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Ohlin: Delinquency and Opportunity

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As the United States turned into the decade of the 1960s, an increasing amount of attention was paid to the issue of social and economic inequality. President John F. Kennedy spoke of a “new frontier,” while Lyndon B. Johnson called for a “great society.” The civil rights movement was taking hold and would soon capture the attention of the entire society. The time was ripe for a book that linked delinquency to disadvantaged youths’ denial of opportunity. Such a thesis resonated with the times. Thus, when Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin published *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs* in 1960, it met with a receptive audience. They were conveying a message that those inside and outside criminology were prepared to hear.

Gang delinquency is not spread evenly across American society. Cloward and Ohlin thus explained that *Delinquency and Opportunity* “is about delinquent gangs, or subcultures, as they are typically found among adolescent males in lower-class areas of large urban centers” (p. 1). In their view, accounting for the concentration of gangs in this social location meant that two related, but distinct, issues had to be addressed.

First, they wished to know why the motivation for delinquency was high in lower-class urban areas. To answer this question, they relied on the work of Robert K. Merton, whose paradigm is often referred to as strain theory (Hirschi, 1969). Second, they wished to know why delinquency assumed a collective form and manifested certain subcultural content. To answer this question, they relied on the work of theorists in the Chicago School of criminology such as Edwin Sutherland, Clifford Shaw, and Henry McKay. The consolidation of these two perspectives was important because Merton's work and the Chicago School were generally seen as rival explanations of criminal behavior. Cloward and Ohlin were offering a fresh integrated theory of gang delinquency, which increased its significance still further. Notably, they dedicated *Delinquency and Opportunity* to both Merton and Sutherland.

The Dark Side of the American Dream

Some explanations of crime, such as control theory, assume that people will naturally commit crimes because it is human nature to seek immediate gratification and pursue self-interest through the easiest means available, which at times would include

engaging in a criminal act (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969). Strain theories, however, reject this view. For them, crime is an adaptation to a problem of adjustment—a purposeful attempt to cope with a difficulty that is inducing pressure into an individual's life. These situations create a motivation to do something to relieve the intense feelings of strain. In this sense, criminal motivation is socially created and not hardwired into human nature.

In this context, it is perhaps understandable why Cloward and Ohlin would initially ask, “To what problems of adjustment might this pattern be a response? Under what conditions will persons experience strains and tensions that lead to delinquent subcultures?” (p. 32). To address this explanatory problem, they turned to the main theory of their day that illuminated the origins of strain and why it might be higher for those in the lower echelon of American society. This was Merton's paradigm.

Merton argued that the United States is characterized by a unique cultural prescription, which he captured with the construct of the American Dream. This set of cultural beliefs teaches that in the United States, everyone can be economically successful. It instructs all Americans to strive for material success, suggesting that hard work will bring high rewards. The American Dream has positive effects, because it creates strong desires for upward mobility and allows some people who might otherwise have been mired in the bottom of [p. 171 ↓] society to achieve enormous wealth. But this dream also has a dark side.

The difficulty is that the American Dream preaches universal success—that is, that it tells everyone that economic mobility not only is to be cherished but also is within reach. But this dream confronts a harsh reality: the unequal American class structure. Opportunities for success are not universal but differentially available. Not everyone can become a physician, lawyer, or corporate CEO. Only a quarter of the population will earn a college degree. Some people will never rise above low-paying jobs; others will struggle with unemployment. For those starting in the lower class, the American Dream inflicts an especially high cost. With the farthest to rise to reach success, they are the most likely to fall short.

Aspiring to success but being denied this goal constitutes a serious problem of adjustment, particularly for those in the lower class. The gap between what individuals

are led to desire and what they can realistically achieve ensures that they will fail to reach the goals they are taught to cherish. In Merton's view, this situation imposes socially induced pressures or strains on individuals. These strains in turn create the motivation to seek an adaptation, which could include pursuing success through criminal or deviant conduct.

