

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Matza, David: Delinquency and Drift

Contributors: Elliott Currie
Editors: Francis T. Cullen & Pamela Wilcox
Book Title: Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory
Chapter Title: "Matza, David: Delinquency and Drift"
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.n163>
Print pages: 587-591

©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.n163>

David Matza's *Delinquency and Drift*, published in 1964, offers a complex and multilayered critique of what its author considered to be the dominant theories of juvenile delinquency at that time—indeed the dominant themes in criminology since the late 19th century. On one level, the book is a critique and reformulation of the major postwar subcultural theories of delinquency, including the work of Albert Cohen in *Delinquent Boys* and Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin in *Delinquency and Opportunity*. On another level, it represents an affirmation of some of the key themes of control theories of crime and delinquency, which were considerably less prominent in criminology in the 1950s and early 1960s than they are today. More generally, the work is a critique of what Matza describes as the core assumptions of criminological positivism, and a reaffirmation of some of the principles of the classical theories of Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham. Matza's (1964, p. 3) aim was not to throw out the positivist framework altogether, but to “incorporate modified versions” of the classical perspective into it. All of these levels are closely related and come together in a densely argued and closely reasoned theoretical analysis.

Explaining too Much Delinquency: The Critique of Positivism and Subculture Theories

Matza's main purpose in *Delinquency and Drift* is to “question and modify the positivist portrait” of the delinquent (p. 1). He believes that, since the time of Cesare Lombroso, positivism has dominated criminological thinking, even more than it has other branches of social science. “Modern criminology,” he writes, “is the positive school of criminology” (p. 3, emphasis added). But there are three crucially problematic assumptions in the dominant criminological positivism, all of which represent overreactions against the assumptions of the earlier Classical School.

The first of those problematic assumptions is what Matza calls the “primacy of the criminal actor rather than the criminal law” (p. 3) in the explanation of crime. Modern positivist criminology, unlike the Classical School, looks for the explanation

of delinquency in the motivation, character, and background of offenders. Oddly, however, despite its emphasis on the social institutions that influence the delinquent, positivist criminology leaves out one of the most important of them—the law itself. The relationship between legal institutions and delinquency, he argues, is complex, but crucial, since delinquency is, after all, an *infraction*—a violation of law—not simply an *action*. Indeed, committing infractions is the defining characteristic of the delinquent, and delinquency cannot be understood outside of that socio-legal reality. Hence, a key task of *Delinquency and Drift* is to “bring the legal system back in” as a crucial part of the explanation of delinquency.

The second problematic characteristic of positive criminology is its commitment to what Matza [p. 587 ↓] calls a “hard” version of determinism—a view that, he argues, has been largely abandoned in most of the rest of social science. Hard determinism assumes that delinquents break the law because they are powerfully compelled to do so by some factor or set of factors—whether those factors are biological, social, or cultural. This leads modern criminology to reject altogether the element of *choice* in the explanation of delinquency, and to embrace a vision of the criminal as entirely “constrained.” Against this, Matza poses what he calls a “soft” determinist view. Human beings possess “some leeway of action.” The delinquent is not simply pushed around by compelling forces, whether internal or external: “He acts, and his acts are variably free” (p. 11).

Positive criminology, relatedly, views the delinquent as fundamentally different from law-abiding people. That is its third crucially mistaken assumption, for the emphasis on difference, in Matza's view, is both exaggerated and empirically unsupported. Early versions of positivist criminology focused on the delinquent as biologically distinct from everyone else. By the 1960s, those views had been largely discredited. But they had been replaced by an equally problematic *sociological* sense of difference, best represented in those contemporary subcultural theories of delinquency that saw the delinquent as “constrained through an ethical code which makes his misdeeds mandatory” (p. 18). For Matza, the “central idea of the dominant sociological view of delinquency” (p. 19) is that the delinquent has different beliefs, and those beliefs are carried by a distinct and oppositional subculture.

