Social Process and Learning Theories of Crime

This section will discuss Sutherland’s development of differential association theory and how this evolved into Akers’s work of differential reinforcement and other social learning theories, such as techniques of neutralization. Then, the modern state of research on these theories will be presented. We will also discuss the evolution of control theories of crime, with an emphasis on social bonding and the scientific evidence found regarding the key constructs in Hirschi’s control theories, two of the most highly regarded perspectives according to criminological experts and their studies.¹

Most of the social process theories assume that criminal behavior is learned behavior, which means that criminal activity is actually learned from others through social interaction, much like riding a bike or playing basketball. Namely, people learn criminal activity from significant others, such as family, peers, or coworkers. However, other social process theories, namely control theories, assume that offending is the result of natural tendencies and thus must be controlled by social processes. Social process theories examine how individuals interact with other individuals and groups and how the learning that takes place in these interactions leads to a propensity for criminal activity. This section will explore both of these theoretical frameworks and explain how social processes are vital to both perspectives in determining criminal behavior.

This section begins with social process theories known as learning theories. Such learning theories attempt to explain how and why individuals learn from significant others to engage in criminal rather than conventional behavior. Next, we discuss control theories, which emphasize personal or socialization factors that prevent individuals from engaging in selfish, antisocial behaviors.

Learning Theories

In this section, we review theories that emphasize how individuals learn criminal behavior through interacting with significant others, people with whom they typically associate. These learning theories assume that people are born with no tendency toward or away from committing crime. This concept is referred to as tabula rasa, or blank slate, meaning that all individuals are completely malleable and will believe what they are told by their significant others and act accordingly. Thus, such theories of learning tend to explain how criminal behavior is learned through cultural norms. One of the main concepts in learning theories is the influence of peers and significant others on an individual’s behavior.

Here, three learning theories are discussed: (a) differential association theory, (b) differential identification theory, and (c) differential reinforcement theory; then we examine techniques of neutralization.

Differential Association Theory

Edwin Sutherland introduced his differential association theory in the late 1930s. He proposed a theoretical framework that explained how criminal values could be culturally transmitted to individuals from their significant others. Sutherland proposed a theoretical model that included nine principles, but rather than list them all, we will summarize the main points of his theory.

Perhaps the most interesting principle is the first: Criminal behavior is learned. This was a radical departure from previous theories (e.g., Lombroso’s “born criminal” theory, Goddard’s feeblemindedness theory, Sheldon’s body type theory). Sutherland was one of the first to state that criminal behavior is the result of normal social processes, resulting when individuals associate with the wrong type of people, often by no fault on their part. By associating with crime-oriented people, whether parents or peers, an individual will inevitably choose to engage in criminal behavior because that is what he or she has learned, Sutherland thought.

Perhaps the most important of Sutherland’s principles, and certainly the most revealing one, was number six in his framework: “A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law.” Sutherland noted that this principle represents the essence of differential association theory. It suggests that people can have associations that favor both criminal and noncriminal behavior patterns. If an individual is receiving more information and values that are pro-crime than anti-crime, the individual will inevitably engage in criminal activity. Also, Sutherland claimed that such learning can take place only in interactions with significant others and not via television, movies, radio, or other media.

It is important to understand the cultural context at the time Sutherland was developing his theory. In the early 20th century, most academics, and society for that matter, believed that there was something abnormal or different about criminals. Sheldon’s body type theory was popular in the same period, as was the use of IQ to pick out people who were of lower intelligence and supposedly predisposed to crime (both of these theories were covered in Section IV). So, the common assumption when Sutherland created the principles of differential association theory was that there was essentially something wrong with individuals who commit crime.

In light of this common assumption, Sutherland’s proposal—that criminality is learned just like any conventional activity—was extremely profound. This suggests that any normal person, when exposed to attitudes favorable to crime, will learn criminal activity, and that the processes and mechanisms of learning are the same for crime as for most legal, everyday behaviors, namely, social interaction with family and friends, and not reading books or watching movies. How many of us learned to play basketball or other sports by reading a book about

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3Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald R. Cressey, Principles of Criminology, 5th ed. (Chicago: Lippincott, 1950), 78.
it? Virtually no one learns how to play sports this way. Rather, we learn the techniques (e.g., how to do a jump shot) and motivations for playing sports (e.g., it is fun or you might be able to earn a scholarship) through our friends, relatives, coaches, and other people close to us. According to Sutherland, crime is learned the same way; our close associates teach us both the techniques (e.g., how to steal a car) and the motivations (e.g., it is fun; you might be able to sell it or its parts). While most criminologists tend to take it for granted that criminal behavior is learned, the idea was rather unique and bold when Sutherland presented his theory of differential association.

It is important to keep in mind that differential association theory is just as positivistic as earlier biological and psychological theories. Sutherland clearly believed that, if people were receiving more information that breaking the law was good, then they would inevitably commit crimes. There is virtually no allowance for free will and rational decision making in this model of offending. Rather, people’s choices to commit crime are determined through their social interactions with those close to them; they do not actually make the decisions to engage (or not engage) in criminal activities. So, differential association can be seen as a highly positive, deterministic theory, much like Lombroso’s “born criminal” and Goddard’s feeblemindedness theories (see Section IV), except that, instead of biological or psychological traits causing crime, it is social interaction and learning. Furthermore, Sutherland claimed that individual differences in biological and psychological functioning have little to do with criminality; however, this idea has been discounted by modern research, which shows that such variations do in fact affect criminal behavior, largely because such biopsychological factors influence the learning processes of individuals, thereby directly impacting the basic principles of Sutherland’s theory (see Sections IV and V).

Classical Conditioning: A Learning Theory with Limitations

Sutherland used the dominant psychological theory of learning in his era as the basis for his theory of differential association. This model was classical conditioning, which was primarily developed by Ivan Pavlov. Classical conditioning assumes that animals, as well as people, learn through associations between stimuli and responses. Organisms, animals or people, are somewhat passive actors in this process, meaning that they simply receive and respond in natural ways to various forms of stimuli; over time, they learn to associate certain stimuli with certain responses.

For example, Pavlov showed that dogs, which are naturally afraid of loud noises such as bells, could be quickly conditioned not only to be less afraid of bells but to actually desire and salivate at their sound. A dog naturally

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Footnote:

4For a discussion, see Thomas J. Bernard, Jeffrey B. Snipes, and Alexander L. Gerould, Vold’s Theoretical Criminology, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 156–57 (see chap. 2).
salivates when presented with meat, so when this presentation of an unconditioned stimulus (meat) is given, a dog will always salivate (unconditioned response) in anticipation of eating. Pavlov demonstrated through a series of experiments that, if a bell (conditioned stimulus) is always rung at the same time the dog is presented with meat, then the dog will learn to associate what was previously a negative stimulus with a positive stimulus (food). Thus, the dog will very quickly begin to salivate at the ringing of a bell, even when meat is not presented. When this occurs, it is called a conditioned response because it is not natural; however, it is a very powerful and effective means of learning, and it sometimes takes only a few occurrences of coupling the bell ringing with meat before the conditioned response takes place.

One modern use of this in humans is the administration of drugs that make people ill when they drink alcohol. Alcoholics are often prescribed drugs that make them very sick, often to the point of vomiting, if they ingest any alcohol. The idea is that they will learn to associate feelings of sickness with drinking and thus stop wanting to consume alcohol. One big problem with this strategy is that alcoholics often do not consistently take the drugs, so they quickly slip back into addiction. Still, if they were to maintain their regimen of drugs, it would likely work, because people do tend to learn through association.

This type of learning model was used in the critically acclaimed 1964 novel (and later motion picture) *A Clockwork Orange*. In this novel, the author, Anthony Burgess, tells the story of a juvenile murderer who is “rehabilitated” by doctors who force him to watch hour after hour of violent images while simultaneously giving him drugs that make him sick. In the novel, the protagonist is “cured” after only two weeks of this treatment, having learned to consistently associate violence with sickness. However, once he is let out, he lacks the ability to choose violence and other antisocial behavior, which is seen as losing his humanity. Therefore, the ethicists order a reversal treatment and make him back into his former self, a violent predator. Although a fictional piece, *A Clockwork Orange* is probably one of the best illustrations of the use of classical conditioning in relation to criminal offending and rehabilitation.

Another example of classical conditioning is the associations we make with certain smells and sounds. For example, all of us can relate good times to smells that were present during those occasions. If a loved one or someone we dated wore a certain perfume or cologne, smelling that scent at a later time can bring back memories. When our partner goes out of town, we can smell his or her pillow, and it will remind us of our partner because we associate his or her smell with his or her being. Or perhaps the smell of a turkey cooking in an oven always reminds us of Thanksgiving or another holiday. Regarding associations of sounds, we can all remember songs that remind us of happy and sad times in our lives. Often these songs will play on the radio, and they take us back to those occasions, whether good or bad. People with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) also experience sound associations; war veterans, for example, may hit the deck when a car backfires. These are all clear examples of classical conditioning and associating stimuli with responses.

Since Sutherland’s theory was published, many of the principles outlined in his model have come under scrutiny. Follow-up research has shown some flaws in, as well as misinterpretations of, his work. Specifically, Sutherland theorized that crime occurs when associations favorable to violation of the law outweigh associations favorable to conforming to the law. However, measuring this type of ratio is nearly impossible for social scientists.

