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Thornberry, Terence  
P.: Interactional Theory

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Terence P. Thornberry called his theory “interactional” because it was developed based on the premise that crime and delinquency is a behavioral outcome of social *interactions* between a person and his or her environment. Guided by a strategy he called “theoretical elaboration,” Thornberry combined two major social psychological perspectives of delinquency, control theory and social learning theory, into an initial version of interactional theory designed to explain delinquent behavior better than when each theory is used separately. The significance of interactional theory, however, goes beyond its proposed merging of these two individual theories. The theory's unique contribution has been to offer a dynamic model of bidirectional causality and developmental changes across three stages of adolescence (ages 11–20): early, middle, and late adolescence. Up until this time, criminologists had only sporadically discussed and explored changes in the influence of delinquency predictors during adolescence as well as bidirectional (or reciprocal) causal relationships between these predictors and delinquency. However, Thornberry's interactional theory was the first fully developed model of bidirectional causality and life-course dynamics in criminology.

The initial version of interactional theory was later extended by Thornberry and Marvin Krohn to allow for a life-course explanation of continuity and change in offending not only in adolescence but also in preschool years, childhood, and late adolescence/emerging adulthood. As a result, the extension broadened the definition of deviant behavior, from delinquent to antisocial behavior, and the scope of theoretical explanation by incorporating strain as well as control and social learning concepts into its model. The extended version also emphasizes the importance of studying continuity and change in prosocial as well as antisocial, behaviors for a full understanding of the life-course patterns of human behavior. Finally, it proposes a model of intergenerational continuity in behavior over time. These extensions as well as the initial model have made unique contributions to the field, and any discussion of criminological theory neglecting Thornberry's interactional theory would be incomplete.

## Foundation for an Interactional Theory

Thornberry began with Travis Hirschi's version of control theory, which he elaborated upon by using propositions and empirical findings of Ronald Akers's social learning

theory, in order to construct a more accurate model of delinquency causation. In this sense, the intellectual origin of interactional theory is the Durkheimian tradition of social control. That is, Thornberry agrees with Hirschi that we are all born with deviant motivation—a natural tendency or impulse to violate social norms for easy and immediate personal gains. If social constraints are absent or ineffective, we come to naturally engage in deviant acts, as our inborn tendency is free to be expressed.

However, Thornberry departs from Hirschi, arguing that the lack or weakening of social control would not automatically result in delinquency, though it would make delinquency possible along with other forms of behaviors, prosocial as well as antisocial. Delinquency remains a possibility until an interactive setting in which delinquency is learned, performed, and reinforced as Akers suggests. In other words, according to Thornberry, the absence or weakening of social control is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for delinquent involvement. Thus, Hirschi's social control theory needed to be extended to include concepts and propositions of Akers's social learning theory.

[p. 949 ↓ ]

## Core Concepts

Based on empirical findings from previous research, Thornberry selected three concepts from Hirschi's theory (attachment to parents, commitment to school, and belief in conventional values) and two from Akers's theory (association with delinquent peers and delinquent values). These five concepts are used to explain delinquent behavior, which refers to all types of “acts that place the youth at risk for adjudication” (1987, p. 867), including both minor (e.g., status offenses) and serious or violent activities. Given this broad scope of the behavioral outcome concept, interactional theory is a general theory intended to account for a variety of delinquent acts. Similarly, to fully develop implications of the two constituent theories, the five explanatory concepts are also broadly defined (p. 866). Using these six concepts, Thornberry first built a baseline model of early adolescence (ages 11–13) by describing interrelationships among the concepts. In doing so, he constructed a model that addresses two main

limitations of the previous research on delinquency: unidirectional causality and the lack of developmental perspective.

## Bidirectional Causality

The basic premise of interactional theory is “human behavior occurs in social interaction and can therefore best be explained by models that focus on interactive processes” (Thornberry, 1987, p. 864). Being consistent with this premise, the interactional model specifies relationships among the six concepts as bidirectional rather than unidirectional based on empirical findings from previous research. For example, Hirschi's social control theory proposes an adolescent's attachment to parents reduces the chance of engaging in delinquent behavior. Thornberry elaborated on this unidirectional (or recursive) proposition by adding the reversed causality to the original relationship based on empirical evidence that an adolescent's involvement in delinquency reduces the chance of his or her feeling attached to parents (Liska & Reed, 1985). Similarly, he specified mutually increasing, bidirectional relationships between an adolescent's association with delinquent peers and delinquent behavior, to which Akers's social learning theory alluded but previous researchers paid little attention.

In this way, the bidirectional perspective was applied to relationships among the six core concepts, while the strengths of those relationships are not necessarily expected to be of equal strength. For instance, the baseline model of early adolescence includes reciprocal relationships, one of which is stronger than the other, like the relationships between attachment to parents and association with delinquent peers. On the other hand, not all relationships were specified as bidirectional based on existing theories and research. For example, in the early adolescent model, one relationship was described as unidirectional (e.g., attachment to parents a belief in conventional values, but not the other way around), whereas three pairs of the six variables were specified to have no relationship, neither unidirectional nor bidirectional: attachment to parents—delinquent values; belief in conventional values—delinquent behavior; and belief in conventional values—delinquent values. In these specifications, belief in conventional values is expected to have limited influence on other variables because conventional beliefs tend to be widely shared among adolescents in this developmental stage (i.e., ages 11–13).