Against this view, Matza offers once again a softer version of the distinctiveness of the beliefs of ordinary delinquents. He does not propose to reject subculture theories altogether, but to modify them in ways that, in his view, better fit what empirical research and common sense observation tell us about the nature of delinquency. He agrees that many delinquents do participate in a subculture of delinquency. But the subculture of delinquency is not a delinquent subculture, and the distinction is crucially important. Delinquents are neither as different from other people nor as committed to delinquency as the dominant theory suggests. Most of the time, delinquent youths are not actually engaging in delinquency. Much of what they do all day long is conventional, as are most of their beliefs. Moreover, the subculture's hold is usually time-limited. Most delinquents get out of delinquency, sooner rather than later, and the fact that they mature out of delinquency is difficult to square with the idea of powerfully constraining beliefs that impel the delinquent inexorably toward a life of lawbreaking. The delinquent subculture is permeated by conventional values and continually exposed to the influence of conventional adults—most notably parents. As a result, rather than being a distinctively oppositional culture, the subculture's precepts and customs are “delicately balanced between convention and crime” (p. 59).

Matza's critique of subculture theory, however, is not only that it exaggerates the oppositional character of the delinquent subculture, but also that it exaggerates how uniformly conventional the rest of the culture is. The dominant subculture theories, in his view, often seem to assume that the conventional culture is thoroughly Puritan, straight-laced, and unambiguously rejecting of all aspects of delinquency. But Matza argues that the dominant culture is actually far more complex and ambiguous than this. It is shot through with what he calls “subterranean” traditions that support rough and contrary behavior, including a kind of cowboy individualism and disrespect for authority that is not all that different from the defining themes of the subculture of delinquency. Delinquency itself, Matza argues, is a kind of subterranean tradition in American life, and one that is not entirely at odds with, or completely rejected by, the norms of the larger culture.

Drift and Neutralization

The potential delinquent, in short, is caught in between the conventional and the delinquent world. Delinquency is therefore not the result of special compulsions that distinguish the delinquent from others: rather, it involves a release from the ties that often—indeed most of the time—bind youths to the conventional moral order from which they are not nearly so distant as the reigning subcultural theories of delinquency assume. Once those ties are loosened, moreover, youths do not usually fall into a permanent state of delinquency, but are only episodically free from moral constraint. This is the essential meaning of Matza's central conception of *drift*. Drift results when social controls are [p. 588 ↓] loosened, but where those who are set loose from conventional controls have also not yet become “agents in their own behalf” (p. 29)—that is, capable of exerting a degree of control over their own destiny. The delinquent, Matza says, is not truly free in this state of drift, because freedom requires that modicum of control and agency. (Note that in stressing this element of agency, Matza is foreshadowing a renewed concern with the idea of agency, as an element of both committing crime and desisting from it, that emerged in criminological theory several decades later.)

This is not to deny the existence of underlying influences that nudge delinquents toward infraction, but those influences may be almost infinite, and their effect is gentle, rather than compelling—a notion that again fits with Matza's embrace of what he calls soft determinism. Many things might nudge youths into delinquency once they have been sufficiently freed from moral constraint; for that matter, many things might nudge them out of delinquency, and indeed usually do. What is constant is the “moral holiday” that permits the drift into delinquency.

Matza acknowledges that the concept of drift bears considerable resemblance to the original meaning of *anomie*. Both refer to a condition of unregulated choice, but Matza prefers to use the term *drift* rather than *anomie*—partly because the latter has taken on confusing multiple meanings since Émile Durkheim originated it at the turn of the century, and partly because he wants to emphasize the “episodic,” rather than constant, quality of the moral deregulation that, in his view, permits delinquency (p. 69).

Seen from another angle, drift is a condition that allows the idea of individual choice to come back into the picture, after having been banished by decades of positive criminology. The loosening of moral binds allows youths to choose to transgress, but does not make it certain that they will. Matza emphasizes that in most delinquent behavior there is what he calls an “ineradicable element of choice and freedom” (p. ix)—thus reclaiming a central element of classical theory, but again in a softer variant. He does not deny that some delinquents may indeed be constrained to commit infractions, but not many. The “ordinary” delinquent is one who drifts into delinquency—and also back again. Drift goes in both directions; it is movement between criminal and conventional action. The youth in drift is free to choose delinquency—and also free to choose conventional behavior.