Another topic of criticism involves Sutherland’s claim that all criminals learn the behavior from others before they engage in such activity. However, many theorists have noted that an individual may engage in criminal activity without being taught such behavior, then seek out others with attitudes and behavior similar to their own. So, do individuals learn to commit crime after they are taught by delinquent peers, or do they start associating with similar

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Tittle et al., “Modeling Sutherland’s Theory.”
delinquents or criminals once they have initiated their offending career (i.e., “birds of a feather flock together”)?

This exact debate was examined by researchers, and the most recent studies point to the occurrence of both causal processes: Criminal associations cause more crime, and committing crime causes more criminal associations. Both are key in the causal process, so Sutherland was missing half of this equation.8

Another key criticism is that, if each individual is born with a blank slate and all criminal behavior is learned, then who committed crime in the first place? Who could expose the first criminal to the definitions favorable to violation of law? Furthermore, what factor(s) caused that individual to do the crime if it was not learned? Obviously, if it were due to any factor(s) other than learning—and it must have been because there was no one to teach it—then it obviously was not explained by learning theories. This criticism cannot be addressed, so it is somewhat ignored in the scientific literature.

Despite the criticisms and flaws, much research supports Sutherland’s theory. For example, researchers have found that older criminals teach younger delinquents.9 In addition, delinquents often associate with criminal peers prior to engaging in criminal activity.10 Furthermore, research has shown that criminal friends, attitudes, and activity are highly associated.11 Still, Sutherland’s principles are quite vague and elusive in terms of measurement, which renders them difficult for social scientists to test.12 Related to these issues, perhaps one of the biggest problems with Sutherland’s formulation of differential association is that he used primarily one type of learning model—classical conditioning—to formulate most of his principles, and thus he neglected other important ways that we learn attitudes and behavior from others. Ultimately, Sutherland’s principles are hard to test; more current versions of his framework have incorporated other learning models and thus are easier to test so that empirical validity can be demonstrated.

Glaser’s Concept of Differential Identification

Another reaction to Sutherland’s differential association dealt with the influence of movies and television, as well as other reference groups outside of one’s significant others. As stated above, Sutherland claimed that learning of criminal definitions can take place only through social interactions with significant others as opposed to reading a book or watching movies. However, in 1956, Daniel Glaser proposed the idea of differential identification theory, which allows for learning to take place not only through people close to us but also through other reference groups, even distant ones, such as sports heroes or movie stars whom we have never actually met and with whom we have never corresponded.13 Glaser claimed that it did not matter much whether an individual had a personal relationship with a reference group(s); in fact, he argued that a group could be imaginary, such as fictitious characters in a movie or book. The important thing, according to Glaser, was that an individual must identify with a person or character and thus behave in ways that fit the norm set of this reference group or person.

Glaser’s proposition has been virtually ignored, with the exception of Dawes’s study of delinquency in 1973, which found that identification with people other than parents was strong when youths perceived a greater degree of rejection from their parents.14 Given the profound influence of movies, music, and television on today’s youth

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culture, it is obvious that differential identification was an important addition to Sutherland's framework, and more research should examine the validity of Glaser's theory in contemporary society.

Although Glaser and others modified differential association, the most valid and respected variation is differential reinforcement theory.

**Differential Reinforcement Theory**

In 1965, C. R. Jeffery provided an extensive critique and reevaluation of Sutherland's differential association theory. He argued that the theory was incomplete without some attention to an updated social psychology of learning (e.g., operant conditioning and modeling theories of learning). He wanted Sutherland to account for the fact that people can be conditioned into behaving certain ways, such as by being rewarded for conforming behavior. Then, in 1966, Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers criticized and responded to Jeffery's criticism by proposing a new theory that incorporated some of these learning models into Sutherland's basic framework. The result was what is now known as **differential reinforcement theory**. Ultimately, Burgess and Akers argued that by integrating Sutherland's work with contributions from the field of social psychology, criminal behavior could be more clearly understood.

In some ways, differential reinforcement theory may appear to be no different than rational choice theory (see Section III). To an extent, this is true, because both models focus on reinforcements and punishments that occur after an individual offends. However, differential reinforcement theory can be distinguished from the rational choice perspective. The latter assumes that humans are born with the capacity for rational decision making, whereas the differential reinforcement perspective assumes people are born with a blank slate and, thus, must be socialized and taught how to behave through various forms of conditioning (e.g., operant and classical) as well as modeling.

Burgess and Akers developed seven propositions to summarize differential reinforcement theory, which largely represent efficient modifications of Sutherland's original nine principles of differential association. The strong influence of social psychologists is illustrated in their first statement, as well as throughout the seven principles. Although differential reinforcement incorporates the elements of modeling and classical conditioning learning models in its framework, the first statement clearly states that the essential learning mechanism in social behavior is operant conditioning, so it is important to understand what operant conditioning is and how it is evident throughout life.

**Operant Conditioning**

The idea of operant conditioning was primarily developed by B. F. Skinner, who ironically was working just across campus from Edwin Sutherland when he was developing differential association theory at Indiana University. As in modern times, academia was too intradisciplinary and intradepartmental. Had Sutherland been aware of Skinner's studies and theoretical development, he likely would have included it in his original framework. In his defense, operant conditioning was not well known or researched at the time; as a result, Sutherland incorporated the then-dominant learning model, classical conditioning. Burgess and Akers went on to incorporate operant conditioning into Sutherland's framework.

Operant conditioning concerns how behavior is influenced by reinforcements and punishments. Furthermore, operant conditioning assumes that an animal or human being is a proactive player in seeking out rewards and not

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just a passive entity that receives stimuli, as classical conditioning assumes. Behavior is strengthened or encouraged through reward (positive reinforcement) and avoidance of punishment (negative reinforcement). For example, if someone is given a car for graduation from college, that would be a positive reinforcement. On the other hand, if a teenager who has been grounded is allowed to start going out again because he or she has better grades, this would be a negative reinforcement, because he or she is now being rewarded via the avoidance of something negative. Like different types of reinforcement, punishment comes in two forms as well. Behavior is weakened, or discouraged, through adverse stimuli (positive punishment) or lack of reward (negative punishment). A good example of positive punishment would be a good, old-fashioned spanking, because it is certainly a negative stimulus; anything that directly presents negative sensations or feelings is a positive punishment. On the other hand, if parents take away car privileges from a teenager who broke curfew, that would be an example of negative punishment because the parents are removing a positive aspect or reward.

Some notable examples of operant conditioning include teaching a rat to successfully run a maze. When rats take the correct path and finish the maze quickly, they are either positively reinforced (e.g., rewarded with a piece of cheese) or negatively reinforced (e.g., not zapped with electricity as they were when they chose the wrong path). On the other hand, when rats take wrong turns or do not complete the maze in adequate time, they are either positively punished (e.g., zapped with electricity) or negatively punished (e.g., not given the cheese they expect to receive). The rats, like humans, tend to learn the correct behavior very fast using such consistent implementation of reinforcements and punishments.

In humans, such principles of operant conditioning can be found even at very early ages. In fact, many of us have implemented such techniques (or been subjected to them) without really knowing they were called operant conditioning. For example, during toilet training, children learn to use the bathroom to do their natural duty rather than doing it in their pants. To reinforce the act of going to the bathroom on a toilet, we encourage the correct behavior by presenting positive rewards, which can be as simple as applauding the child or giving him or her a piece of candy for a successful job. While parents (we hope) rarely proactively use spanking in toilet training, there is an inherent positive punishment involved when children go in their pants; namely, they have to be in their dirty diaper for a while, not to mention the embarrassment that most children feel when they do this. Furthermore, negative punishments are present in such situations because the child does not get the applause or candy, so the rewards have been removed.

Of course, this does not apply only to early behavior. An extensive amount of research has shown that humans learn attitudes and behavior best through a mix of reinforcements and punishments throughout life. In terms of criminal offending, studies have clearly shown that the rehabilitative programs that appear to work most effectively in reducing recidivism in offenders are those that provide opportunities for reward as well as threats of punishment. Empirical research has combined the findings from hundreds of such studies of rehab programs, showing that the programs that are most successful in changing the attitudes and behavior of previous offenders are those that offer at least four reward opportunities for every one possible punishment.19 So, whether it is training children to go potty correctly or altering criminals’ thinking and behavior, operant conditioning is a well-established form of learning that makes differential reinforcement theory a more valid and specified model of offending than differential association.

Whether deviant or conforming behavior occurs and continues “depends on the past and present rewards or punishment for the behavior, and the rewards and punishment attached to alternative behavior.”20 In contrast to Sutherland’s differential association model, which looks only at what happens before an act (i.e., classical conditioning), not at what happens after the act is completed (i.e., operant conditioning), Burgess and Akers’s model looks at both. Criminal behavior is likely to occur, Burgess and Akers theorized, when its rewards outweigh the punishments.

19Patricia Van Voorhis and Emily Salisbury, Correctional Counseling and Rehabilitation, 8th ed. (Cincinnati: Anderson, 2013).

Bandura’s Theory of Modeling and Imitation

Another learning model that Burgess and Akers emphasized in their formulation of differential reinforcement theory was the element of modeling and imitation. Although Sutherland’s original formulation of differential association theory was somewhat inspired by Gabriel Tarde’s concept of imitation,21 the nine principles did not adequately emphasize the importance of modeling in the process of learning behavior. Sutherland’s failure was likely due to the fact that Albert Bandura’s primary work in this area had not occurred when Sutherland was formulating differential association theory.22

Through a series of experiments and theoretical development, Bandura demonstrated that a significant amount of learning takes place without any form of conditioning. Specifically, he claimed that individuals can learn even if they are not rewarded or punished for behavior (i.e., operant conditioning) and even if they have not been exposed to associations between stimuli and responses (i.e., classical conditioning). Rather, Bandura proposed that people learn much of their attitudes and behavior from simply observing the behavior of others, namely through mimicking what others do. This is often referred to as monkey see, monkey do, but it is not just monkeys that do this. Like most animal species, humans are biologically hardwired to observe and learn the behavior of others, especially elders, to see what behavior is essential for survival and success.