## Developmental Extension

To address the problem of the nondevelopmental nature of most theories in criminology, Thornberry extended the basic model of early adolescence to explain interrelationships among core concepts at middle (ages 15–16) and late adolescence (ages 18–20). While the models for the early and middle adolescence share essentially the same causal structure, some changes in relationships are expected as adolescents make a transition from one developmental stage to the next. For example, the overall influence of attachment to parents is weaker during middle than early adolescence as the locus of interaction and control moves from the family and parents to school and peers. As a result, the influence of peers, especially delinquent peers, is expected to increase. Another developmental change concerns the increased causal significance of delinquent values as a result of these values becoming more fully articulated and having stronger effects on other variables. Thus, during middle adolescence the family and parents decline in relative importance, while school and peers increase in causal significance.

[p. 950 ↓ ]

Thornberry then added two new variables to the preceding model to reflect types of developmental changes expected during later adolescence: commitment to one's own family and commitment to conventional activities (e.g., employment, attending college, and military service). These new sources of bonds to conventional society largely replace attachment to parents and commitment to school, even though they still have limited roles in explaining delinquency. Though belief in conventional values has strong relationships with the new variables, it has no relationship with other variables except association with delinquent peers, with which it has weak bidirectional relationships.

On the other hand, association with delinquent peers and delinquent values both have strong reciprocal relationships with delinquent behavior. This would increase the chance of sustained delinquency unless the amplifying causal loop involving the three delinquent variables gets interrupted by changes taking place in this developmental stage. Thornberry proposes that two new variables are key sources of such change, offering an explanation for the empirically observed pattern of discontinuity in offending

(desistance). That is, commitment to conventional activity and to one's own family would create new prosocial roles (e.g., employee or parent) and networks of attachments (e.g., social relationships with employer and other coworkers; or building relationship with spouse and/or nurturing own child). In turn, there one might reduce delinquent involvement and even break the cycle toward criminal careers.

## Social Structure

Another premise of interactional theory is that behavioral trajectories are embedded in the social structure. Thus, a person's location in the structure of social roles and statuses (i.e., race, class, sex, and community of residence), especially a position in early stage of life, is important to consider since it sets the basic path of the behavioral trajectories from the beginning. To illustrate, Thornberry focused on social class of origin. Based on empirical findings about class differences in family disruption, poverty, and residential community, he suggested that children from lower-class families are "*initially* less bonded to conventional society and more exposed to delinquent values, friends, and behaviors" (1987, p. 885, emphasis in the original) than those from middle-class families. This class difference in the initial values of interactional variables would place those children on different paths of the initial values' development over time, including bidirectional relationships among the variables.

## Extensions of an Interactional Theory

Almost 15 years later, Thornberry and Krohn proposed an extended version of interactional theory to broaden the scope of its initial model in three major ways. First, the life span of interest was expanded from adolescence (ages 11–20) to "the full life course, from infancy through adulthood" (2001, p. 301), thereby broadly defining the primary outcome behavior as antisocial rather than delinquent. Second, the extended model includes a discussion of prosocial as well as antisocial behaviors to enhance the explanation of antisocial careers, which still remain the theory's main focus. Third, while not explicit, the initial version of interactional theory was further elaborated upon, using a strain perspective.

# Antisocial Careers

Positing that the initiation of antisocial careers occurs throughout the life course, Thornberry and Krohn proposed four ideal types of continuity and change in antisocial behavior: precocious offenders, early onset offenders, later onset offenders, and late bloomers. They constructed a 2 × 2 table of the four types by dividing the life course into two stages—“early” and “later”—and asking whether antisocial behavior was present or absent in each stage. While using the ideal types for a heuristic purpose, they posited there is an unlimited variance in the timing of antisocial careers’ onset and termination and the length of their duration over the continuum of the life course rather than suggesting that there is a certain number of antisocial career types as others had done.

While disproportionately small in the population, *precocious offenders* are characterized by very early onset and long-term duration of antisocial careers. Specifically, they start to engage in antisocial behavior prior to about age 6, during toddlerhood and the preschool years, and continue their antisocial behavior through childhood to adulthood. Their [p. 951 ↓] precocious onset can be explained by an intense combination of individual traits (e.g., negative temperamental qualities and neuropsychological deficits), ineffective parenting (e.g., inconsistent rule setting and explosive physical discipline), and a severely disadvantaged position in the social structure (e.g., chronic poverty and welfare dependence). Structural adversity generates emotional distress (e.g., anger and depression) for both parents and their children, increasing the chance of very-early-onset-offending. This sets the stage for cumulative disadvantage of precocious offending and subsequent maladjustment in family, school, peer relations, and beliefs interacting over the life course, making patterns of persistent and serious antisocial behaviors likely.