But what causes drift to happen in the first place? How are the ties to the moral order loosened? Here Matza introduces the concept of *neutralization*, an idea developed in the 1950s with Gresham M. Sykes in an influential article called “Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency.” “Neutralization,” Matza writes, “enables drift. It is the process by which we are freed from the moral bind of the law (p. 176).” Since the delinquent, like everyone else, *usually* adheres to at least some of the legal norms that proscribe infraction, those norms must be neutralized, or nullified, in some way before he or she can be “freed” to break them. Neutralization is not simply the delinquent's after-the-fact rationalization of law breaking: it is an indispensable precondition for it.

What is highly original in Matza's treatment of neutralization is his argument that the law itself, along with other agencies of social control and indeed the modern discipline of criminology itself, contributes to this process of neutralization. In a sense, this argument is a variant of societal reaction theory, but one of a very specific kind. Where most such theories point to the role of labeling or maltreatment by the system in defining and cementing the delinquent in that role, Matza argues in essence that the law and other systems of control facilitate delinquency by helping delinquents to excuse it. The criminal law itself, Matza points out, contains a variety of justifications or exceptions that mitigate its force. The law “contains the seeds of its own neutralization” (p. 61), because it specifies a variety of conditions under which it may be violated, including the absence of intent, self-defense, and insanity.

But neutralization may also be specifically fostered by both the ideology and the routine organization and practices of the youth control system. The modern positivist view of the delinquent, based as it is on the central idea that people are compelled to crime by external forces, matches the view of the subculture of delinquency itself and provides one path toward neutralizing the law's bind. It is an ideology that, by locating the causes of delinquency in the delinquent's parents, their community, the larger society, or even victims, itself becomes a cause [p. 589 ↓] of delinquency. These views pervade the juvenile justice system, and, ironically, "are part of the causal nexus culminating in delinquency in that they bolster an otherwise precarious and brittle system of beliefs"—that is, the half-baked but consequential beliefs common to the subculture already (p. 95). Theories of delinquency rooted in hard determinism, then, are in Matza's view not only intellectually untenable but, in a real sense, are causes of the very behavior they seek to explain.

This effect is especially important since, according to Matza, it is precisely the sense of lacking control over their behavior that allows delinquents to drift—that promotes the sense of irresponsibility without which delinquency is unlikely. Matza here introduces the idea of the crucial role of fatalism in the trajectory into delinquency—the youths sense that they are an "effect," rather than a "cause," that they are driven by forces outside themselves. Crime is "extenuated and thus permissible" only when delinquents recall that they are "controlled by external forces" (p. 88) and thereby rendered irresponsible.

This sense of irresponsibility, to Matza, is an indispensable "immediate" cause of drift. But drifting into delinquency is also facilitated by another condition, which he describes as a state of readiness to slide into delinquency once the sense of irresponsibility has been established. This longer-term condition Matza calls the sense of injustice—a feeling that is critical to the loosening of moral bonds because it provides "another and more profound condition of neutralization" (p. 101). The delinquent's sense of injustice—an underlying "simmering resentment"—is fostered by the operation of the justice system itself, because the delinquent often perceives legal authorities as behaving in ways that are arbitrary and often flagrantly unjust.

Crucial to Matza's perspective is the argument that the delinquent's perception of structured injustice is not entirely wrong. It is fostered by certain fundamental features

of modern systems of juvenile justice—in particular, the rampant discretion that characterizes those systems, and, relatedly, the vagueness of the principles that guide their decisions about the fate of the youth who come before them. Unlike the legal definitions of offenses themselves, the criteria for judgment in a system of individualized justice, which is a core feature of modern youth control systems, are diffuse and subjective, relying on the “wisdom” of court officials to weigh a variety of factors in deciding a youth's fate, including many extra-legal characteristics of the youth themselves. This promotes the feeling that the system is inconsistent and arbitrary, and thus feeds the sense of injustice. The wide use of discretion may make the system work reasonably well for those who run it, but to the delinquent it appears as an injustice (p. 132).

