

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Cohen, Albert K.: Delinquent Boys

Contributors: Gray Cavender
Editors: Francis T. Cullen & Pamela Wilcox
Book Title: Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory
Chapter Title: "Cohen, Albert K.: Delinquent Boys"
Pub. Date: 2010
Access Date: September 12, 2014
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9781412959186
Online ISBN: 9781412959193
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n50>
Print pages: 180-184

©2010 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n50>

Albert K. Cohen's *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* offered a theoretical explanation for delinquency gangs in the United States. Cohen explained the existence of gangs and why boys join them. He argued that working-class boys join gangs because gangs provide a sense of status or self-esteem that would otherwise be unavailable to them in a society dominated by middle-class values. As a delinquent subculture, the gang is a solution to problems of adjustment encountered by working-class boys.

Of course, theories exist in a context; they reflect their time. This entry discusses that context and elaborates on the criminological theory that Cohen offered in *Delinquent Boys*.

Context

In the mid-20th century when Cohen was a student, criminologists were interested in theories of crime and delinquency. They tried to explain why people committed crime and how such acts were distributed across various segments of society. There were many explanations, but two of the predominant theories were Edwin Sutherland's theory of differential association and Robert Merton's theory of social structure and anomie.

Sutherland's theory reflected the interactionist tradition of the University of Chicago. He argued that criminal behavior, like other behaviors, is learned in intimate group interactions. Learning includes rationalizations as well as techniques for [p. 180 ↓] committing crime. People become delinquent if the definitions favorable to law violation that they learn exceed those that are unfavorable to law violation. In contrast, Merton's theory was grounded in the anomie tradition of the French sociologist, Émile Durkheim. Durkheim's anomie theory posits that society exists in a condition of equilibrium so long as people's goals and the means for attaining those goals are compatible. A condition of anomie or normlessness occurs if the goals and means get out of balance. According to Merton's modification of anomie theory, people are encouraged to pursue the American Dream, a goal that includes economic success. Although our ideology assumes that the means of attaining this dream are available to all citizens, in fact the means are unequally distributed in society. Members of the lower classes are disadvantaged in

terms of the means that are available to them. Those who lack the means to attain the American Dream employ various adaptations to deal with the ensuing stress. Crime is one adaptation: people may commit crime to attain the dream of economic success.

Cohen was exposed to the anomie tradition as an undergraduate student at Harvard University. Although initially a political science major, Cohen shifted to sociology after the first meeting of his first sociology class. In a 1993 interview conducted by Gray Cavender, he said that he was captivated by the image of sociology as the study of cultures and civilizations. Upon graduation, Cohen decided to pursue graduate studies. Sociology, especially theory, excited him; it was something he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

He transferred to Indiana University to pursue an MA degree in sociology. Sutherland was a professor there. Sutherland made the graduate students in his seminars feel as if they were engaged in an important intellectual enterprise. He presented his ideas and invited the students to critique them. Cohen studied differential association theory in a seminar with Sutherland. Cohen understood that kids learned delinquent ideas in group interactions, but he wanted to know why these ideas were there in the first place. Where do they come from? He asked, but Sutherland (and differential association theory) had no answer to this question. The exchange stuck with Cohen, and after he had graduated from Indiana University and returned to Harvard to pursue a Ph.D., that question became a focal point of his dissertation. He wanted to develop a theory that explained why boys joined gangs, but also how the gang came to exist in the first place.

Once he framed his research questions, Cohen read extensively about the nature and the extent of juvenile delinquency, as well as other work—for example, research about crowd behavior. Cohen's dissertation was thus a product of the time: It was informed by the literature on delinquency and offered a theory that explained those data. Based upon his reading of the literature, he adopted several assumptions that underlay his theory: He assumed that juvenile delinquency was mainly confined to working-class boys who lived in large cities. The data convinced Cohen that these boys' delinquent acts were malicious in nature and were not designed to produce an economic profit.