*Early onset offenders* share many of the precocious offenders’ risk factors for antisocial behaviors, which contribute to their initiation of offending during the elementary school years (about ages 6–12). However, they are unlikely to experience the intense coupling of those factors like precocious offenders, and environmental factors—parental and social structural—tend to contribute more to the onset than individual deficits. Thus, their initiation of antisocial behaviors is likely to occur after toddlerhood and the

preschool years. As they begin to attend school and broaden social networks, their risk factors (which were dormant due to familial protection and/or limited antisocial opportunity) increasingly become the source of antisocial behaviors as those factors interact with the external social environment. For example, difficult temperament (which was restrained by parental control) begins to interact with the new environment of school and new relations with peers and teachers, resulting in their rejection and negatively affecting performance at school. These types of stressors and resultant stress weaken social bonds and increase access to deviant opportunity structures, such as delinquent peers and gangs in the community. Although they are expected to show a substantial degree of continuity in offending, their antisocial careers are more likely to come to an end (i.e., to desist) due to improved social environments (e.g., family's upward mobility), loosely coupled causal factors, and effective treatments received (e.g., delinquency prevention program).

Thornberry and Krohn's (2001, p. 299) *later onset offenders* "begin offending during the early adolescent years and, for most, terminate their involvement in delinquency before the end of adolescence." After being largely prosocial throughout the elementary school years, these adolescents, who are mostly without individual deficits, begin to get exposed to environmental risk factors, from which they were protected by their conventional bonds and close control by parents and teachers. While trying to establish age-appropriate autonomy, adolescents experience increasing tension in their relationships with parents and teachers and feel anger toward them. As a result, adolescents gravitate toward each other because their experiences are similar, at the same time distancing themselves from parents and teachers. One of the consequences is to engage in deviant lifestyles, experimental use of drugs, and minor forms of delinquency. But they begin to disengage from these activities as the need for autonomy is met and they prepare for transition to adulthood. Some of the actions, however, can have profound, long-term consequences (e.g., teenage parenthood).

Thornberry and Krohn later added a fourth type, *late bloomers*, who initiate antisocial behaviors during late adolescence and early adulthood. These individuals are likely to have a number of individual deficits (e.g., low intelligence), which becomes an obstacle to building human capital, but those deficits' causal influence is kept in check, being buffered by supportive family and school environment and social structural advantages. However, as they leave such protective environments to seek employment

and independence, a lack of human capital becomes a major disadvantage entering into adulthood. The loss of buffering factors, coupled with increasing life stressors and deviant peer influence, leads to problem behaviors, including excessive drinking and drug use and addiction.

## Continuity and Change in Antisocial Behavior

Precocious, early onset, and later onset offenders, and late bloomers are *not discrete* categories, into which all offenders are supposed to be classified. They are presented as exemplary scenarios describing an infinite number of cases on a continuum of antisocial careers, defined by the onset and desistance of antisocial behaviors over the life course. For example, while the age of onset of precocious offenders will be definitely younger than that of [p. 952 ↓] early onset offenders, interactional theory is little interested in offering a cutoff age distinguishing the two. Instead, the theory focuses on explaining how the age of onset is determined by “the *combination and interaction* of structural, individual, and parental influences” (Thornberry & Krohn, 2001, p. 295, emphasis in the original). Like initiation, termination of antisocial behaviors is a product of the combination and interaction of the three continuous variables, which also explains why the earlier the onset, the more delayed the desistance.

## Prosocial Careers

Similar to precocious offenders, individuals whose behaviors remain prosocial throughout the life course constitute a relatively small proportion of the population. The absence or control of negative temperamental qualities, strong bonds to the family, and effective parenting set the stage for the continuity of prosocial behavior early in the life course, providing a foundation for conventional life styles and prosocial relations with others, such as teachers and peers. These individuals are less likely to face structural adversity than their antisocial counterparts as their families tend to be economically secure and structurally stable, thus reducing strain and stress. As a result, from the

early years through adolescence, they are likely to develop human and social capital necessary for smooth, on-time transitions to adulthood.

## Intergenerational Extensions

Exploring the intergenerational implications of his theory, Thornberry proposed another extended model of behavioral continuity across three generations. The model includes variables of grandparents' as well as parents' characteristics and behaviors to explain their children's antisocial and prosocial behaviors. While the model contains the same theoretical variables—social bonds, effective parenting, antisocial peers, stressors, and structural adversity—Thornberry elaborated his theory, using empirical findings about behavioral continuity across generations and suggesting alternative, non-social explanations of intergenerational transmission of antisocial behaviors, such as genetic factors.

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See also

- [Agnew, Robert: General Strain Theory](#)
- [Akers, Ronald L.: Social Learning Theory](#)
- [Hirschi, Travis: Social Control Theory](#)
- [Moffitt, Terrie E.: A Developmental Model of Life-Course-Persistent Offending](#)
- [Sutherland, Edwin H.: Differential Association Theory and Differential Social Organization](#)

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