Bandura showed that simply observing the behavior of others, especially adults, can have profound learning effects on the behavior of children. Specifically, he performed experiments in which a randomized experimental group of children watched a video of adults acting aggressively toward Bo-Bo dolls (which are blow-up plastic dolls); the control group of children did not watch such a video. Both groups of children were then sent into a room containing Bo-Bo dolls, and the experimental group, who had seen the adult behavior, mimicked their elders by acting far more aggressively toward the dolls than the children in the control group. The experimental group had no previous associations of more aggressive behavior toward the dolls and no good feelings or motivations, let alone rewards, for such behavior. Rather, the children became more aggressive themselves simply because they were imitating what they had seen older people do.

Bandura’s findings have important implications for the modeling behavior of adults (and peers) and for the influence of television, movies, video games, and other factors. Furthermore, the influences demonstrated by Bandura supported a phenomenon commonplace in everyday life. Mimicking is the source of fashion trends—wearing low-slung pants or baseball hats turned a certain way. Styles tend to ebb and flow based on how some respected person (often a celebrity) wears clothing. This can be seen very early in life; parents must be careful what they say and do because their children, as young as two years old, imitate what their parents do. This continues throughout life, especially in the teenage years as young persons imitate the cool trends and styles as well as behaviors. Of course, sometimes this behavior is illegal, but individuals are often simply mimicking the way their friends or others are behaving with little regard for potential rewards or punishments. Ultimately, Bandura’s theory of modeling and imitation adds a great deal of explanation to a model of learning, and differential reinforcement theory includes such influences, whereas Sutherland’s model of differential association does not, largely because the psychological perspective had not yet been developed.

Burgess and Akers’s theory of differential reinforcement has also been the target of criticism by theorists and researchers. Perhaps the most important criticism of differential reinforcement theory is that it appears tautological, meaning that the variables and measures used to test its validity are true by definition. To clarify, studies testing this theory have been divided into four groups based on variables or factors: associations, reinforcements, definitions, and modeling.

Some critics have noted that, if individuals who report that they associate with those who offend are rewarded for offending, believe offending is good, and have seen many of their significant others offend, they will inevitably be more likely to offend. In other words, if your friends and family are doing it, there is little doubt that you will be doing it.\(^{23}\) For example, critics would argue that a person who primarily hangs out with car thieves, knows he will be rewarded for stealing cars, believes stealing cars is good and not immoral, and has observed many respected others stealing cars, will inevitably commit auto theft himself. However, it has been well argued that such criticisms of tautology are not valid because none of these factors necessarily makes offending by the respondent true by definition.\(^{24}\)

Differential reinforcement theory has also faced the same criticism that was addressed to Sutherland’s theory, namely, that delinquent associations may take place after criminal activity rather than before. However, Burgess and Akers’s model clearly has this area of criticism covered in the sense that differential reinforcement includes what comes after the activity, not just what happens before it. Specifically, it addresses the rewards or punishments that follow criminal activity, whether those rewards come from friends, parents, or other members or institutions of society.

It is arguable that differential reinforcement theory may have the most empirical validity of any contemporary (nonintegrated) model of criminal offending, especially considering that studies have examined a variety of behaviors, ranging from drug use to property crimes to violence. The theoretical model has also been tested in samples across the United States as well as in other cultures, such as South Korea, with the evidence being quite supportive of the framework. Furthermore, a variety of age groups have been examined, ranging from teenagers to middle-aged adults to the elderly, with all studies providing support for the model.\(^{25}\)

Specifically, researchers found that the major variables of the theory had a significant effect in explaining marijuana and alcohol use among adolescents.\(^{26}\) The researchers concluded that the “study demonstrates that central learning concepts are amenable to meaningful questionnaire measurement and that social learning theory can be adequately tested with survey data.”\(^{27}\) Other studies have also supported the theory when attempting to understand delinquency, cigarette smoking, and drug use.\(^{28}\) Therefore, the inclusion of three psychological learning models, namely, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and modeling and imitation, appears to have made differential reinforcement one of the most valid theories of human behavior, especially in regard to crime.


\[^{24}\text{Akers and Sellers, Criminological Theories, 98–101.}\]


\[^{27}\text{Akers et al., “Social Learning and Deviant Behavior,” 651.}\]

Neutralization Theory

Neutralization theory is associated with Gresham Sykes and David Matza's techniques of neutralization and Matza's drift theory. Like Sutherland, both Sykes and Matza thought that social learning influences delinquent behavior, but they also asserted that most criminals hold conventional beliefs and values. Specifically, Sykes and Matza argued that most criminals are still partially committed to the dominant social order. According to Sykes and Matza, youths are not immersed in a subculture that is committed to either extreme: complete conformity or complete nonconformity. Rather, these individuals vacillate, or drift, between these two extremes and are in a state of transience.

While remaining partially committed to the conventional social order, youths can drift into criminal activity, Sykes and Matza claimed, and avoid feelings of guilt for these actions by justifying or rationalizing their behavior. This typically occurs in the teenage years, when social controls (parents, family, etc.) are at their weakest point and peer pressures and associations are at their highest level. Why is this called neutralization theory? The answer is that people justify and rationalize behavior through neutralizing it or making it appear not so serious. They make up situational excuses for behavior that they know is wrong to alleviate the guilt they feel for doing such immoral acts. In many ways, this resembles Freud’s defense mechanisms, which allow us to forgive ourselves for the bad things we do even when we know they are wrong. The specific techniques of neutralization outlined by Sykes and Matza in 1957 are much like excuses for inappropriate behavior.

Techniques of Neutralization

Sykes and Matza identified methods or techniques of neutralization that people use to justify their criminal behavior. These techniques allow people to neutralize or rationalize their criminal and delinquent acts by making themselves look as though they are conforming to the rules of conventional society. If individuals can create such rationalizations, then they are free to engage in criminal activities without serious damage to their consciences or self-images. According to Sykes and Matza, there are five common techniques of neutralization:

1. **Denial of responsibility:** Individuals may claim they were influenced by forces outside themselves and that they are not responsible or accountable for their behavior. For example, many youths blame their peers for their own behavior.

2. **Denial of injury:** This is the rationalization that no one was actually hurt by the offender’s behavior. For instance, if someone steals from a store, he or she may rationalize this by saying that the store has insurance, so there is no direct victim.

3. **Denial of the victim:** Offenders see themselves as avengers and the victims as the wrongdoers. For example, some offenders believe that a person who disrespects or “disses” them deserves what he or she gets, even if it means serious injury.

4. **Condemnation of the condemners:** Offenders claim that the condemners (usually the authorities who catch them) are hypocrites. For instance, one may claim that police speed on the highway all the time, so everyone else is entitled to drive higher than the speed limit.

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31 Ibid., 28.
32 Sykes and Matza, “Techniques of Neutralization.”
5. **Appeal to higher loyalties:** Offenders often overlook the norms of conventional society in favor of the rules of a belief they have or of a group to which they belong. For example, people who kill doctors who perform abortions tend to see their crimes as above the law because they are serving a higher power.

Although Sykes and Matza specifically labeled only five techniques of neutralization, it should be clear that there may be endless excuses people make up to rationalize behaviors they know are wrong. Techniques of neutralization have been applied to white-collar crime, for example. Several studies have examined the tendency to use such excuses to alleviate guilt for engaging in illegal corporate crime; they point out new types of excuses white-collar criminals use to justify their acts, techniques that were not discussed in Sykes and Matza’s original formulation.33

Studies that have attempted to empirically test neutralization theory are, at best, inconsistent. For example, Agnew argued that there are essentially two general criticisms of studies that support neutralization theory.34 First, theorists and researchers have noted that some neutralization techniques are much more difficult to measure than commitment to unconventional attitudes or norms.35 The second major criticism is the concern that criminals may not use techniques of neutralization prior to committing a criminal offense but rather only after committing a crime. As estimated by previous studies, temporal ordering can be problematic in terms of causal implications when neutralization follows a criminal act.36 This temporal ordering problem results from research conducted at a single point in time. Some would argue that the temporal ordering problem is not a major criticism because individuals may be predisposed to make up such rationalizations for their behavior regardless of whether they do it before or after the act of offending. Such a propensity may be related to low self-control theory, which we will examine later in this section.

### Summary of Learning Theories

Learning theories tend to emphasize the social processes of how and why individuals learn criminal behavior. These theories also focus on the impact of significant others involved in the socialization process, such as family, friends, and teachers. Ultimately, empirical research has shown that learning theories are key in our understanding of criminal behavior, particularly in terms of whether criminal behavior is rewarded or punished. In summary, if individuals are taught and rewarded for performing criminal acts by the people they interact with on a day-to-day basis, they will in all likelihood engage in illegal activity.

### Control Theories

The learning theories discussed in the previous section assume that individuals are born with a conforming disposition. By contrast, **control theories** assume that all people would naturally commit crimes if it weren’t for restraints on their innate selfish tendencies. Social control perspectives of criminal behavior thus assume that there is some

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type of basic human nature and that all human beings exhibit antisocial tendencies. Such theories are concerned
with why individuals don’t commit crime or deviant behaviors. Control theorists ask questions like this: What is it
about society and human interaction that causes people not to act on their impulses?

