencing a personality disturbance.” Such a response is more a statement of faith than a matter of fact. Currently, it is safe to say that the psychoanalytic approach is of very little value in explaining crime and delinquency (or any other form of deviance, for that matter). Nonetheless, the Freudian approach has remained popular in much of the Western world, and Freud has had many disciples who have applied his techniques directly to delinquency.

Among those who emphasized the psychoanalytic perspective were Healy and Bronner (1936), who believed that the delinquent was a product of a personality disturbance resulting from thwarted desires and deprivations that led to frustration and a weak superego. Healy and Bronner interviewed numerous juvenile offenders and came to the conclusion that 90 percent of them were emotionally disturbed. Adler (1931), Halleck (1971), and Fox and Levin (1994) concluded that those who are frustrated, believe the world is against them, and feel inferior may turn to crime as a compensatory means of expressing their autonomy.

Others, using a variety of personality inventories (e.g., the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory [MMPI], the California Personality Inventory [CPI]), have concluded that such inventories do appear to discriminate between delinquents and nondelinquents, but the reasons for such discrimination are not at all clear-cut, and neither are the numerous definitions of “abnormal” personality employed (Bohm, 2001, pp. 56–57). Akers and Sellers (2004) concluded, “The research using personality inventories and other methods of measuring personality characteristics has not been able to produce findings to support personality variables as major causes of criminal and delinquent behavior” (p. 47).

**Psychopathology**

One of the terms most commonly employed to describe certain types of criminals and delinquents is *psychopath*. Typically, the term is used to describe aggressive criminals who act impulsively with no apparent reason. Sutherland and Cressey (1978) indicated that some 55 descriptive terms are consistently linked with the concept of psychopathy (sociopathy or antisocial personality). Bohm (2001) listed 16 characteristics ranging from “unreliability” to “fantastic and
uninviting behavior” to “failure to follow any life plan” (p. 54). Attempts have been made to clarify the concept of psychopathology, but such attempts have helped little in understanding the relationship between psychopathology and criminality because criminality is typically included in the symptomatic basis for psychopathology. In other words, the two conditions are often perceived as being one and the same.

Although the concept of psychopathology is generally considered to be too vague and ambiguous to distinguish psychopaths from nonpsychopaths, there have been attempts to operationalize the concept in more meaningful fashion. Gough (1948, 1960) conceptualized psychopathy as the inability to take the role of the other (the inability to identify with others). The scales he developed to measure role-taking ability generally result in lower scores for offenders than for nonoffenders. Whether or not such differences could have been detected before the offenders committed offenses is another matter.

Research in this area continues. Martens (1999) reported a case in which psychopathy appeared to have been cured as a result of therapeutic psychosocial influences and life events. In this case, the individual began a career in delinquency at 15 years of age and went on to commit offenses, including fraud, theft, rape, and assaults, until 26 years of age. Following life-changing events and therapy, the individual had remained crime free for more than 20 years and appeared to be leading a “normal” life.

Poythrees, Edens, and Lilienfeld (1998) administered the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI), a self-report measure of psychopathic personality features, and the Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL-R) to youthful offender prison inmates. They found that the PPI could be used to accurately predict PCL-R classifications of psychopath and nonpsychopath, raising the possibility that the PPI could be used for clinical purposes to detect psychopathic personalities.

Lynam (1998) hypothesized that there is a developmental relationship between adult psychopathy and children with symptoms of hyperactivity, impulsivity, attention problems, and conduct problems (HIA-CP). Using a large sample of adolescent boys, Lynam found that boys who were hyperactive and impulsive, with attention disorders and conduct problems, scored high on a measure of psychopathic personality. These boys were the most antisocial, were the most disinhibited, and tended to be the most neuropsychologically impaired of the groups studied. Further support for the relationship between adolescent behavior patterns of this type and adult psychopathy comes from Gresham, MacMillan, and Bocian (1998), who found marked differences between third- and fourth-grade students with HIA-CP and other students on peer measures of rejection and friendship and teachers’ ratings of social skills. The notion of the “fledgling psychopath” appears to emerge from these recent studies.

Additional attempts to explore the relationship between psychopathology and delinquency include those by Ireland, Smith, and Thornberry (2002), who focus on the theory of developmental psychopathology. The basis for this theory is that development is age-graded and hierarchical in nature; for example, a child must acquire a certain set of skills before subsequent appropriate development can occur. If these skills are not developed, subsequent age-appropriate development may not occur, and this may persist into adulthood. The authors explore whether maltreatment in early childhood or in later childhood interrupt the development of age-specific skills leading to inappropriate conduct. Unlike some other researchers, these authors found that childhood-limited
maltreatment is not a risk factor for either occasional or frequent offending, while maltreatment in adolescence and persistent maltreatment both pose significant risks to adolescent behavioral development.

Akers (1994) concluded, based on the research available at the time, that the term psychopath appears to be so broad that it could be applied to anyone who violates the law (p. 87). After reviewing attempts to relate psychopathy to child abuse, Knudsen (1992) concluded that there is little evidence of such a relationship. Wolfe (1985) also found no relationship between underlying personality attributes and child abuse beyond general descriptions of stress-related complaints and displeasure in the parenting role. Walsh, MacMillan, and Jamieson (2002) concluded that the exact nature of the relationship between psychopathology and child abuse remains unclear. That conclusion appears to be accurate at the end of the first decade of the 21st century as well. Most importantly, attempts to discover the nature of relationships, if any, between psychopathology and delinquency and abuse continue.

Further research on the relationship between psychopathology and delinquency and abuse is clearly needed. On the one hand, it may turn out that behavior patterns involving hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention, combined with conduct problems, are forerunners of psychopathology. On the other hand, most children exhibit one or more of these behaviors periodically but do not turn out to be psychopaths.