For Cloward and Ohlin, the failure to reach success goals starts during adolescence. For inner-city youths, it is readily apparent that they will not be moving on to college and into a valued high-paying profession. As they peek into the future, they see a life of limited opportunity and impoverishment. Their differential involvement in delinquency thus does not lie in their inherent natures but in the everyday “normal” functioning of American society that preaches a dream that they cannot attain. Faced with an enduring problem of adjustment, they seek to cope with the intense feelings that envelop them. The delinquent gang offers one way of surmounting the pressures they face.

Adapting to Strain: The Collective Response

Cloward and Ohlin thus asserted that the denial of legitimate opportunity is the chief source of delinquent motivation in American society and is especially criminogenic among the lower class. Again, this message struck a chord with many Americans in the 1960s who were sensitized by presidents and protesters to the pervasive denial of equal opportunity that existed in the United States. The very title of their book, *Delinquency and Opportunity*, ensured that it would earn considerable attention.

The downside to this acclaim, however, was that many readers focused exclusively on this half of Cloward and Ohlin's theory—the one that explained why youths are motivated to break the law. In so doing, they neglected Cloward and Ohlin's admonition that a complete theory must also explain the selection of deviant adaptations—that is, why youngsters respond to socially induced pressures in one way rather than another. As a result, their perspective was reduced to a simple strain theory of delinquency: Youths denied success would experience strain and in turn become delinquent (Cullen,

1988; see also Hirschi, 1969). This has limited theoretical development in criminology (Cullen, 1984).

Indeed, in Cloward and Ohlin's view, "perhaps the largest area of conceptual confusion in the literature on delinquency is the failure to distinguish clearly" between questions "regarding the origin of pressures toward delinquency" and questions regarding "the selection ... of different solutions" to these pressures (p. 34). They cautioned that to "account for the development of pressures toward deviance does not sufficiently explain why these pressures result in one deviant solution rather than another" (p. 34).

Clearly, Merton's strain theory addressed the origin of pressures, but it did not illuminate systematically why individuals would make any given adaptation to their problem of adjustment. In short, it was not a theory of the selection of deviant adaptations. A separate or second theory was needed for this explanatory problem—one that would "identify certain intervening variables and show how they tend to channel adjustment difficulties into one or another mode of adaptation" (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960, p. 39).

In *Delinquency and Opportunity*, Cloward and Ohlin thus tackled the problem of why lower-class urban male youths turn to a collective solution to their problem of adjustment of being denied legitimate access to success. They tried to set forth the "intervening variables" that channeled these youths into gangs. Two factors seemed particularly important in making gangs possible.

[p. 172 ↓]

First, youths blocked from success goals potentially experience a "process of alienation" in which they withdraw their allegiance from the norms stating that success must only be pursued through legitimate means such as hard work and education (p. 110). These youths come to see their goal blockage as due not to their own personal failings but to unjust social arrangements that prevent their advancement. This interpretation is more available to those mired in the lower class, especially minority group members, who face structural barriers. In any event, externalizing the blame for failure "cancels out the individual's obligation to the established system" (p. 118). It also prompts youths to seek out others who share their view of the world of failure they inhabit. A collective response becomes possible because this association provides each youth

with “encouragement and reassurance” from those “who have faced similar experiences and who will support one another in common attitudes of alienation from the official system” (p. 126). Concerns about guilt are nullified by this process of alienation and affiliation. The youths develop an “emerging deviant subculture” that “acquires a set of beliefs and values which rationalize the shift in norms as a natural response to a trying situation” (p. 132).

By contrast, those who perceive their failure as due to their own deficiencies cannot cut their ties to the conventional normative order. They see themselves “as unworthy and inferior” and must deal with these “psychic consequences” of their situation (p. 125). They may seek solutions to this problem of adjustment, which may in fact be deviant in nature. But if so, they are likely to see their solution as personal and not seek out support from others. They also are at risk of “strong feelings of guilt” as they pursue their solitary deviant acts (p. 126). They will not be candidates to join a delinquent gang.