The assumption that people have innate antisocial tendencies is a controversial one because it is nearly impos-
sible to test. Nevertheless, some recent evidence supports the idea that human beings are inherently selfish and
antisocial by nature. Specifically, researchers have found that most individuals are oriented toward selfish and
aggressive behaviors at an early age, with such behaviors peaking at the end of the second year (see Figure 8.1). 37

An example of antisocial dispositions appearing early in life was reported by Tremblay and LeMarquand, who
found that most young children’s (particularly boys’) aggressive behaviors peaked at age 27 months. These behaviors
included hitting, biting, and kicking others. 38 Their research is not isolated; virtually all developmental experts
acknowledge that toddlers exhibit a tendency to show aggressive behavior toward others. This line of research would
seem to support the notion that people are predisposed toward antisocial, even criminal, behavior.

Figure 8.1 Frequencies of hitting, biting, and kicking at ages 2 to 12 years

![Graph showing frequencies of hitting, biting, and kicking at ages 2 to 12 years]

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Control theorists do not necessarily assume that people are predisposed toward crime in a way that remains constant throughout life. On the contrary, research shows that most individuals begin to desist from such behaviors starting at around age two. This trend continues until approximately age five, with only the most aggressive individuals (i.e., chronic offenders) continuing such behavior at higher ages.

It is important to note that, at the same time selfish and aggressive behaviors decline, self-consciousness is formed. In addition, social emotions—such as shame, guilt, empathy, and pride—begin to appear. This observation is critical because it is what separates control theories from the Classical School of criminology and the dispositional theories that we already discussed. According to control theories, without appropriate socialization, people act on their preprogrammed tendency toward crime and deviance.

In short, control theories claim that all individuals have natural tendencies to commit selfish, antisocial, and even criminal behavior. So, what is it that curbs this natural propensity? Many experts believe the best explanation is that individuals are socialized and controlled by social attachments and investments in conventional society. This assumption regarding the vital importance of early socialization is probably the primary reason why control theories are currently the most popular and accepted theories among criminologists. We will now discuss several early examples of these control theories.

### Early Control Theories of Human Behavior

#### Thomas Hobbes

Control theories are found in a variety of disciplines, including biology, psychology, and sociology. Perhaps the earliest significant use of social control in explaining deviant behavior is found in a perspective offered by the 17th-century Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Hobbes (see Section II). Hobbes claimed that the natural state of humanity is one of selfishness and self-centeredness to the point of constant chaos, characterized by a state of warfare between individuals. He stated that all individuals are inherently disposed to take advantage of others in order to improve their own personal well-being.

However, Hobbes also claimed that the constant fear created by such selfishness results in humans rationally coming together to create binding contracts that will keep individuals from violating others’ rights. Even with such controlling arrangements, however, Hobbes was clear that the selfish tendencies people exhibit can never be extinguished. In fact, they explain why punishments are necessary to maintain an established social contract among people.

#### Durkheim’s Idea of Awakened Reflection and Collective Conscience

Consistent with Hobbes’s view of individuals as naturally selfish, Durkheim later proposed a theory of social control in the late 1800s that suggested that humans have no internal mechanism to let them know when they are fulfilled. To this end, Durkheim coined the terms *automatic spontaneity* and *awakened reflection*. Automatic spontaneity can be understood with reference to animals’ eating habits. Specifically, animals stop eating when they are full, and they are content until they are hungry again; they don’t start hunting right after they have filled their stomachs with food. In contrast, awakened reflection concerns the fact that humans do not have such an internal, regulatory mechanism. That is because people often acquire resources beyond what is immediately required. Durkheim went so far as to say

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40Walsh and Ellis, “Political Ideology.”


that “our capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss.” Durkheim believed crime and deviance are quite normal, even essential, in any society.

Durkheim’s awakened reflection has become commonly known as greed. People tend to favor better conditions and additional fulfillment because they apparently have no biological or psychological mechanism to limit such tendencies. As Durkheim noted, the selfish desires of humankind “are unlimited so far as they depend on the individual alone. . . . The more one has, the more one wants.” Thus, society must step in and provide the regulative force that keeps humans from acting too selfishly.

One of the primary elements of this regulative force is the **collective conscience**, which is the extent of similarities or likenesses that people share. For example, almost everyone can agree that homicide is a serious and harmful act that should be avoided in any civilized society. The notion of collective conscience can be seen as an early form of the idea of social bonding, which has become one of the dominant theories in criminology.

According to Durkheim, the collective conscience serves many functions in society. One such function is the establishment of rules that keep individuals from following their natural tendencies toward selfish behavior. Durkheim also believed that crime allows people to unite together in opposition against deviants. In other words, crime and deviance allow conforming individuals to be bonded together in opposition against a common enemy, as can be seen in everyday life when groups come together to face opposition. This enemy consists of the deviants who have not internalized the code of the collective conscience.

Many of Durkheim’s ideas hold true today. Just recall a traumatic incident you may have experienced with other strangers (e.g., being stuck in an elevator during a power outage, weathering a serious storm, or being involved in a traffic accident). Incidents such as these bring people together and permit a degree of bonding that would not take place in everyday life. Crime, Durkheim argued, serves a similar function.

How is all of this relevant today? Most control theorists claim that individuals commit crime and deviant acts not because they are lacking in any way but because certain controls have been weakened in their development. This assumption is consistent with Durkheim’s theory, which we discussed previously (see Section VI).

**Freud’s Concepts of the Id, Superego, and Ego**

Although psychoanalytic theory would seem to have few similarities with sociological positivistic theory, in this case, it is extremely complementary. One of Freud’s most essential propositions is that all individuals are born with a tendency toward inherent drives and selfishness due to the **id** domain of the psyche (see Figure 8.2). According to Freud, all people are born with equal amounts of id drives (e.g., libido, food) and motivations toward selfishness and greed. Freud said this inherent selfish tendency must be countered by controls produced from the development of the **superego**, which is the subconscious domain of the psyche that contains our conscience. According to Freud, the superego is formed through the interactions between a young infant or child and his or her significant others. As you can see, the control perspective has a long history in many philosophical and scientific disciplines.

These two drives of the subconscious domains of the id and superego are regulated, Freud thought, by the only conscious domain of the psyche: the **ego**. This ego mediates the battles between our innate drives (id) and our socialized constraints (superego); it represents our personality. There have been a number of applications of Freud’s theoretical model to criminality, such as the concept of a deficient superego (due to a lack of early attachments) or

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43Durkheim, *Suicide*, 246–47. Also, much of this discussion is adapted from Raymond Paternoster and Ronet Bachman, *Explaining Criminals and Crime* (Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2001) (see chap. 5, n. 10).

44Durkheim, *Suicide*, 254.

45A good discussion of Durkheim’s concepts, particularly that of the collective conscience, can be found in Bernard et al., *Vold’s Theoretical Criminology*, 124–39 (see chap. 2).

a weak ego (which fails to properly regulate the battle between the id and superego). The main point is that Freud was an early control theorist and that his theoretical model was highly influential among psychologists in the early 1900s as they tried to determine why certain individuals committed criminal offenses.\(^\text{47}\)

**Early Control Theories of Crime**

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, criminologists borrowed and built on some of the ideas just discussed. Until that time, most research in the criminological literature was dominated by the learning theories discussed earlier in this section, or social structure theories such as the Chicago School or Merton’s strain theory (see Sections VI and VII). While early control theories may not be particularly popular in this day and age, they were vitally important in the sense that they laid the groundwork for future theoretical development.

**Reiss’s Control Theory**

One of the first control theories of crime was proposed by Albert Reiss in 1951. Reiss claimed that delinquency was a consequence of weak ego or superego controls among juvenile probationers.\(^\text{48}\) Reiss found no explicit motivation for delinquent activity. Rather, he thought it would occur in the absence of controls or restraints against such behavior.

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\(^{47}\)Ibid.

Like Freud, Reiss believed that the family was the primary source through which deviant predispositions were discouraged. Furthermore, Reiss claimed that a sound family environment would provide for an individual’s needs and the essential emotional bonds that are so important in socializing individuals. Another important factor in Reiss’s model was close supervision, not only by the family but also by the community. He said that individuals must be closely monitored for delinquent behavior and adequately disciplined when they break the rules.

Personal factors, such as the ability to restrain one’s impulses and delay gratification, were also important in Reiss’s framework. These concepts are very similar to later, more modern concepts of control theory, which have been consistently supported by empirical research. For this reason, Reiss was ahead of his time when he first proposed his control theory. Although the direct tests of Reiss’s theory have provided only partial support for it, his influence is apparent in many contemporary criminological theories.

Toby’s Concept of Stake in Conformity

Soon after Reiss’s theory was presented, a similar theory was developed. In 1957, Jackson Toby proposed a theory of delinquency and gangs. He claimed that individuals were more inclined to act on their natural inclinations when the controls on them were weak. Like most other control theorists, Toby claimed that such inclinations toward deviance were distributed equally across all individuals. Furthermore, he emphasized the concept of a stake in conformity that supposedly prevents most people from committing crime. The stake in conformity Toby was referring to is the extent to which individuals have investments in conventional society. In other words, how much is a person willing to risk when he or she violates the law?

Studies have shown that stake in conformity is one of the most influential factors in individuals’ decisions to offend. People who have nothing to lose are much more likely to take risks and violate others’ rights than those who have relatively more invested in social institutions.