**Behaviorism and Learning Theory**

During the latter 19th century, a number of psychologists became increasingly concerned about weaknesses in the theory and techniques developed by Freud and his followers and those of the biological school emphasizing heredity. Tarde, by contrast, thought that crime was learned by normal people in the process of interacting in specific environments (Bohm, 2001, p. 82). He and others called for a change in focus from genetics and the internal workings of the mind to observable behavior. Although the major work on this learning theory model as it relates to delinquency has been done by sociologists and is discussed under that topic, the psychological underpinnings are discussed here.

As indicated previously, behaviorists called for a change of techniques from the subjective speculative approach based on introspection and retrospection to a more empirical objective approach based on observing and measuring behavior. Perhaps the most important individual in the behaviorist tradition was B. F. Skinner, who directed his attention toward the relationship between a particular stimulus and a given response and to the learning processes involved in connecting the two. Skinner (1953) viewed human social behavior as a set of learned responses to specific stimuli. Criminal and delinquent behaviors are viewed as varieties of human social behavior, learned in the same way as other social behaviors. Through the process of conditioning (rewarding for appropriate behavior and/or punishing for inappropriate behavior), any type of social behavior can be taught (see In Practice 4.2). Therefore, when an individual behaves in a delinquent manner (exhibits an inappropriate response in a given situation), his or her behavior can be modified using conditioning. To control and rehabilitate delinquents, then, the therapist employs behavior modification techniques to extinguish inappropriate behavior and replace it with appropriate behavior.
Behavior Modification—Child Behavior Problems—Out of Control Teens—Behavior Modification Schools

How do parents effect change in their out of control teen?

Behavior Modification is part of a behavioral tradition developed by Pavlov in the early part of the twentieth century. This therapy was adapted by John Watson in 1920 and eventually translated into behavior therapy by researchers and clinicians such as B. F. Skinner and Hans Eysenck in the 1950s. These approaches were later incorporated with cognitive behavior therapy as developed by researchers such as Donald Meichenbaum.

Today, there are many branches and schools of thought with varying terminology as regards Behavior Modification therapy. Generally however, Behavior Modification therapy as we know it today is defined as the use of rewards or punishments to reduce or eliminate problematic behavior, and can teach new responses to an individual in response to environmental stimuli. It is also defined as a “therapy that seeks to extinguish or inhibit abnormal or maladaptive behavior by reinforcing desired behavior and extinguishing undesired behavior.”

The goal of a program of behavior modification is to change and adjust behavior that is inappropriate or undesirable in some way. When embarking on a program of behavior modification with a teen or child, it is important that the undesirable behavior be isolated and observed. With this observation comes awareness of the behavior on the part of the parent and/or teacher, and also on the part of the individual whose behavior is being modified. And with this awareness also comes the greater goal of understanding the cause and effect of the behaviors, thus helping to affect change.

In many cases, some form of behavior modification along with cognitive therapy and medication therapy are the preferred methods of treatment for disorders such as ADD, ADHD and Conduct Disorders. Behavior modification and cognitive therapy are also commonly used in the treatment for disorders such as Eating Disorders and Substance Abuse, Mood, and Anxiety Disorders.

Behavior modification therapy is based on the concepts of observable antecedents (events that occur before a behavior is apparent), observable behavior, and consequences (the events that occur after the behavior occurs). A behavioral modification program to affect behavioral change consists of a series of stages. An inappropriate behavior is observed, identified, targeted, and stopped. Meanwhile, a new, appropriate behavior must be identified, developed, strengthened, and maintained.

Two types of reinforcers are used to strengthen positive behavior. The use of pleasant rewards to reinforce a positive behavior to help affect change is called positive reinforcement. Negative reinforcement strengthens a behavior because a negative condition is stopped or avoided as a consequence of the behavior. Two other reinforcers are identified as those that weaken negative behavior. One is called extinction, where a particular behavior is weakened by the consequence of not experiencing a positive condition or stopping a negative condition, and the other is called punishment, when a particular behavior is weakened by the consequence of experiencing a negative condition.
Although behaviorists do not seek to explain the ultimate causes of social behavior except in the sense that they are learned, their approach holds considerably more promise for understanding and controlling delinquent behavior than does the psychoanalytic approach. The behaviorist approach forces us to focus on just one or two offending behavior patterns. Once a behavior pattern is recognized and its pattern charted and understood, a system of reinforcements and consequences can then be constructed.

An example of a positive reinforcement used immediately after appropriate behavior can be as simple as offering praise immediately after the behavior occurs. Extinction can be used when the behavior can be seen and measured, and an example of this would be to ignore the child’s whining behavior. This can be particularly effective if the parent has given in to whining demands in the past. However, when inappropriate behavior is ignored, then another, more appropriate behavior, must be reinforced.

An example of negative reinforcement is when a child is allowed to skip a required chore if homework is finished by a certain time. A simple example of punishment is when a child is reprimanded or criticized for the inappropriate behavior.

In order to teach and develop new behaviors, successive steps can be reinforced until the final, appropriate behavior is achieved. Based on the observed behavioral patterns, another behavioral method for success is to teach cueing: arranging for the child to receive a cue for correct behavior prior to the expected action can reinforce the child for the appropriate behavior and for recognizing the cue even before the child has a chance to perform the inappropriate behavior.

The key to a successful program of child behavior modification is consistency. And a key piece of behavior modification that parents and teachers can perform is to present their own behavior and reactions in a positive way, so that children can learn and model successful behavior.

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focus, we are dealing with observable behavior that can be measured, counted, and perhaps modified. Success in modifying behavior in the laboratory has been noted (Echeburua, Fernandez-Montalvo, & Baez, 2000; Krasner & Ullman, 1965; Martin & Peas, 1978; Paul, Marx, & Orsillo, 1999). The extent to which this success can be transferred to the world outside the laboratory remains an empirical question (Florsheim, Shotorbani, & Guest-Warnick, 2000; Ross & McKay, 1978; Shelton, Barkley, & Crosswait, 2000). Think about the difficulties of transferring desirable behavior from the laboratory to the street in the following hypothetical case.