Second and more practical, “collective solutions require a set of conditions in which communication among alienated persons can take place” (p. 139). If there are “barriers to communication,” then sufficient interaction will not occur to allow for the formation of a gang with subcultural values supportive of crime. Lower-class urban status, however, is conducive to such interaction because a large number of youths with the same problem of adjustment are in close proximity and have the chance to become aware of one another's disaffection and sense of injustice. Further, once a group starts to form, it is likely to be the recipient of “invidious definitions and punitive responses” from the “law-abiding adult community” (p. 142). Ironically, this negative reaction fosters solidarity among the youths and makes the group “more acutely aware of its isolation from the conventional community” (p. 142).

Explaining Types of Delinquent Subcultures

Cloward and Ohlin might have ended their theory at this point. However, they proceeded to make another observation that required further theoretical explanation: Not all gangs are the same. There is subcultural differentiation: Some gangs are focused on criminal enterprises, some on violence, and some on drug use. Cloward and

Ohlin labeled these gangs “criminal,” “conflict,” and “retreatist.” They argued that the nature of the gang is largely shaped by neighborhood organization.

Cloward and Ohlin placed their analysis of types of gangs or subcultures within Cloward's (1959) broader theory of illegitimate means. Well-schooled in Merton's theory, Cloward accepted the idea that access to the legitimate means to attain success goals was differentially available in the class structure of American society. His key contribution, however, was to broaden this insight to include differential access to illegitimate means. From reading the works of the Chicago School (e.g., Shaw, 1930; Sutherland, 1937), he realized that criminal roles had to be learned and then had to have the opportunity to be discharged. To be a professional thief, for example, a person has to be taught the tricks of the trade (e.g., how to pull off a con job or sophisticated heist) and then has to have compatriots who will assist in undertaking the criminal pursuit. Phrased more generally, Cloward thus suggested that illegitimate means involves both a learning structure and a performance structure. Any particular criminal act cannot be completed if a person cannot learn the skills and values required to do the act and then have the opportunity to use these abilities to victimize a person or place. In short, the selection of a criminal adaptation to strain depends on the availability of illegitimate means.

In *Delinquency and Opportunity*, Cloward and Ohlin reiterated these points. They noted that “the [p. 173 ↓] aspiration to be a physician is hardly enough to explain the fact of becoming a physician; there is much that transpires between the aspiration and the achievement. This is no less true of a person who wants to be a successful criminal” (p. 145). Those criminally motivated thus cannot simply select to deviate whatever way they wish. Just as an individual must have access to the legitimate means (e.g., education) to become a physician, so too does the availability of illegitimate means determine what criminal the person might become. “Having decided that he ‘can't make it legitimately,’” noted Cloward and Ohlin, a motivated offender “cannot simply choose among an array of illegitimate means, all equally available to him” (p. 145). Not everyone with a problem of adjustment can adapt by becoming a white-collar criminal or by becoming a drug dealer. These options are not equally available. Accordingly, a complete theory must illuminate why some people in the social structure have access to some criminal roles but not others. Otherwise, the selection of an adaptation to strain is left unexplained.

Equipped with this perspective, Cloward and Ohlin sought to explain why there are certain types of gangs. They proposed that the subcultural content of gangs is not randomly distributed but determined by neighborhood context. Depending on the neighborhood in which lower-class adolescent males are situated, they can develop a particular type of gang but not another.

Cloward and Ohlin observed that some urban slum neighborhoods are organized for crime. There are ongoing illegal networks that control criminal activities. Older offenders know and are socially integrated with younger offenders and, in turn, teach them the skills of the trade. In this context, the delinquent gangs that arise are largely oriented toward criminal enterprises. Any tendencies by gang members to fight or otherwise use violence are controlled by those operating the illegal rackets in the community who do not want to attract police attention.