One distinguishing feature of Toby’s theory is his emphasis on peer influences in terms of both motivating and inhibiting antisocial behavior depending on whether most peers have low or high stakes in conformity. Toby’s stake in conformity has been used effectively in subsequent control theories of crime.

Nye’s Control Theory

A year after Toby introduced the stake in conformity, F. Ivan Nye proposed a relatively comprehensive control theory that placed a strong focus on the family. Following the assumptions of early control theorists, Nye claimed that there was no significant positive force that caused delinquency because such antisocial tendencies are universal and would be found in virtually everyone if not for certain controls usually found in the home.

Nye’s theory consisted of three primary components of control. The first component was internal control, which is formed through social interaction. This socialization, he claimed, assists in the development of a conscience. Nye further claimed that if individuals are not given adequate resources and care, they will follow their natural tendencies toward doing what is necessary to protect their interests.


See Bernard et al., Vold’s Theoretical Criminology, 202–3.


Nye’s second component of control was direct control, which consists of a wide range of constraints on individual propensities to commit deviant acts. Direct control includes numerous types of sanctions, such as jail and ridicule, and the restriction of one’s chances to commit criminal activity. Nye’s third component of control was indirect control, which occurs when individuals are strongly attached to their early caregivers. For most children, it is through an intense and strong relationship with their parents or guardians that they establish an attachment to conventional society. However, Nye suggested that when the needs of an individual are not met by their caregivers, inappropriate behavior can result.

As shown in Figure 8.3, Nye predicted a U-shaped curve of parental controls in predicting delinquency. Specifically, he argued that either no controls (i.e., complete freedom) or too much control (i.e., no freedom at all) would predict the most chronic delinquency. He believed that a healthy balance of freedom and parental control was the best strategy for inhibiting criminal activity. Some recent research supports Nye’s prediction. Contemporary control theories, such as Tittle’s control-balance theory, draw heavily on Nye’s idea of having a healthy balance of controls and freedom.

**Reckless’s Containment Theory**

Another control theory, known as containment theory, has been proposed by Walter Reckless. This theory emphasizes both inner containment and outer containment, which can be viewed as internal and external controls. Reckless broke from traditional assumptions of social control theories by identifying predictive factors that push or pull individuals toward antisocial behavior. However, the focus of his theory remained on the controlling elements, which can be seen in the emphasis placed on containment in the theory’s name.

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Reckless claimed that individuals can be pushed into delinquency by their social environment, such as by a lack of opportunities for education or employment. Furthermore, he pointed out that some individual factors, such as brain disorders or risk-taking personalities, could push some people to commit criminal behavior. Reckless also noted that some individuals could be pulled into criminal activity by hanging out with delinquent peers, watching too much violence on television, and so on. All told, Reckless went beyond the typical control theory assumption of inborn tendencies. In addition to these natural dispositions toward deviant behavior, containment theory proposes that extra pushes and pulls can motivate people to commit crime.

Reckless further claimed that the pushes and pulls toward criminal behavior could be enough to force individuals into criminal activity unless they are sufficiently contained or controlled. Reckless claimed that such containment should be both internal and external. By *internal containment*, he meant building a person’s sense of self, which helps the person resist the temptations of criminal activity. According to Reckless, other forms of internal containment include the ability to internalize societal norms. With respect to *external containment*, Reckless claimed that social organizations, such as school, church, and other institutions, are essential in building bonds that inhibit individuals from being pushed or pulled into criminal activity.

Reckless offered a visual image of containment theory, which we present in Figure 8.4. The outer circle (Circle 1) in the figure represents the social realm of pressures and pulls (e.g., peer pressure), whereas the innermost circle (Circle 4) symbolizes a person’s individual-level pushes to commit crime, such as predispositions or personality traits that are linked to crime. In between these two circles are the two layers of controls, external containment (Circle 2) and internal containment (Circle 3). The structure of Figure 8.4 and the examples included in each circle are those specifically noted by Reckless.57

While some studies have shown general support for containment theory, others offer more support for some components, such as internalization of rules, than for other factors, such as self-perception, in accounting for variations in delinquency.58 External factors may be more important than internal ones. Furthermore, some studies have noted weaker support for Reckless’s theory among minorities and females, who may be more influenced by their peers or other influences. Thus, the model appears to be most valid for White males, at least according to empirical studies.59

One of the problems with containment theory is that it does not go far enough toward specifying the factors that are important in predicting criminality, especially regarding specific groups of individuals. For example, an infinite number of concepts could potentially be categorized either as a push or pull toward criminality or as an inner or outer containment of criminality. Thus, the theory could be considered too broad or vague and not specific enough to be of practical value. To Reckless’s credit, however, containment theory has increased the exposure of control theories of criminal behavior. And although support for containment theory has been mixed, there is no doubt that it has influenced other, more recent control theories.60

**Modern Social Control Theories**

As the previous sections attest, control theory has been around in various forms for some time. Modern social control theories build on these earlier versions and add levels of depth and sophistication. Two modern social control theories are Matza’s drift theory and Hirschi’s social bonding theory.

57Ibid., 479.


Matza’s Drift Theory

The theory of drift, or drift theory, presented by David Matza in 1964, claims that individuals offend at certain times in their lives when social controls—such as parental supervision, employment, and family ties—are weakened. In developing his theory, Matza criticized earlier theories and their tendency to predict too much crime. For example, the Chicago School would incorrectly predict that all individuals in bad neighborhoods will commit crime. Likewise, strain theory predicts that all poor individuals will commit crime. Obviously, this is not true. Thus, Matza claimed that there is a degree of determinism (i.e., Positive School) in human behavior but also a significant amount of free will (i.e., Classical School). He called this perspective soft determinism, which is the gray area between free will and determinism. This is illustrated in Figure 8.5.

Returning to the basics of Matza’s theory, he claimed that individuals offend at the time in life when social controls are most weakened. As is well known, social controls are most weakened for most individuals during the teenage years. At this time, parents and other caretakers stop having a constant supervisory role, and at the same time, teenagers generally do not have too many responsibilities—such as careers or children—that would inhibit

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61Matza, Delinquency and Drift.
them from experimenting with deviance. This is very consistent with the well-known age–crime relationship; most individuals who are arrested experience this in their teenage years.62 Once sufficient ties are developed, people tend to mature out of criminal lifestyles.

Matza further claimed that when supervision is absent and ties are minimal, the majority of individuals are the most free to do what they want. Where, then, does the term drift come from? During the times when people have few ties and obligations, they will drift in and out of delinquency, Matza proposed. He pointed out that previous theories were unsuccessful in explaining this age–crime relationship:

Most theories of delinquency take no account of maturational reform; those that do often do so at the expense of violating their own assumptions regarding the constrained delinquent.63

Matza insisted that drifting is not the same as a commitment to a life of crime. Instead, it is experimenting with questionable behavior and then rationalizing it. The way youths rationalize behavior that they know to be wrong is through learning the techniques of neutralization discussed earlier.

Drift theory goes on to say that individuals do not reject the conventional normative structure. On the contrary, much offending is based on neutralizing or adhering to subterranean values, which young people have been socialized to use as a means of circumventing conventional values. This is basically the same as asserting one’s independence, which tends to occur with a vengeance during the teenage years.

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Subterranean values are quite prevalent and underlie many aspects of our culture, which is why Matza’s drift theory is also classified as a learning theory. For example, while it is conventional to believe that violence is wrong, boxing matches and sports that commonly lead to injury are some of the most popular spectator activities. Such phenomena create an atmosphere that readily allows neutralization or rationalization of criminal activity.

We will see other forms of subterranean values when we discuss risk-taking and low self-control later in this section. In many contexts, such as business, risk-taking and aggressiveness are seen as desirable characteristics, so many individuals are influenced by such subterranean values. This, according to Matza, adds to individuals’ likelihood of drifting into crime and delinquency.

Matza’s theory of drift seems sensible on its face, but empirical research examining the theory has shown mixed results. One of the primary criticisms of Matza’s theory, which even he acknowledged, is that it does not explain the most chronic offenders, the people who are responsible for the vast majority of serious, violent crimes. Chronic offenders often offend long before and well past their teenage years, which clearly limits the predictive value of Matza’s theory.

Despite its shortcomings, Matza’s drift theory appears to explain why many people offend exclusively during their teenage and young adult years but then grow out of it. Also, the theory is highly consistent with several of the ideas presented by control theorists, including the assumption that (a) selfish tendencies are universal, (b) these tendencies are inhibited by socialization and social controls, and (c) the selfish tendencies appear at times when controls are weakest. The theory goes beyond previous control theories by adding the concepts of soft determinism, neutralization, and subterranean values, as well as the idea that, in many contexts, selfish and aggressive behaviors are not wrong but actually desirable.

**Hirschi’s Social Bonding Theory**

Perhaps the most influential social control theory was presented by Travis Hirschi in 1969. Hirschi’s model of social bonding theory takes an assumption from Durkheim that “we are all animals, and thus naturally capable of committing criminal acts.” However, as Hirschi acknowledged, most humans can be adequately socialized to become tightly bonded to conventional entities, such as families, schools, and communities. Hirschi said that the more strongly a person is bonded to conventional society, the less prone to engaging in crime he or she will be. More specifically, the stronger the social bond, the lower the likelihood that an individual will commit criminal offenses.

As shown in Figure 8.6, Hirschi’s social bond is made up of four elements: (a) attachment, (b) commitment, (c) involvement, and (d) moral belief. The stronger or more developed the person in each of the four elements, the lower the likelihood that he or she will commit crime. Let us now consider each element in detail.