Joe Foul Up, a juvenile, is repeatedly apprehended for fighting. Finally, he is turned over to a therapist who, over a period of several weeks, eliminates the undesirable behavior by punishing Joe (e.g., with electric shock) when he begins to exhibit the undesirable behavior and by rewarding him when he exhibits appropriate alternative behavior. After therapy ends, Joe’s behavior has been modified, and he returns home to his old neighborhood and his old street gang. When Joe refuses to fight, the gang thinks that it is appropriate to punish him by calling him a coward and excluding him from gang activities. When he does fight, they reward him by treating him like a hero. What are the chances that the behavior modification that occurred in the laboratory will continue to exist?

In spite of the odds, there is recent evidence that at least one form of behavioral therapy does have an impact on recidivism among both juveniles and adults (Clark, 2010). **Cognitive behavioral therapy** suggests that once individuals become conscious of their own thoughts and behaviors and the attitudes, beliefs, and values underlying those thoughts and behaviors (with the assistance of trained therapists), they can make positive changes in both (Clark, 2010, p. 22). Lipsey (2009) and Landenberger and Lipsey (2005) found that such therapy can be effective with a variety of types of problems (i.e., drug abuse, juvenile offenders, prisoners, etc.) in institutions and the community. Reviewing over 500 studies, Landenberger and Lipsey found that interventions based on cognitive-behavior skill building were the most effective form of intervention studied in reducing recidivism even among high-risk offenders. These authors note that more research is needed to determine the impact of cognitive behavioral therapy under differing conditions.
We have more to say about the learning theory or behaviorist approach in the section on learning theory.

**Sociological Theories**

There have been a number of different sociological theories of delinquency causation, some dealing with social class and/or family differences (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958; Quinney, 1975), some dealing with blocked educational and occupational goals (Merton, 1938), some dealing with neighborhood and peers (Miller, 1958; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Thrasher, 1927), and some dealing with the effects of official labeling (Becker, 1963). Most of these theories share the notion that delinquent behavior is the product of social interaction rather than the result of heredity or personality disturbance. For sociologists, delinquency must be understood in social context. Thus, we must consider time, place, audience, and nature of the behavior involved when studying delinquency.

**Anomie and Strain Theory**

Beginning in the 1930s in the United States, a number of theorists focused on a systems model to explain crime and delinquency. Adapting Durkheim’s anomie theory (a breakdown of social norms or the dissociation of the individual from a general sense of morality of the times), Merton (1938) focused on the discrepancy between societal goals and the legitimate means of attaining those goals. He argued that strain is placed on those who wish to pursue societal goals but lack the legitimate means of doing so (strain theory). According to Merton, people adapt to this strain in different ways; some attempt to play the game, some retreat (and may become addicts and outcasts), some develop innovative responses (including the illegitimate responses of crime and delinquency), and some rebel (another potential source of crime).

During the 1950s, Cohen (1955) adapted Merton’s theory in an attempt to explain juvenile gangs. He argued that lower-class juveniles experience the strain of being unsuccessful in middle-class terms, especially in the school setting. Because many lower-class youth find success in school difficult to achieve, they reject middle-class values and seek to gain status by engaging in behaviors contrary to middle-class standards. Thus they establish their own anti-middle-class value system and, through mutual recruitment, form delinquent gangs. Miller (1958) disagreed with Cohen’s theory that lower-class youth act in terms of inverted middle-class values; instead, Miller focused on what he called the “focal concerns” (toughness, trouble, smartness, fate, autonomy, and excitement) of the lower social class as the sources of delinquent behavior.

Sykes and Matza (1957) argued in their theory of delinquency and drift that firm commitment to subcultural values was not necessarily a precursor of delinquent behavior (unlike the view of Cohen, Miller, and others). Sykes and Matza viewed delinquency as being based on an extension of defenses to crimes in the form of justifications for deviant behavior that are accepted by delinquents but not necessarily by the legal system or larger society. These defenses were called techniques of neutralization and included (a) the denial of responsibility (for the consequences of delinquent actions), (b) the denial of injury (to the victim or larger society), (c) the denial of a victim (the victim “had it coming”), (d) condemnation of the condemners (as hypocrites or spiteful people), and (e) an appeal to higher loyalties (e.g., to the gang). Using these techniques, juveniles drift in and out of the delinquent subculture over time.
Cloward and Ohlin (1960) extended anomie, or strain theory, by focusing on the differential opportunities that exist among juveniles. If an illegitimate opportunity structure is readily available, they argued, juveniles who are experiencing strain or anomie are attracted to that structure and are likely to become involved in delinquent activities.

In 1985, Agnew again revised strain theory. He discussed three types of strain that may produce deviant behavior. The first is the individual’s failure to achieve goals, the second involves loss of a source of stability (e.g., death of a loved one), and the third occurs when the individual is confronted by negative stimuli (e.g., lack of success in school). Furthermore, Agnew (1985) suggested that, rather than pursuing specific goals, many people are simply interested in being treated justly based on their own efforts and resources. People who do not perceive themselves to be treated fairly experience strain, according to Agnew. Reactions to this perception of unfair treatment may lead to crime and delinquency. Later, Agnew (2001) argued that criminal victimization might be among the most consequential strains experienced by adolescents and, therefore, might be an important cause of delinquency. Subsequently, Hay and Evans (2006) examined predictions from general strain theory about the effects of victimization on later involvement in delinquency. They concluded that violent victimization significantly predicted later involvement in delinquency, even when controlling for the individual’s earlier involvement in delinquency, and that the effects of victimization were slightly greater for juveniles with weak emotional attachment to their parents and significantly greater for those low in self-control.

Using a sample of homeless street youth, Baron (2004) examined how specific forms of strain, including emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, homelessness, being a victim of robbery, being a victim of violence, being a victim of theft, relative deprivation, monetary dissatisfaction, and unemployment, are related to crime and drug use. He also explored how strain is conditioned by deviant peers, deviant attitudes, external attributions, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. He concluded that all 10 types of strain examined can lead to criminal behavior either as main effects or when interacting with conditioning variables.