The sense of injustice is also fed by the enforcement of status offenses, which, as participants in the subculture of delinquency thoroughly understand, are infractions that apply only to them—and which, moreover, are only sporadically and inconsistently enforced. Activities like drinking, skipping school, and generally being outside of adult control are not merely common within the subculture of delinquency, but are the core of it. Criminalizing them—especially on an inconsistent basis—is thus unsurprisingly a source of resentment.

The Role of Will

The sense of injustice bred by these aspects of the system, then, is a key underlying factor promoting the neutralization that enables the drift into delinquency. But Matza also argues that the process of neutralization alone does not fully explain why the youth chooses to break the law. Neutralization allows infraction but does not compel it. Something else needs to be present—something that does indeed provide the push into delinquency once the bonds to conventional behavior are loosened. Put in another way, the youth must in some sense want to do the crime and be sufficiently freed from constraint to do it. To provide that essential part of the explanation, Matza, again reaching back into classical criminology, introduces the notion of “will.” Without will, drift will not result in crime. But in contrast to the classical view, Matza does not suggest that the will to crime is an inherent aspect of human nature that predictably emerges when

the “lid” of social control is taken off. Rather, the will to crime is invoked under certain conditions, which Matza labels “preparation” and “desperation.”

Preparation means in essence that the youth must feel able to successfully commit the infraction—be prepared for offending in the sense of [p. 590 ↓] feeling able to carry it off. Desperation, on the other hand, is a consequence of the mood of fatalism that afflicts the delinquent. According to Matza, the delinquent wills infraction in order to escape the sense of fatalism—the sense of being pushed around—by making things happen. The need to make things happen in this sense is especially urgent because of the fragile sense of masculinity that characterizes the subculture of delinquency. Being manly is a core norm of that subculture, and being at the mercy of external forces or authorities will be regarded as unmanly by both the subculture and the delinquent himself. Breaking the law, even if it means getting caught and suffering the legal consequences, can serve the purpose of making things happen—and thus represents a desperate move on the delinquent's part to restore a sense of himself as cause: an effort to provide “some dramatic reassurance that he can still make things happen” (p. 189).

Conclusion

Delinquency and Drift has remained an influential work in the theory of juvenile delinquency since its publication—a robust record—though many contemporary criminologists may be more familiar with a few of its key concepts, notably neutralization, than with its penetrating critique of contemporary juvenile justice or its subtle analysis of the role of criminal law in crime itself. Part of the reason for this endurance may be that empirical research has tended to support the assertion that many delinquent youths do indeed employ techniques of neutralization to justify their offenses—offering support to Matza's central argument that delinquency may be less a reflection of deep divisions in fundamental values between delinquents and the larger culture than of a process of periodic loosening of moral ties that are mostly shared with law-abiding people. As noted, too, the theme of the importance of the ineradicable element of choice—the zone of at least partial freedom in which relatively unconstrained actors make decisions about the course of action they will take—has resonated in more recent discussions of the importance of agency in understanding

individuals' trajectories into, and out of, crime. And still other themes—including the role of fatalism and desperation in precipitating crime—though less developed, may offer rich opportunities for exploration.

ElliottCurrie

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n163>

See also

- [Beccaria, Cesare: Classical School](#)
- [Cloward, Richard A., and Lloyd E. Ohlin: Delinquency and Opportunity](#)
- [Cohen, Albert K.: Delinquent Boys](#)
- [Matza, David: Becoming Deviant](#)
- [Matza, David, and Gresham M. Sykes: Subterranean Values and Delinquency](#)
- [Miller, Walter B.: Lower-Class Culture Theory of Delinquency](#)
- [Reckless, Walter C.: Containment Theory](#)

References and Further Readings

Currie, E. (2004). *The road to whatever: Middle class culture and the crisis of adolescence*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Matza, D. (1964). *Delinquency and drift*. New York: Wiley.

Matza, D. (1969). *Becoming deviant*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Sykes, G. M., and Matza, D. Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review* 22 664–670. (1957). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2089195>