The most important factor in the social bond is attachment, which consist of affectionate bonds between an individual and his or her significant others. Attachment is vitally important for the internalization of conventional values. Hirschi said, “The essence of internalization of norms, conscience, or superego thus lies in the attachment of the individual to others.” Hirschi made it clear, as did Freud, that strong, early attachments are the most important factor in developing a social bond. The other constructs in the social bond—commitment, involvement, and belief—are contingent on adequate attachment to others, he argued. That is, without healthy attachments, especially early in life, the probability of acting inappropriately increases.
Commitment, the second element of Hirschi’s social bond, is the investment a person has in conventional society. This has been explained as one’s “stake in conformity,” or what is at risk of being lost if one gets caught committing crime. If people feel they have much to lose by committing crime, they will probably not do it. In contrast, if someone has nothing to lose, what is to prevent that person from doing something he or she may be punished for? The answer is, of course, not much. And this, some theorists claim, is why it is difficult to control so-called chronic offenders. Trying to instill a commitment to conventional society in such individuals is extremely difficult.

Another element of the social bond is involvement, which is the time spent in conventional activities. The assumption is that time spent in constructive activities will reduce time devoted to illegal behaviors. This element of the bond goes back to the old adage that “idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” Hirschi claimed that participating in conventional activities can inhibit delinquent and criminal activity.

The last element of the social bond is beliefs, which have generally been interpreted as moral beliefs concerning the laws and rules of society. This is one of the most examined and consistently supported aspects of the social bond. Basically, individuals who feel that a course of action is against their moral beliefs are much less likely to pursue it.
than individuals who don’t see a breach of morality in such behavior. For example, we all probably know some people who see drunk driving as a very serious offense because of the injury and death it can cause. However, we also probably know individuals who don’t see a problem with such behavior. The same can be said about speeding in a car, shoplifting from a store, or using marijuana; people differ in their beliefs about most forms of criminal activity.

Hirschi’s theory has been tested by numerous researchers and has, for the most part, been supported. However, one criticism is that the components of the social bond may predict criminality only if they are defined in a certain way. For example, with respect to the involvement element of the bond, studies have shown that not all conventional activities are equal when it comes to preventing delinquency. Only academic or religious activities seem to have consistent effects in inhibiting delinquency. In contrast, many studies show that teenagers who date or play sports actually have an increased risk of committing crime.

Another major criticism of Hirschi’s theory is that the effect of attachment on crime depends on to whom one is attached. Studies have clearly and consistently shown that attachment to delinquent peers is a strong predictor of criminal activity.

Finally, some evidence indicates that social bonding theory may better explain why individuals start offending than why they continue or escalate in their offending. One reason for this is that Hirschi’s theory does not elaborate on what occurs after an individual commits criminal activity. This is likely the primary reason why some of the more complex, integrated theories of crime often attribute the initiation of delinquency to a breakdown in the social bond. However, other theories (such as differential reinforcement) are typically seen as better predictors of what happens after the initial stages of the criminal career.

Despite the criticism it has received, Hirschi’s social bonding theory is still one of the most accepted theories of criminal behavior. It is a relatively convincing explanation for criminality because of the consistent support that it has found among samples of people taken from all over the world.

**Integrated Social Control Theories**

Although we will review integrated theories in detail in Section XI, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss the two integrated models that most incorporate the control perspective into their frameworks. These two integrated models are control-balance theory and power-control theory. Both have received considerable attention in the criminological literature. Other integrated theories that incorporate control theory to a lesser extent include Braithwaite’s shaming theory and Sampson and Laub’s life-course theory. These will be covered in more detail in Sections XI and XII.

**Tittle’s Control-Balance Theory**

Presented by Charles Tittle in 1995, control-balance theory proposes that (a) the amount of control to which one is subjected and (b) the amount of control one can exercise determine the probability that deviance will occur. The balance between these two types of control, he argued, can even predict the type of behavior that is likely to be committed.

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69For a review, see Akers, *Criminological Theories*, 105–10.

70Ibid.


72Walsh and Ellis, “Political Ideology.”


Tittle argued that a person is least likely to offend when he or she has a balance of controlling and being controlled. Furthermore, the likelihood of offending increases when these become unbalanced. If individuals are more controlled (Tittle calls this control surplus), then the theory predicts that they will commit predatory or defiant acts. In contrast, if an individual possesses an excessive level of control (Tittle calls this control deficit), then he or she will be more likely to commit acts of exploitation or decadence. Note that excessive control is not the same as excessive self-control. Tittle argues that people who are controlling, that is, who have excessive control over others, will be predisposed toward inappropriate activities.

Initial empirical tests of control-balance theory have reported mixed results, with both surpluses and deficits predicting the same types of deviance. In addition, researchers have uncovered differing effects of the control-balance ratio on two types of deviance that are contingent on gender. This finding is consistent with the gender-specific support found for Reckless’s containment theory, described earlier in this section.

Hagan’s Power-Control Theory

Power-control theory is an integrated theory that was proposed by John Hagan and his colleagues. The primary focus of this theory is on the level of control and patriarchal attitudes, as well as structure in the household, which are influenced by parental positions in the workforce. Power-control theory assumes that, in households where the mothers and fathers have relatively similar levels of power at work (i.e., balanced households), mothers will be less likely to exert control on their daughters. These balanced households will be less likely to experience gender differences in the criminal offending of the children. However, households in which mothers and fathers have dissimilar levels of power in the workplace (i.e., unbalanced households) are more likely to suppress criminal activity in daughters. In addition, assertiveness and risky activity among the males in the house will be encouraged. This assertiveness and risky activity may be a precursor to crime.

Most empirical tests of power-control have provided moderate support for the theory, while more recent studies have further specified the validity of the theory in different contexts. For example, one recent study reported that the influence of mothers, not fathers, on sons had the greatest impact on reducing the delinquency of young males. Another researcher found that differences in perceived threats of embarrassment and formal sanctions varied between more patriarchal and less patriarchal households. Finally, studies have also started measuring the effect of patriarchal attitudes on crime and delinquency. Power-control theory is a good example of a social control...
theory in that it is consistent with the idea that individuals must be socialized and that the gender differences in such socialization make a difference in how people will act throughout life.

**A General Theory of Crime: Low Self-Control**

In 1990, Travis Hirschi, along with his colleague Michael Gottfredson, proposed a general theory of low self-control, which is often referred to as the general theory of crime.\(^8^2\) This theory has led to a significant amount of debate and research in the field since its appearance—more than any other contemporary theory of crime. Like previous control theories of crime, this theory assumes that individuals are born predisposed toward selfish, self-centered activities and that only effective child rearing and socialization can create self-control. Without such adequate socialization (i.e., social controls) and reduction of criminal opportunities, individuals will follow their natural tendencies to become selfish predators. Furthermore, the general theory of crime assumes that self-control must be established by age 10. If it has not formed by that time, then, according to the theory, individuals will forever exhibit low self-control.

Although Gottfredson and Hirschi still attribute the formation of controls to the socialization processes, the distinguishing characteristic of this theory is its emphasis on the individual’s ability to control himself or herself. That is, the general theory of crime assumes that people can take a degree of control over their own decisions and, within certain limitations, control themselves.

The general theory of crime is accepted as one of the most valid theories of crime.\(^8^3\) This is probably because it identifies only one primary factor that causes criminality—low self-control. But, low self-control theory may actually implicate a series of personality traits and behavior, including risk-taking, impulsiveness, self-centeredness, short-term orientation, and quick temper. For example, recent research has supported the idea that inadequate child-rearing practices tend to result in lower levels of self-control among children and that these low levels produce various risky behaviors, including criminal activity.\(^8^4\) Such propensities toward low self-control can manifest in varying forms across an individual’s life. For example, teenagers with low self-control will likely hit or steal from peers, and as they grow older, they will be more likely to gamble or cheat on taxes.

**Psychological Aspects of Low Self-Control**

Criminologists have recently claimed that low self-control may be due to the emotional disposition of individuals. For example, one study showed that the effects of low self-control on intentions to commit drunk driving and shoplifting were tied to individuals’ perceptions of pleasure and shame. More specifically, the findings of this study showed that individuals who had low self-control had significantly lower levels of anticipated shame but significantly higher levels of perceived pleasure in committing both drunk driving and shoplifting.\(^8^5\) These results suggest that individuals who lack self-control will be oriented toward gaining pleasure and taking advantage of resources and toward avoiding negative emotional feelings (e.g., shame) that are primarily induced through socialization.

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Physiological Aspects of Low Self-Control

Low self-control can also be tied to physiological factors. Interestingly, research has shown that chronic offenders show greater arousal toward danger and risk-taking than toward the possibility of punishment. This arousal has been measured by monitoring brain activity in response to certain stimuli. The research suggests that individuals are encouraged to commit risky behavior due to physiological mechanisms that reward their risk-taking activities by releasing pleasure chemicals in their brains.

In a similar vein, recent studies show that chronic gamblers tend to get a physiological high (such as a sudden, intense release of brain chemicals similar to that following a small dose of cocaine) from the activity of betting, particularly when they are gambling with their own money and risking a personal loss. Undoubtedly, a minority of individuals thrive off of risk-taking behaviors significantly more than others. This suggests that physiological as well as psychological differences may explain why certain individuals favor risky behaviors.