Hay and Evans (2006) examined the stressful effects of being violently victimized on later delinquency. Consistent with strain theory, the authors found that being a victim of violence increased a youth’s subsequent delinquency and that the effects of such victimization on delinquency were somewhat mediated by the youth’s feelings of anger. As feelings of anger increased so did involvement in delinquency. When anger was controlled, the direct effects of victimization on delinquency were reduced and the youth’s level of self-control was related to coping with victimization in that youth who were impulsive and demonstrated low self-control had more difficulty in coping.

Hollist, Hughes, and Schaible (2009), focusing on parent-child problems as a source of strain leading to delinquency, found a significant association between maltreatment and delinquency. Their findings supported strain theory as they found negative emotions to be important intervening mechanisms in this relationship. However, contrary to the tenets of strain theory, they noted that the direct effects of the negative emotions were equally, if not more, important for involvement in delinquency than the direct effect of maltreatment.

Finally, partial support for general strain theory was reported by Tsunokai and Kposowa (2009) who found that Asian youth who responded to school-related stress with anger and frustration were more likely to commit future delinquent acts. At the same time, however, the study failed to show a significant relationship among strain, negative affect, and gang involvement among Asian youth.
The hypothesis that stress produced by generational conflict would increase gang involvement and delinquency was not supported. Instead, results showed that youth involved in such conflict were less likely to engage in future delinquent acts. The researchers hypothesize that this may be a result of the nature and structure of family relationships among Asian Americans.

There are numerous criticisms of strain/anomie theory. It tends to focus almost exclusively on lower-class delinquency. It also ignores the effects of labeling and fails to explain why many juveniles who undoubtedly experience strain do not turn to delinquency as a means of attaining their goals. As is the case with many of the other theories discussed in this chapter, the verdict on strain/anomie theory is still out.

The Ecological/Social Disorganization Approach

The ecological/social disorganization approach to explaining crime and delinquency was developed during the 1930s and 1940s and is one of the oldest interest areas of American criminologists. This approach focuses on the geographic distribution of delinquency. Shaw and McKay (1942), and later others, found that crime and delinquency rates were not distributed equally within cities. They mapped the areas marked by high crime and delinquency rates along with the socioeconomic problems of those areas. Using Burgess’s (1952) concentric-zone theory of city growth, the ecological/social disorganization studies generally found that zones of transition between residential and industrial neighborhoods consistently had the highest rates of crime and delinquency. These zones are characterized by physical deterioration and are located adjacent to the business district of the central city. The neighborhoods in this zone are marked by deteriorating buildings and substandard housing with accompanying overcrowdedness, lack of sanitation, and generally poor
health and safety conditions. In addition, the area is marked by a transient population, high unemployment rates, poverty, broken homes, and a high adult crime rate. In short, the area is characterized by a general lack of social stability and cohesion or social disorganization.

Wilks (1967) best summarized early ecological/social disorganization studies and their findings on the distribution of delinquency. Her conclusions were as follows:

1. Rates of delinquency and crime vary widely in different neighborhoods and within a city or town.
2. The highest crime and delinquency rates generally occur in the low-rent areas located near the center of the city, and the rates decrease with increasing distance from the city center.
3. High-delinquency-rate areas tend to maintain their rates over time, although the population composition of the area may change radically within the same time period.
4. Areas that have high rates of truancy also have high rates of juvenile court cases and high rates of male delinquency and usually have high rates of female delinquency. The differences in area rates reflect differences in community background. High-rate areas are characterized by things such as physical deterioration and declining population.
5. The delinquency rates for particular nationality and ethnic groups show the same general tendency as the entire population; namely, they are high in the central area of the city and low as the groups move toward the outskirts of the city.
6. Delinquents living in areas with high delinquency rates are the most likely to become recidivists and are likely to appear in court several times more often than are those living in areas with low delinquency rates.
7. In summary, delinquency and crime follow the pattern of social and physical structures of the city, with concentration occurring in disorganized, deteriorated areas.

According to Wilks (1967), to predict delinquency using the ecological/social disorganization approach, it is necessary to be aware of the existing social structure, social processes, and population composition, as well as the area’s position within the large urban societal complex, because these variables all affect the distribution of delinquency. In general, this approach found that family and neighborhood stability were lacking and that the street environment was the prevailing determinant of behavior. If delinquent behavior is learned behavior, this learning would be maximized in environments such as those in transitional zones. In transitional zones, those agencies or institutions that traditionally produce stability, cohesion, and organization have often been replaced by the street environment of adult criminals and delinquent gangs.

The ecological/social disorganization approach to explaining delinquency has been challenged on the grounds that using only one variable to explain delinquency is not likely to lead to success. In Lander’s (1970) study of Baltimore, for example, he found anomie, or normlessness, to be a more appropriate explanation of delinquency rates than socioeconomic area. Nonetheless, follow-up studies by Shaw and McKay (1969) in other American cities (Boston, Philadelphia, and Cleveland) support their contention that official delinquency rates decrease from the central city out to the suburbs. Similarly, Lyerly and Skipper (1981) found that significantly less delinquent activity was reported by rural youth than by urban youth in their study of juveniles in detention.
Stark (1987) concluded that certain geographic areas (those characterized by high population density, poverty, transience, dilapidation, etc.) attract deviant people who drive out those who are not so deviant, and these places then become “deviant places” with high crime rates and weak social control. Whatever the cause, the fact remains that high official delinquency rates are found in certain areas or types of areas where serious and repetitive misconduct not only is common but also appears to have become traditional and more or less acceptable (Lowencamp, Cullen, & Pratt, 2003). There is a real danger here, however, of drawing false conclusions based on what has been called the “ecological fallacy.” This term refers to false conclusions drawn from analyzing data at one level (e.g., the group level) and applying those conclusions at another level (e.g., the individual level). In short, group crime rates tell us nothing about whether a particular individual is likely to become involved in crime (Bohm, 2001, p. 71). In spite of these criticisms, Moyer (2001) found that “one can find the early development of the interactionist perspective, control theory, and conflict theory in their works” (p. 118).