Cohen's dissertation offered a theory of the delinquent gang subculture and why boys joined it. The key concepts in his theory include working-class culture, middle-

class culture, subculture, school, strain, adjustment problems, self-esteem, reaction formation, and non-utilitarian delinquency.

Cohen's Theory of Delinquency and the Delinquent Subculture

The values and attitudes that kids learn are transmitted through the culture in which they are raised; the family is an important institution in this process. Kids from middle-class families learn to compete for status in terms of middle-class values, which include a premium on ambition, individual responsibility, rational planning, civility, deferred gratification, a rejection of violence, and a respect for property. In contrast, working-class boys learn to be more easy-going; they lack discipline and are governed by their impulses and desire to have fun, not by long-term goals. Fighting is a more acceptable way to settle disputes in working-class culture. The problem is that middle-class values are the dominant evaluative criteria in society. The situation reaches a crisis in school.

U.S. schools are an important site of democracy: Kids are evaluated as individuals and according to the same criteria. This seems fair, but in practice it means that middle-class teachers use middle-class standards to evaluate working-class boys. Those boys are evaluated on dimensions that [p. 181 ↓] are not a part of their learned repertoire of behavior; indeed, much of their socialization is at odds with what is expected of them in school. As a result, they would be viewed by their teachers as discipline problems and were likely to fail in school. When this happened, the boys experienced the stress or strain that came from a loss of self-esteem: They suffered adjustment problems. They will be in the market for a solution to this dilemma, and the delinquent subculture offered a solution.

Cohen also wanted to provide a theory of the delinquent subculture—how it got started and what kept it going. He argued that the delinquent subculture emerged as a response to working-class boys' problems of adjustment and loss of status that occurred when they failed to meet middle-class standards. Cohen posited that the delinquent subculture was a joint solution to a joint problem: It responded to the problems of adjustment by providing new evaluative criteria that working-class boys

could meet. The gang was the antithesis of middle-class culture; it turned middle-class norms upside-down. If middle-class values privileged rational planning, respect for property, and eschewing aggression, the criteria for status in the gang included aggression, impulsiveness, and a disrespect for the property of others. These inverted criteria explained why gang activities were so malicious and negativistic. Cohen characterized gang activities as non-utilitarian; that is, they were not designed for profit so much as to express the rejection of middle-class values.

Cohen noted, however, that the goal of the American Dream was deeply ingrained in all sectors of U.S. society, including the working class. So, although working-class boys had suffered a loss of status by failing to attain the dream and sought out a subculture that offered status according to criteria that they could meet, they still experienced frustration. Cohen employed the notion of a “reaction formation” as a way of understanding how working-class boys handled this frustration. Reaction formation is a psychological concept—a defense mechanism—that relates to the alleviation of anxiety. It is characterized by an exaggerated and inappropriate response to situations that generate anxiety. The irrational, malicious, non-utilitarian behavior of delinquent boys is a case of reaction formation; they reject in an exaggerated fashion any remnants of middle-class values.

The gang employed status criteria that the working-class boys could meet; hence, they enjoyed status in the gang. Of course, gang activities further separated them from mainstream society, reinforcing solidarity in the delinquent subculture. Thus, the emergence of the delinquent subculture and working-class boys’ participation in it were a result of the life conditions of the working-class. Cohen noted an irony here: Those values that are at the core of the American way of life and are the major determinants of respectability in our society help to generate juvenile delinquency and the delinquent subculture.

Cohen returned to Indiana University as a professor and completed the dissertation in 1951. He reworked his dissertation and published it as *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*. It was reviewed in many academic journals and across several disciplines. Several of the reviews commented on the book’s clear writing and its freedom from academic jargon. Cohen credited Sutherland for this writing style. Sutherland directed his master’s thesis at Indiana University. When Cohen submitted his initial thesis

chapters to Sutherland, he received one page that Sutherland had re-written several days later. Sutherland had attached a note that asked what, if anything, was in the first several pages of the thesis draft that was not said in a more straightforward manner in his one-page re-write. In a 2008 interview with Gray Cavender and Nancy Jurik, Cohen said that Sutherland taught him to avoid a boring, jargon-filled style of writing that sometimes characterizes academic writing.