By contrast to these criminal gangs, conflict subcultures arise in disorganized slum neighborhoods that lack integrated criminal networks. These communities do not provide the illegitimate means needed to learn and perform criminal roles. Youths in these areas are thus “cut off from institutionalized channels, criminal as well as legitimate” (p. 175). Denied access to success in both opportunity structures, they “must rely upon their own resources for solving this problem of adjustment” (p. 175). As Cloward and Ohlin noted, “these adolescents seize upon the manipulation of violence as a route to status not only because it provides a way of expressing pent-up angers and frustrations but also because they are not cut off from violence from the vicissitudes of birth” (p. 175). The willingness to use violence does not require connections or elaborate technical expertise but only the “heart” to “risk injury or death in the search for ‘rep’” (p. 175). This violence is often demonstrated—and status achieved—in gang warfare in defense of turf and when the group's respect is challenged. The violence is not curbed because of the absence of adults, whether in the conventional or criminal sphere, sufficiently organized to exercise informal social control over gang members.

Finally, Cloward and Ohlin identified a third type of gang, the retreatist subculture whose main focus is on drug use. The term *retreatist* was borrowed from Merton, who had previously used it in a typology of adaptations that he had outlined. For Cloward and Ohlin, those who fall into this category are “double failures” (pp. 179–184). They are unable to be successful through either legitimate or illegitimate means. Their social

disadvantage limits their access to conventional avenues for upward mobility. But they face the added burden of failing to “find a place for themselves in criminal or conflict subcultures” (p. 182). Even violence is not an option, because they tend to be poor at its exercise and hence earn little prestige. As they retreat from this world of failure, they turn to drugs “as a solution” to their “status dilemma” (p. 183). Some of them also seek out the company of other “double failures” and find comfort in a gang of fellow drug users.

Conclusion

Cloward and Ohlin's *Delinquency Opportunity* earned the status of a classic book in the history of criminology. It was required reading for a generation and is cited in textbooks today. Even so, its continuing influence on the criminological imagination has been undermined by two considerations.

First, there were a variety of tests of the strain portion of their work—the thesis that pressures [p. 174 ↓] brought on by denial of success goals place youngsters at risk for delinquency. These tests yielded mixed results, creating an impression that their strain thesis had been falsified. In reality, most tests inadequately operationalized the theory's core elements—especially denial of legitimate means—and, as a result, produced misleading conclusions (Burton & Cullen, 1992).

Second, subsequent research did not discover the pure subcultures hypothesized by Cloward and Ohlin. Most gangs appeared to be a mixture of criminal activity, violence, and drug use. This erroneous prediction unfortunately led scholars to ignore the broader theoretical point that Cloward and Ohlin were making: the role that access to illegitimate means plays in controlling the selection of criminal roles that motivated offenders may select. The failure to address this issue remains a weakness in contemporary criminological theorizing (Cullen, 1984).

Finally, Cloward and Ohlin did not remain as university faculty members detached from the “real world.” Soon after the publication of *Delinquency and Opportunity*, Ohlin assumed a post formulating delinquency policy in the Kennedy administration. Meanwhile, Cloward, who would spend his career on the faculty of Columbia

University, helped to sponsor a delinquency prevention program in New York City called Mobilization for Youth. The program proved controversial because it sought to provide opportunities for youngsters by attacking the political and social inequalities that underlie crime-producing communities (e.g., poor schools, exclusion of minorities from unions, tolerance of slum landlords). Cloward would spend much of the rest of his academic career not as a criminologist but studying how poor people might achieve greater social justice.

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See also

- [Agnew, Robert: General Strain Theory](#)
- [Cloward, Richard A.: The Theory of Illegitimate Means](#)
- [Cohen, Albert K.: Delinquent Boys](#)
- [Merton, Robert K.: Social Structure and Anomie](#)

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