Edwin Sutherland’s Differential-Association Theory

Sutherland (1939) developed what is known as the **theory of differential association**. Sutherland’s approach combines some of the principles of behaviorism (or learning theory) with the notion that learning takes place in interaction within social groups. For Sutherland, the primary group (family or gang) is the focal point of learning social behavior, including deviant behavior. In this context, individuals learn how to define different situations as appropriate for law-abiding or law-violating behavior. Therefore, seeing an unattended newsstand might be defined as a situation appropriate to the theft of a newspaper by some passersby but not by others. The way a given individual defines a particular situation depends on that individual’s prior life experiences. An individual who has a balance of definitions favorable to law-violating behavior in a given situation is likely to commit a law-violating act. The impact of learned definitions on the individual depends on how early in life the definitions were learned (priority), how frequently the definitions are reinforced (frequency), the period of time over which such definitions are reinforced (duration), and the importance of the definition to the individual (intensity) (Sutherland, Cressey, & Luckenbill, 1992, pp. 88–90).

Sutherland’s approach has the advantage of discussing both deviant and normal social behavior as learned phenomena. The approach also indicates that the primary group is crucial in the learning process. In addition, Sutherland suggested some important variables to be considered in determining whether behavior will be criminal or noncriminal in given situations. Finally, Sutherland suggested that it is not differential association with criminal and noncriminal types that determines the individual’s behavior; rather, it is differential association with, or exposure to, definitions favorable or unfavorable to law-violating behavior.

The learning theory and differential-association approaches have been used to try to explain child abuse and neglect as well as delinquency. According to these approaches, abusive parents learned abusive behavior when they were abused as children. Thus child abuse is said to be an intergenerational phenomenon. Kaufman and Zigler (1987), after reviewing self-report data, concluded that the rate of abuse by individuals with a history of abuse is six times higher than that in the general population (p. 190). This finding supports the belief that abusive behavior is learned in primary groups that define it as acceptable behavior (as Sutherland suggested is the case with other forms of deviance). However, other researchers have criticized
Kaufman and Zigler and have failed to find a relationship between being abused and abusing. Knudsen (1992) also concluded that the cycle of violence appears to be a minor factor in explaining child abuse (p. 63). Still, as we indicated earlier, there is evidence to the contrary. Scudder and colleagues (1993) concluded that children who break the law often have a history of maltreatment as children (p. 321). These researchers and Siegel and Williams (2003) indicated that a child abused at a young age is at higher risk for subsequent delinquent behaviors than is a nonabused child.

There are a number of criticisms of Sutherland’s approach. It is clearly difficult to operationalize the terms favorable to and unfavorable to. There are serious problems with trying to measure the variable intensity. How many exposures to definitions favorable to law violation are required before definitions unfavorable to law violation are outweighed and the individual commits the illegal act? These and other weaknesses have been pointed out over the years by critics of differential association. Nonetheless, there is a certain logic to Sutherland’s approach. Some of the propositions are empirically testable, and the description of the learning process seems to be relatively accurate. Sutherland’s approach has sensitized us to an approach to understanding crime and delinquency that has been built on by other theorists and researchers (Akers, 1998; Burgess & Akers, 1968; Curran & Renzetti, 1994; Glaser, 1960).

One attempt to improve on Sutherland’s theory was made by Glaser (1978). Glaser referred to his theory as the theory of differential anticipation, which, in his view, combines differential association and control theory and is compatible with biological and personality theories. Differential-anticipation theory assumes that a person will try to commit a crime wherever and whenever the expectations of gratification from it—as a result of social bonds, differential learning, and perceptions of opportunity—exceed the unfavorable anticipations from these sources (pp. 126–127). In short, expectations determine conduct, and expectations are determined by social bonds, differential learning, and perceived opportunities. Burgess and Akers (1968) also expanded on the learning theory approach developing differential association–differential reinforcement theory. Akers (1985, 1992) later referred to his theoretical approach as social-learning theory. This theory holds that social sanctions of engaging in (deviant) behavior may be perceived differently by different individuals. However, so long as these sanctions are perceived as more rewarding than alternative behavior, the deviant behavior will be repeated under similar circumstances. Progression into sustained deviant behavior is promoted to the extent that reinforcement, exposure to deviant models, and definitions are not offset by negative sanctions and definitions. These theories are eclectic in the sense that they extend Sutherland while being compatible with most of the approaches we have discussed and with labeling theory, to which we now turn our attention.

**Labeling Theory**

A number of social scientists have contributed to what might be called the labeling theory school of crime/delinquency causation. Becker (1963) discussed the process of labeling deviants as outsiders. Erikson (1962) pointed out the importance of what he called the labeling “ceremony” for deviants. These authors and others shifted the focus of attention from the individual deviant (e.g., delinquent, criminal, mentally ill) to the reaction of the audience observing and labeling the behavior as deviant. As we have indicated repeatedly, it is clear that many individuals commit
deviant acts, but only some are dealt with officially. The time at which the act occurs, the place where it occurs, and the people who observe the act all are important in determining whether or not official action will be taken. Thus, the juvenile using heroin in the privacy of his gang’s hangout in front of other gang members is not subject to official action. If, however, he used heroin in a public place in the presence of a police officer who was observing his behavior, official action would be likely.

From the labeling theorist’s point of view, then, society’s reaction to deviant behavior is crucially important in understanding who becomes labeled as deviant. Erikson (1962) discussed the ceremony that deviants typically go through once the decision to take official action has been made. First, the alleged deviant is apprehended (arrested or taken into custody). Second, the individual is confronted, generally at a trial or hearing. Third, the individual is judged (a verdict, disposition, or decision is rendered). Finally, the individual is placed (imprisoned, committed to an institution, or put back into society on probation). The result is that the individual is officially labeled as deviant.