Cohen's work was a product of its time. It drew from Sutherland, with whom he studied, the importance of the cultural transmission of values, including those that can produce delinquent behavior. It reflected Merton's view that the American Dream is not equally available to all sectors and that delinquent behavior may be a response to that situation. Cohen also studied with Merton and understood that one purpose of Merton's version of anomie theory was to explain the distribution of criminality in society.

Critique

Despite its theoretical sophistication and its popularity, there have been criticisms of Cohen's theory. First, Cohen (and Merton) took as “given” the [p. 182 ↓] law's definitions of crime. In this, he adopted Durkheim's view that society was characterized by a consensus of values that were reflected in the criminal law. Cohen's mentor, Sutherland, actually did question the definitions of law, for example, in his classic work on white-collar crime. Later, critical criminologists addressed where law comes from and whose interests it represents.

A second criticism pertains to Cohen's characterizations of the differences between middle-class and working-class boys—that is, that middle-class boys have ambition and are civil, but that working-class boys lack discipline, are disrespectful, and fight a lot. At the time, this was a standard view of the working-class and of crime as mainly a working-class phenomenon. The view was reflected in Merton's theory and in plays and films such as *West Side Story*. Obviously, not all working-class kids became delinquents. Cohen understood this, but did not explain why some working-class kids did and others did not join gangs.

Third, Cohen saw delinquency as a phenomenon of boys. This assumption reflected the delinquency literature and also dominant views about women at the time, including how girls and women seek status. Subsequent criminologists, such as Jody Miller, have added an in-depth understanding of girl delinquents, girl gangs, or women's criminality more generally. Other criminologists, such as James Messerschmidt, rely on newer theories of gender to explain the relationship between different forms of masculinities and violence.

Cohen's theory appeared in the 1950s, and contemporary research into gang activity reflects dimensions that have changed with the times. Martin Sanchez Jankowski demonstrates that many gang activities (e.g., drug dealing) are designed for profit and that even malicious activities are utilitarian in nature. Others have noted that gang membership is not limited to boys; members may remain in a gang for many years. Others note that contemporary gangs often reflect racial/ethnic groupings or, in some cases, a form of political purpose (e.g., skinhead gangs).

Cohen's Theory in Perspective

Cohen offered an important theory of juvenile delinquency. His theory addressed two issues: why boys join a gang, and how there is a gang available to join. His explanation bridged two of the dominant theories of his day: differential association theory and social structure and anomie theory. Viewed more broadly in terms of a history of ideas, Cohen bridged two major sociological traditions: the interactionist tradition of the University of Chicago and the anomie tradition of Merton.

Cohen offered an important modification of Merton's approach. In Merton's theory, the adaptations to the structural inability to attain the American Dream were somewhat individualistic. Although Cohen used concepts that are associated with psychology (e.g., adjustment problems, self-esteem, and reaction formation), his was a more sociological theory: The delinquent subculture and the boys who joined it both reflected the conditions of life in working-class culture. Moreover, although Cohen and Merton were criticized for their views on class, nonetheless they fostered a discussion of U.S. values, ideology, and the material conditions of social life.

There are many ways of categorizing criminological theories. Although Cohen's theory is often discussed in connection with differential association and social structure and anomie, it also is considered to be an important example of two other theoretical approaches: strain theory and subculture theory. Strain theory focuses on the anxiety produced by the disjuncture between culturally proscribed goals and the structural availability of the means to attain those goals; delinquency was a response to that strain. The response that Cohen explained—the emergence of the gang as a solution to the problem of adjustment that followed that strain—is the essence of subcultural theory. Strain and subcultural approaches were prominent traditions in criminological theory.