One of the consequences of labeling in our society is that, once labeled, the individual may never be able to redeem himself or herself in the eyes of society. Therefore, John Q. Convict does not become John Q. Citizen on release from prison. Instead, he becomes John Q. Ex-Convict. Having been labeled may make it extremely difficult for the rehabilitated deviant to find employment and establish successful family ties. The more difficult it becomes for the rehabilitated deviant to succeed in the larger society, the greater the chances that he or she will return to old associates and old ways. Of course, these are often the very associates and ways that led the individual to become officially labeled in the first place. Thus, the individual may be more or less forced to continue his or her career in deviance, partially as a result of the labeling itself.

Research by Blankenship and Singh (1976) indicated that a juvenile’s prior career of delinquent behavior (the extent to which he or she has been officially labeled previously) is indeed an important determinant of official action. These authors, as well as Covington (1984), pointed out that labeling comes in different forms (e.g., legalistic vs. peer group) and has different consequences for different types of offenders (e.g., whites vs. blacks). If we could assume that society never makes a mistake in attaching the label of deviant and that rehabilitation programs never succeed, we might regard the consequences of labeling as somewhat less alarming. As we have already seen in Chapters 2 and 3, the assumption that society never makes a mistake is unwarranted. We see later that there is at least some hope that rehabilitation programs do succeed. If the result of official labeling forces the labeled individual back into a deviant career, in the case of juveniles at least, we are accomplishing exactly the opposite of what we intended when we created a separate juvenile justice system designed to protect, educate, and treat juveniles rather than to punish them. One of the consequences of negative societal reaction to the label of delinquent may be the changing of the delinquent’s self-concept, so the individual, like society, begins to think about himself or herself in negative terms. Possibilities for rehabilitation may be lessened as a result.

An interesting contribution to labeling theory was made by Braithwaite (1989). He discussed what he referred to as “disintegrative shaming” (negative stigmatization) and noted that it is destructive of social identities because it morally condemns and isolates people but involves no attempt to reintegrate the shamed people at some later time. He contrasts this harmful approach
to stigmatization with “reintegrative shaming” in which there is an attempt to reconnect the stigmatized person to the larger society.

A 2006 study by Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera found that teens processed by the juvenile justice system were more likely than teens who had not been processed to become gang members or to be part of a delinquent network. According to the authors, official labeling as a delinquent plays a significant role in the maintenance and stability of delinquency. They conclude that intervention may in some cases increase associations with deviant peers by placing youth in the company of other delinquent youth.

The labeling approach accurately describes how individuals become labeled, why some maintain deviant careers, and some of the possible consequences of labeling (Krisberg, 2005, p. 184). It does not deal with the issue of why some individuals initially commit acts that lead them to be labeled; rather, it deals only with what is referred to as secondary deviance. In addition, those who support the approach often lose sight of the fact that the individual is in some way responsible for the actions that are viewed as unacceptable; that is, social audiences do not appear to attach negative labels haphazardly. They are responding to some stimulus presented by the individual committing a crime for which he or she must accept some responsibility (unless we return to a completely deterministic concept of deviance).

Despite some weaknesses, the labeling approach contributes significantly to our understanding of deviance. Through this approach, deviance is viewed as a product of social interaction in which the actions of both the deviant and his or her audience must be considered.

**Conflict/Radical/Critical/Marxist Theories**

Chambliss (1984) described conflict theories of crime as focusing on whole political and economic systems and on class relations in those systems. Conflict theorists argue that conflict is inherent in all societies, not just capitalist societies, and focus on conflict resulting from gender, race, ethnicity, power, and other relationships. Conflict results from competition for power among many groups. Those who are successful in this competition define criminality at any given time. Thus, criminal behavior is viewed not as universal or inherent but rather as situational and definitional. This view does not account for individual acts of criminality occurring outside of the group context but serves basically to alert us to the social factors that may be related to criminality. Why, for example, do we pass laws with severe sanctions for use of marijuana but deal with tobacco use among teens much less harshly? Is it because the tobacco lobby is powerful and able to convince legislators that tobacco use among juveniles should, at most, be regulated but not outlawed?

The Marxist approach to criminology and delinquency finds the causes of such phenomena in the repression of the lower social classes by the “ruling class.” In short, laws are passed and enforced by those who monopolize power against those who are powerless (e.g., the poor and minorities). The causal roots of crime are assumed, by many proponents of this approach, to be inherent in the social structure of capitalistic societies. Crime control policies are developed and implemented by those who have power (e.g., own the means of production, have wealth), and these policies serve to criminalize those who threaten the status quo (Beirne & Quinney, 1982; Chambliss & Mandoff, 1976; Platt, 1977; Quinney, 1970, 1974; Turk, 1969; Vold, 1958). Labeling the discontented as criminals and delinquents allows the ruling class to call on law enforcement officials to deal with such individuals without needing
to grant legitimacy to their discontent. Although there are a number of variations on the theme as discussed here, these are the essential components of most radical or critical explanations of delinquency and crime.

Radical criminology became relatively popular in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, but its popularity has declined over the years and some of its most important spokespersons have abandoned this approach, at least in part, as an explanation of crime and delinquency. Little empirical research that supports the radical/critical approach has been done (Moyer, 2001, p. 238).

As we indicated earlier, delinquency appears to be rather uniformly distributed across social classes, contrary to the teachings of the Marxist approach. In addition, as we indicated earlier, this approach fails to recognize that the legal order serves the purpose of maintaining the system in all known types of societies, including those that claim to be Marxist/Communist/Socialist (Cox, 1975). As Klockars (1979) noted, “The leading figures of American Marxist criminology have not raised the details of Gulag or Cuban solutions to the problems of crime in America, nor have they seriously examined such solutions in states which legitimate them” (p. 477). Bohm (2001) added, “Today, it probably makes little sense to speak of capitalist and socialist societies anyway, because no pure societies of either type exist. (They probably never did.)” (p. 119).

**Feminism**

One reaction to conflict theory, which concentrated largely on crimes committed by males, is feminism. Feminism as an approach to studying crime and delinquency focuses on women’s experiences, typically in the areas of victimization, gender differences in crime, and differential treatment of women by the justice network. Some feminists focus on equal rights and equal participation for women, some focus on the ills of capitalist society, and others focus on the issue of patriarchal oppression (in the form of male control over sex, money, and power) that has resulted in second-class citizenship for women in our society. Traditional criminology has certainly largely ignored female crime, raising the issue of whether any of the theories of crime apply directly to women. Furthermore, there are clearly differences in the extent and nature of crime by gender, and there is a question as to whether or not current theories can explain these differences (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Naffine, 1996). Still, the focus on gender as a major determinant of delinquent and criminal behavior has been seriously questioned because there appears to be limited empirical support for the approach (Akers, 1994, p. 177; Bohm, 2001, p. 122).

**Control Theories**

Control theories assume that all of us must be held in check or “controlled” if we are to resist the temptation to commit criminal or delinquent acts. The types of systems used to control or check delinquent behavior fall into two categories: personal (internal) and social (external). The containment theory of Reckless (1961, 1967), for instance, emphasizes the importance of both inner controls and external pressures on self-concept. A poor self-concept is thought to increase the chances that a juvenile will turn to delinquency; a positive self-concept is seen as insulating the juvenile from delinquent activities. Negative self-concepts and low self-esteem have also been frequently noted as characteristics of those who abuse or neglect children (Marshall, Cripps, Anderson, & Cortoni, 1999; Shorkey & Armendariz, 1985).
Hirschi’s (1969) control theory places more emphasis on social factors (bonds and attachments) than on inner controls. For example, the term attachment is used to refer to the feelings one has toward other persons or groups. The stronger one’s attachment to nondelinquent others, the less likely one is to engage in delinquency. The same type of argument is applied to commitment (profits associated with conformity vs. losses associated with nonconformity), involvement (in conforming vs. nonconforming activities), and beliefs (in the conventional value system vs. some less conventional value system). Although these four components of control theory may vary independently, Hirschi maintained that in general they vary together. Strong positive ties in each of these four areas minimize the possibility of delinquency, whereas strong negative ties maximize the likelihood of delinquency. Hirschi’s formulation has encouraged considerable research, and although there is some empirical evidence to support portions of the control theory approach, this approach leaves unanswered a number of important questions. What is the exact nature of the relationship between self-concept and labeling? How is it that some juveniles who appear to be well insulated from negative attachments and bonds commit delinquent acts? Do such bonds and attachments themselves actually inhibit delinquent behavior, or are the bonds and attachments perceived by law enforcement and criminal justice personnel simply used to determine whether or not to take official action? Are there longitudinal data that support the approach? Attempts to answer some of these questions are ongoing. In a reanalysis of Hirschi’s original data, Costello and Vowell (1999) found support for Hirschi’s theory. May (1999) found that social-control theory has a significant association with juvenile firearms possession in school. But Greenberg’s (1999) reanalysis of Hirschi’s data found that social-control theory has only limited explanatory power.

In 1990, Hirschi collaborated with Michael Gottfredson to develop what they referred to as a “general theory of crime” in which they sought to examine criminal conduct in the more general context of deviant behavior that they regarded as simply one form of behavior, not a distinct category (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). From this perspective, crime and delinquency are viewed as routine behaviors that are poorly planned, not very lucrative, and largely localized geographically. In general, these authors viewed crime as a result of low self-control that results in a desire for immediate gratification. Furthermore, they indicated that the degree of self-control one possesses is determined largely by child-rearing practices.

The general theory developed by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) has been criticized on several grounds but has provoked a good deal of empirical research. For example, Piquero, Gomez-Smith, and Langton (2004) used Gottfredson and Hirschi’s notion of self-control to examine whether an individual perceives sanctions as fair or unfair and how perceptions of sanctions and low self-control influence the perceived anger that may result from being singled out for sanctioning. Piquero and colleagues also examined the relationship among self-control, perceptions of fairness, and anger. Their results suggest that individuals with low self-control are more likely to perceive sanctions as being unfair and that this combination leads to anger for being singled out for punishment.

Church, Wharton, and Taylor (2009) investigated family stressors, family cohesion, and nonfamilial relationships in an assessment of differential-association (discussed earlier in this chapter) and control theories and found that only family stressors had a direct effect on delinquency. They also found that being male was the strongest predictor of delinquency. Overall these findings
appear to provide little support for control theory. Research on control theory and its impact, if any, on delinquency continues.

**Integrated Theories**

Numerous attempts have been made to combine two or more preexisting theories in an attempt to provide more comprehensive explanations (integrated theories) of criminal and delinquent behavior. The resulting theories or conceptual schemes are far too numerous to discuss here, but we mention a few of the more prominent attempts. Developmental and life course theory (DLC) attempts to explain how antisocial behavior develops, how different risk factors exist at different stages of life, and the differential effects of life events on antisocial behavior (Farrington, 2003; Reid, 2006, pp. 195–198). Moffitt (1993, 2006) developed a life course-persistent/adolescence-limited theory that attempts to explain two types of antisocial behavior using biological, psychological, and sociological approaches. According to Moffitt, antisocial behavior either persists across the life course or is limited to adolescence. Those that persist in crime suffer from neuropsychological problems that begin in prenatal development and lead to psychological disorders during childhood that facilitate the delinquent behaviors. Offenders that persist across the life course also grow up in disadvantaged neighborhoods and suffer from inadequate parenting (Moffitt, 1993, 2006). According to Hagan and Parker (1999, p. 259), for example, life course-capitalization theory proposes that low intergenerational educational aspirations and educational underachievement is disadvantageous to adolescents and that subsequent adult and parenting problems may well result from this disadvantage. Thus a parent’s educational disinvestment as an adolescent leads to dropping out of school, teen parenthood, unemployment, and marriage and parenting problems, all of which contribute to the intergenerational causation of delinquency among children and adolescents.