One critique of Cohen's theory is that its reliance on official data led to some misspecifications of the nature of delinquency. Although he relied on official data, Cohen understood their limitations. Because he was interested in the distribution of delinquent acts across various sectors of society, Cohen advocated that, in future research, representative samples be drawn of juvenile populations without regard to delinquent histories.

Cohen noted that, in terms of crime, criminologists usually try to explain who did it and why. He [p. 183 ↓] thought that the better question with respect to delinquency was “what made it happen.” He emphasized the need to know more about the frequency and spacing of delinquent acts, about their spirit and emotional tone, about the context of the act—what preceded, accompanied, or followed it—and, perhaps most important, about the collective or individual nature of the act. He thus offered an interactionist agenda for the study of crime, one that subsequent generations of criminologists have pursued: David Luckenbill's research on homicide as a situated transaction; Jack Katz's criminal life style; Gray Cavender, Nancy Jurik, and Cohen's analysis of the accounts offered in the Iran/Contra affair; Lois Presser's focus on the construction of criminal identities in interviewer/ex-con interactions; Vera Lopez's analysis of the embeddedness of delinquent events.

Cohen has enjoyed a distinguished career as a theoretical criminologist. In addition to his books and articles, he has been honored with awards and offices in numerous academic associations.

GrayCavender

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n50>

See also

- [Cloward, Richard A., and Lloyd E. Ohlin: Delinquency and Opportunity](#)
- [Merton, Robert K.: Social Structure and Anomie](#)
- [Short, James F., Jr.: Gangs and Group Processes](#)
- [Sutherland, Edwin H.: Differential Association Theory and Differential Social Organization](#)
- [Thrasher, Frederick M.: The Gang](#)

References and Further Readings

Cavender, G. An interview with Albert K. Cohen . *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 13 1–15. (1993).

Cavender, G. (2008, August 5–6). An interview with Albert K. Cohen conducted by G. Cavender & N. Jurik, Storrs, CT .

Cavender, G., Jurik, N., and Cohen, A. The baffling case of the smoking gun: The social ecology of political accounts in the Iran-Contra affair . *Social Problems* 40 152–166. (1993). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/sp.1993.40.2.03x0323k>

Chambliss, W., & Zatz, M. (1993). *Making law: The state, the law, and structural conditions* . Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Cohen, A. (1955). *Delinquent boys: The culture of the gang* . New York: Free Press.

Durkheim, É. (1964). *The division of labor in society* . New York: Free Press.

Katz, J. (1988). *Seductions of crime: Moral and sensual attractions of doing evil* . New York: Basic Books.

Lilly, R., Cullen, F. T., & Ball, R. (2007). *Criminological theory: Context and consequence* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lopez, V. Understanding adolescent property crime using a delinquent events perspective . *Deviant Behavior* 29 581–610. (2008). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01639620701839401>

Luckenbill, D. Criminal homicide as a situated transaction . *Social Problems* 25 176–186. (1977). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/sp.1977.25.2.03a00050>

Lynch, M., & Michalowski, R. (2005). *Crime, power, and identity: The new primer in radical criminology* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Criminal Justice Press.

Merton, R. Social structure and anomie . *American Sociological Review* 3 672–682. (1938). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2084686>

Messerschmidt, J. (2000). *Nine lives: Adolescent masculinities, the body, and violence* . Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Miller, J. (2008). *Getting played: African American girls, urban inequality, and gendered violence* . New York: Oxford University Press.

Presser, L. Violent offenders, moral selves: Constructing identities and accounts in the research interview . *Social Problems* 51 82–101. (2004). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/sp.2004.51.1.82>

Sanchez Jankowski, M. (1991). *Islands in the street: Gangs and American urban society* . Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sutherland, E. H. (1939). *Principles of criminology* (3rd ed.). Philadelphia: Lippincott.