Interactional theory represents an attempt to combine social learning, social bonding, and social-structural theories (Thornberry, 1987). This theory holds that, like all other human social behavior, delinquency is the result of interactions among individuals and is the result of the learning and exchanges that occur in such interaction. Thus, understanding interaction among juveniles and their parents, siblings, peers, gang members, school personnel, and others is critical. Interaction with gang members, for example, may increase the level of delinquent behavior among new members, but those who leave the gang and interact with others who may be less criminally inclined become less likely to engage in behaviors encouraged by the gang.

Hayes (1997) notes that labeling, differential-association, social-learning, and social-control theory all provide useful information in the delinquency process. None of these theories, however, accounts for the entire process. Hayes incorporated elements of labeling, differential-association, social-learning, and social-control theories in an attempt to explain both initial and continued delinquency. Using data from the National Youth Survey, Hayes found that the new model showed that weakened social controls increase opportunities for associating with delinquent peers, learning delinquent behaviors, and committing initial delinquent acts. Initial delinquency increases the likelihood of being observed and negatively labeled by parents. These labels, in turn, increase the likelihood of future delinquency (Hayes, p. 161). The author concludes that these findings support the use of integrated theory in the study of juvenile delinquency.
Other integrated theories that you may wish to examine further include network analysis, control balance theory, and strain/control theories. As noted, integrated theories represent attempts to improve on our understanding of delinquent behavior and have inspired considerable research. Ultimately, those proposing such theories are searching for commonalities among existing theories that will form the background for a more comprehensive theory. This is important because, as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, all criminological theories have implications for criminal justice policy and practice (Akers & Sellers, 2004).

**SUMMARY**

We have provided a brief overview of some of the attempts to explain delinquency. It should be clear at this point that, using our definition of theory, few if any of these attempts have resulted in explanations that are scientifically sound. Many have been more or less discarded over time, and others continue to provide leads that need to be pursued. Bridging the gap between theory and practice is crucial to controlling delinquency and to improving the juvenile justice network. The input of practitioners is extremely useful in testing our theoretical statements. The benefits to be reaped, if and when a sound theoretical base is established, are considerable. We can no longer afford to ignore the importance of theory, nor can we continue to rely on commonsense notions of causation that are, as we have seen, very often inaccurate.

Unlike demonology, which has been largely discounted as an explanation of delinquency today, the classical school of criminology remains important as a basis of our current criminal and juvenile justice networks. Public opinion continues to indicate a belief that severe punishment will deter crime/delinquency, and legislatures around the country continue to pass “get tough” measures in the hope of meeting public expectations. As a result, there is pressure for more arrests, more convictions, and more severe punishment, none of which seem to have accomplished the desired goal, perhaps because of the lack of certainty and swiftness of punishment. Even capital punishment, which certainly deters the subject, has been shown to have little
effect on others, and the procedures currently employed are fraught with difficulties that have led to moratoria in some states.

Biological theories of causation raise some important issues. Although biological factors do not appear to be a direct cause of delinquency, we must remain constantly alert to the possibility that physiological malfunctions or abnormalities may be important in assessing juveniles’ behaviors. For example, a juvenile who has become increasingly aggressive, irrational, and uncooperative with others could conceivably be suffering from brain damage (e.g., tumor, lesion) that causes these symptoms. In cases where physical ailments or the use of intoxicants might be related to delinquency, it is obviously best to provide for appropriate medical intervention.

There is always, of course, the possibility that some emotional or psychological difficulty may be present in a specific delinquent. The evidence in support of personality disturbances as causes of delinquency is ambiguous at best, due in part to measurement and definitional difficulties. Nevertheless, the psychological approach to explaining delinquency remains important because psychotherapy of some type—individual or group therapy or counseling—is often prescribed as treatment within correctional facilities. Whether or not such treatment is likely to help remains an empirical question, but some successes are reported.

The sociological school views delinquency as a result of social interaction, learned in much the same way as nondelinquent behavior. According to this approach, much of the juvenile justice network makes sense, but some does not. For example, if labeling is an important factor in delinquency, attempts to keep juvenile proceedings confidential makes sense. However, it does not make sense, within this theoretical context, to house minor or first-time delinquents in large institutions with more serious delinquents from whom they are likely to learn additional delinquent behaviors. This may account for our failure to rehabilitate many delinquents in such settings. In addition, the sociological approach looks for causes of delinquency in society as well as in the individual. It may be that the only way to significantly reduce delinquency rates is to change some social policies such as those leading to educational and racial discrimination and unemployment. Finally, the sociological approach suggests methods of control and rehabilitation that do not require the death penalty, the practice of eugenics, or complete restructuring of the individual’s personality. This approach suggests that positive reinforcement, administered in surroundings where the juvenile lives and by those with whom the juvenile regularly interacts, may provide more positive results than do many techniques currently employed. Although the sociological approach is not a panacea, it does provide a number of leads for future research and treatment that may prove to be beneficial provided that public and agency cooperation can be obtained.

Finally, the search for new and better theories of delinquency continues in attempts to combine the tenets of different theories into more comprehensive theories that do a better job of explaining delinquent behavior. Ultimately, the success or failure of policies and practices in the field of juvenile delinquency is determined by the accuracy of explanations for its existence and persistence.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What is a scientific theory, and why is the development of such theories crucial to our understanding and control of delinquency?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of our current juvenile justice network in terms of the learning theory and labeling theory approaches? Discuss some of the reasons why the classical approach to the control of delinquency has been, and continues to be, ineffective. Why do you think the approach has remained popular in spite of its ineffectiveness? What contemporary theories are extensions of the classical approach?

3. What are the major strengths and weaknesses of the psychological approach to understanding and controlling delinquency? What has been Freud’s impact on the treatment of delinquency?

4. Is there evidence in support of the biological school of delinquency causation? Discuss some of the attempts to demonstrate a relationship between biology and delinquent behavior.

5. What is your overall assessment of the sociological approach to understanding and controlling delinquency? Which of the various attempts in this school do you think does the best job of explaining delinquency? The worst job?

Suggested Readings