Researchers have also found that criminal offenders generally perceive a significantly lower level of internal sanctions (e.g., shame, guilt, embarrassment) than do nonoffenders. So, in summary, a select group of individuals appear to derive physiological and psychological pleasure from engaging in risky behaviors while simultaneously being less likely to be inhibited by internal emotional sanctions. Such a combination, Gottfredson and Hirschi claimed, is very dangerous and helps explain why impulsive individuals often end up in prison.

Finally, the psychological and physiological aspects of low self-control may help explain the gender differences observed between males and females. Specifically, studies show that females are significantly more likely than males to experience internal emotional sanctioning for offenses they have committed. In other words, there appears to be something innately different about males and females that helps explain the differing levels of self-control each possesses.

Summary of Control Theories

Control perspectives are among the oldest and most respected explanations of criminal activity. The fundamental assumption that humans have an inborn, selfish disposition that must be controlled through socialization distinguishes control theories from other theories of crime. The control perspective's longevity as one of the most popular criminological theories demonstrates its legitimacy as an explanation of behavior. This is likely due to the dedication and efforts of criminologists who are constantly developing new and improved versions of control theory, many of which we have discussed here.

Policy Implications

Numerous policy implications can be taken from the various types of social learning and control theories presented here. We will concentrate on those that are likely to be most effective and pragmatic in helping to reduce criminal behavior.

A number of policy implications can be drawn from the various learning models. Perhaps their most important suggestion is to supply many opportunities for positive reinforcements, or rewards, for good behavior. Such...
reinforcements have been found to be far more effective than punishments, especially among criminal offenders. Further-
more, studies show that the most effective rehabilitation programs for offenders should be based on a cognitive behavioral ap-
proach, which teaches individuals to think before they act. Furthermore, evaluation studies have shown that simply group-
ing offenders together for counseling or peer-therapy sessions is not an effective strategy; rather, it appears that such programs
often show no effect, or actually increase offending among participants, perhaps because they tend to learn more anti-
social attitudes from such sessions. Ultimately, offender programs that emphasize positive reinforcements and are based on a
cognitive behavioral approach show the greatest success.

Regarding the policy implications of control theories, we will focus on the early social bonding that must take
place and the need for more parental supervision to help an individual develop or learn self-control and create
healthy, strong bonds to conventional society. Most control theories assume that individuals are predisposed to
criminal behavior, so the primary focus of programs should be to reduce this propensity toward such behavior.
According to most control perspectives, the most important factor in preventing or controlling this predisposition
involves early parenting and building attachments or ties to prosocial aspects of the individual’s environment.

Thus, perhaps the most important policy recommendation is to increase the ties between early caregivers or
parents and their children. A variety of programs try to increase the relationship and bonding that takes place
between infants and young children and their parents, as well as to monitor the supervision that takes place in this
dynamic. Such programs have consistently been shown to be effective in preventing and reducing criminality in
high-risk children, especially when such programs involve home visitations by health care providers (e.g., nurses)
and social care experts (e.g., social workers). By visiting the homes of high-risk children, workers can provide more
direct, personal attention in aiding and counseling parents about how best to nurture, monitor, and discipline their
young children. These types of programs may lead to more control over behavior while building stronger bonds to
society and developing self-control among these high-risk individuals.

**Conclusion**

In this section, we have discussed a wide range of theories that may appear to be quite different. However, all of the
criminological theories here share an emphasis on social processes as the primary reason why individuals commit
crime. This is true of the learning theories, which propose that people are taught to commit crime, as well as the
control theories, which claim that people offend naturally and must be taught not to commit crime. Despite their
seemingly opposite assumptions of human behavior, the fact is that learning and control theories both identify
socialization, or the lack thereof, as the key cause of criminal behavior.

We also examined some of the key policy recommendations that have been suggested by both of these theoretical
perspectives. Specifically, we noted that programs that simply group offenders together only seem to reinforce
their tendency to offend, whereas programs that take a cognitive behavioral approach and use many reward oppor-
tunities appear to have some effect in reducing recidivism. Also, we concluded that programs that involve home
visitations by experts (e.g., nurses, counselors) tend to aid in developing more effective parenting and building social
bonds among young individuals, which helps them to build strong attachments to society and develop self-control.

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91. Van Voorhis and Salisbury, *Correctional Counseling.*
92. Ibid.
First, we discussed what distinguishes learning theories of crime from other perspectives. Then we reviewed Glaser’s differential identification theory, which emphasizes the learning that takes place via reference groups or role models. We then discussed Sutherland’s differential association theory and how this framework was improved by Akers’s differential reinforcement theory. We examined in depth the psychological learning model of classical conditioning, as well as its limitations. We then explored two other learning models that formed the basis of differential reinforcement theory, namely, operant conditioning and learning according to modeling or imitation. We reviewed the theory of neutralization, including the five original techniques of neutralization presented by Sykes and Matza. We also reviewed several early forms of social control theory, such as Hobbes’s, Freud’s, and Durkheim’s. Then we examined the early social control theories of crime, presented by Reiss, Toby, and Nye, along with Reckless’s containment theory. We then examined more modern social control theories, such as Matza’s drift theory and Hirschi’s social bonding theory. Integrated social control theories were briefly examined, including Tittle’s control-balance theory and Hagan’s power-control theory. Finally, we reviewed low self-control theory from both a psychological and a physiological perspective.

**KEY TERMS**

- classical conditioning
- id
- power-control theory
- containment theory
- learning theories
- social bonding theory
- control-theory
- modeling and imitation
- soft determinism
- diffusion association theory
- negative punishment
- stake in conformity
- differential association theory
- negative reinforcement
- subterranean values
- differential identification theory
- neutralization theory
- superego
- differential reinforcement theory
- operant conditioning
- tabula rasa
- drift theory
- positive punishment
- theory of low self-control
- ego
- positive reinforcement

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What distinguishes learning theories from other criminological theories?
2. What distinguishes differential association from differential reinforcement theory?
3. What did differential identification add to learning theories?
4. Which technique of neutralization do you use or relate to the most? Why?
5. Which technique of neutralization do you find least valid? Why?

6. Which element of Hirschi’s social bond do you find you have highest levels of?

7. Which element of Hirschi’s social bond do you find you have lowest levels of?

8. Can you identify someone you know who fits the profile of a person with low self-control?

9. Which aspects of the low self-control personality do you think you fit?

10. Do you think Matza’s theory of drift relates to when you or your friends have committed crime in life? Studies show that most people commit crimes when they are in their teens or 20s, or at least know people who do (e.g., drinking under age 21, speeding).

WEB RESOURCES

Differential Association Theory
http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/sutherland.html

Differential Reinforcement Theory
http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/akers.htm

Social and Self-Control Theory
http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/hirschi.htm

Techniques of Neutralization
http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/matza.htm
This selection may be one of the most important entries in the book, primarily because it is written by Edwin H. Sutherland, who is generally regarded as the most important criminologist of the 20th century. One of the key reasons that Sutherland is held in such high regard is because of his proposed theoretical model of criminal behavior, which is known as differential association theory. This theory contains nine propositions, which are the focus of this selection. Readers should keep in mind that when these nine propositions were presented in the early to mid-1900s, the primary emphasis of criminological theory and research was on how offenders are physically (e.g., body type theories) or psychologically (e.g., IQ) different from nonoffenders. Although the social learning of criminal behavior is often assumed by modern criminologists, at that time Sutherland’s emphasis was seen as a major break from widely accepted theoretical frameworks.

Specifically, Sutherland claims that offenders are no different, physically or psychologically, from nonoffenders. Rather, he concludes that individuals engage in offending because they are exposed to significant others (e.g., family, friends) who teach them the norms and techniques beneficial for committing crime. It is also important to keep in mind that Sutherland’s theory is just as deterministic as previous theories (e.g., Lombroso’s theory, Goddard’s feeblemindedness theory, Sheldon’s body type theory) in the sense that Sutherland claims that people do not have free choice or free will in determining their actions; rather, it all comes down to whom they associate with the most, and their attitudes regarding the violation of law.

It is also important to note that Sutherland bases his theory on classical conditioning, which was the dominant psychological model of learning when Sutherland developed differential association theory. Classical conditioning is based on Pavlov’s concept of learning through association between stimuli and responses. Good examples can be easily found in everyday life, such as when people hear a certain song on the radio or smell a certain scent that reminds them of a particular event from their past. Although there is no doubt that classical conditioning, or learning via association, is a valid way that individuals learn, we will see later in this section that Sutherland’s reliance on only this one model of learning somewhat limited his theory because it does not take other learning models into account.

**A Sociological Theory of Criminal Behavior**

**Edwin H. Sutherland**

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**Explanation of Criminal Behavior**

The following statement refers to the process by which a particular person comes to engage in criminal behavior.

1. *Criminal behavior is learned.* Negatively, this means that criminal[ity] is not inherited, as such;

2. *Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication.* This communication is verbal in many respects but includes also “the communication of gestures.”

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3. The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups. Negatively, this means that the impersonal agencies of communication, such as movies and newspapers, play a relatively unimportant part in the genesis of criminal behavior.

4. When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes very simple; (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.

5. The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable. In some societies an individual is surrounded by persons who invariably define the legal codes as rules to be observed, while in others he is surrounded by persons whose definitions are favorable to the violation of the legal codes. In our American society these definitions are almost always mixed, with the consequences that we have culture conflict in relation to the legal codes.

6. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law. This is the principle of differential association. It refers to both criminal and anti-criminal associations and has to do with countering forces. When persons become criminal, they do so because of contacts with criminal patterns and also because of isolation from anti-criminal patterns. Any person inevitably assimilates the surrounding culture unless other patterns are in conflict; a Southerner does not pronounce “r” because other Southerners do not pronounce “r.” Negatively, this proposition of differential association means that associations which are neutral so far as crime is concerned have little or no effect on the genesis of criminal behavior. Much of the experience of a person is neutral in this sense, e.g., learning to brush one’s teeth. This behavior has no negative or positive effect on criminal behavior except as it may be related to associations which are concerned with the legal codes.

This neutral behavior is important especially as an occupier of the time of a child so that he is not in contact with criminal behavior during the time he is so engaged in the neutral behavior.

7. Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. This means that associations with criminal behavior and also associations with anti-criminal behavior vary in those respects. “Frequency” and “duration” as modalities of associations are obvious and need no explanation. “Priority” is assumed to be important in the sense that lawful behavior developed in early childhood may persist throughout life, and also that delinquent behavior developed in early childhood may persist throughout life. This tendency, however, has not been adequately demonstrated, and priority seems to be important principally through its selective influence. “Intensity” is not precisely defined but it has to do with such things as the prestige of the source of a criminal or anti-criminal pattern and with emotional reactions related to the associations. In a precise description of the criminal behavior of a person these modalities would be stated in quantitative form and a mathematical ratio be reached. A formula in this sense has not been developed, and the development of such a formula would be extremely difficult.

8. The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning. Negatively, this means that the learning of criminal behavior is not restricted to the process of imitation. A person who is seduced, for instance, learns criminal behavior by association, but this process would not ordinarily be described as imitation.

9. While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values since non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values. Thieves generally steal in order to secure money, but likewise honest laborers work in order to secure money. The attempts by many scholars to explain criminal behavior by general
drives and values, such as, the happiness principle, striving for social status, the money motive, or frustration, have been and must continue to be futile since they explain lawful behavior as completely as they explain criminal behavior. They are similar to respiration, which is necessary for any behavior but which does not differentiate criminal from non-criminal behavior.

It is not necessary, at this level of explanation, to explain why a person has the associations which he has; this certainly involves a complex of many things. In an area where the delinquency rate is high a boy who is sociable, gregarious, active, and athletic is very likely to come in contact with the other boys in the neighborhood, learn delinquent behavior from them, and become a gangster; in the same neighborhood the psychopathic boy who is isolated, introvert, and inert may remain at home, not become acquainted with the other boys in the neighborhood, and not become delinquent. In another situation, the sociable, athletic, aggressive boy may become a member of a scout troop and not become involved in delinquent behavior. The person's associations are determined in a general context of social organization. A child is ordinarily reared in a family; the place of residence of the family is determined largely by family income; and the delinquency rate is, in many respects, related to the rental value of the houses. Many other factors enter into this social organization, including many of the small personal group relationships.

The preceding explanation of criminal behavior is stated from the point of view of the person who engages in criminal behavior. As indicated earlier, it is possible, also, to state sociological theories of criminal behavior from the point of view of the community, nation, or other group. The problem, when thus stated, is generally concerned with crime rates and involves a comparison of the crime rates of various groups or the crime rates of a particular group at different times. The explanation of a crime rate must be consistent with the explanation of the criminal behavior of the person, since the crime rate is a summary statement of the number of persons in the group who commit crimes and the frequency with which they commit crimes. One of the best explanations of crime rates from this point of view is that a high crime rate is due to social disorganization. The term “social disorganization” is not entirely satisfactory and it seems preferable to substitute for it the term “differential social organization.” The postulate on which this theory is based, regardless of the name, is that crime is rooted in the social organization and is an expression of that social organization. A group may be organized for criminal behavior or organized against criminal behavior. Most communities are organized both for criminal and anti-criminal behavior and in that sense the crime rate is an expression of the differential group organization. Differential group organization as an explanation of variations in crime rates is consistent with the differential association theory of the processes by which persons become criminals.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Using Sutherland’s first three propositions, how does he claim criminal behavior is learned? What does he have to say about the effect of movies and media on the learning of criminal behavior?

2. What two types of learning does Sutherland claim takes place in his fourth proposition? Provide an example of each of these two types.

3. Sutherland’s sixth proposition is often considered the best summary of his theory. Explain what this proposition means as if you were trying to tell a person who knows nothing about criminology. Also, do you agree with it? Why or why not?

4. What four types of associations are identified by Sutherland in his seventh proposition? Explain each, and provide your opinion on which of the four types is most important in determining criminal activity.
In this selection, Ron Akers presents a theoretical model known as differential reinforcement theory. Although some, including Akers himself, often refer to this theory as social learning theory, this label is a bit confusing because there are many social learning theories. We prefer differential reinforcement theory as the name of this framework because, when you say this, criminologists know exactly which theoretical model you are referring to, and also because the term reinforcement specifies the key concept that distinguishes this model from all other social learning theories.

Differential reinforcement theory builds on the framework provided by Sutherland’s differential association theory but adds two important models of social learning that were not included in Sutherland’s theory. Specifically, Sutherland based his differential association model on only one type of social learning: classical conditioning. While including classical conditioning in its framework, Akers’s theory of differential reinforcement adds two additional learning models: operant conditioning and modeling and imitation. Operant conditioning is based on B. F. Skinner’s work in psychology, which emphasizes whether punishments or reinforcements (i.e., rewards) occur after a given activity. The other learning model is modeling and imitation, which is largely based on Bandura’s psychological model of learning through observation, such as what happens when children watch what adults do and then imitating their behavior—in other words, “monkey see, monkey do.” Differential reinforcement theory is an improvement over Sutherland’s differential association theory because it takes all three learning processes—classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and modeling and imitation—into account in the theoretical model. While reading this selection, readers are encouraged to consider how the primary concepts and propositions of the theory occur in their lives, not necessarily in terms of criminal behavior, but in the learning of any behavior. Another important aspect of Sutherland’s theory that Akers’s differential reinforcement theory adopts is that the processes involved in the learning of criminal behavior are the same as the processes for learning all types of conventional behavior.

**A Social Learning Theory of Crime**

Ronald L. Akers

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Concise Statement of the Theory

The basic assumption in social learning theory is that the same learning process, operating in a context of social structure, interaction, and situation, produces both conforming and deviant behavior. The difference lies in the direction of the process in which these mechanisms operate. In both, it is seldom an either-or, all-or-nothing process; what is involved, rather, is the balance of influences on behavior. That balance usually exhibits some stability over time, but it can become unstable and change with time or circumstances. Conforming and deviant behavior is learned by all of the mechanisms in this process, but the theory proposes that the principal mechanisms are in that part of the process in which differential reinforcement (instrumental learning through rewards and punishers) and imitation (observational learning) produce both overt behavior and cognitive definitions that function as discriminative (cue) stimuli for the behavior. Always implied, and
sometimes made explicit when these concepts are called upon to account for deviant/conforming behavior, is the understanding that the behavioral processes in operant and classical conditioning are in operation (see below). However, social learning theory focuses on four major concepts—differential association, differential reinforcement, imitation, and definitions. The central proposition of the social learning theory of criminal and deviant behavior can be stated as a long sentence proposing that criminal and deviant behavior is more likely when, on balance, the combined effects of these four main sets of variables instigate and strengthen nonconforming over conforming acts:

The probability that persons will engage in criminal and deviant behavior is increased and the probability of their conforming to the norm is decreased when they differentially associate with others who commit criminal behavior and espouse definitions favorable to it, are relatively more exposed in-person or symbolically to salient criminal/deviant models, define it as desirable or justified in a situation discriminative for the behavior, and have received in the past and anticipate in the current or future situation relatively greater reward than punishment for the behavior.

The probability of conforming behavior is increased and the probability of deviant behavior is decreased when the balance of these variables moves in the reverse direction.

Each of the four main components of this statement can be presented as a separate testable hypothesis. The individual is more likely to commit violations when:

1. He or she differentially associates with other[s] who commit, model, and support violations of social and legal norms.
2. The violative behavior is differentially reinforced over behavior in conformity to the norm.
3. He or she is more exposed to and observes more deviant than conforming models.
4. His or her own learned definitions are favorable toward committing the deviant acts.

### General Principles of Social Learning Theory

Since it is a general explanation of crime and deviance of all kinds, social learning is not simply a theory about how novel criminal behavior is learned or a theory only of the positive causes of that behavior. It embraces variables that operate to both motivate and control delinquent and criminal behavior, to both promote and undermine conformity. It answers the questions of why people do and do not violate norms. The probability of criminal or conforming behavior occurring is a function of the variables operating in the underlying social learning process. The main concepts/variables and their respective empirical indicators have been identified and measured, but they can be viewed as indicators of a general latent construct, for which additional indicators can be devised (Akers & La Greca, 1991; Akers & Lee, 1996).

Social learning accounts for the individual becoming prone to deviant or criminal behavior and for stability or change in that propensity. Therefore, the theory is capable of accounting for the development of stable individual differences, as well as changes in the individual’s behavioral patterns or tendencies to commit deviant and criminal acts, over time and in different situations. . . . The social learning process operates in each individual’s learning history and in the immediate situation in which the opportunity for a crime occurs.

Deviant and criminal behavior is learned and modified (acquired, performed, repeated, maintained, and changed) through all of the same cognitive and behavioral mechanisms as conforming behavior. They differ in the direction, content, and outcome of the behavior learned. Therefore, it is inaccurate to state, for instance, that peer influence does not explain adolescent deviant behavior since conforming behavior is also peer influenced in adolescence. The theory expects peer influences to be implicated in both; it is the content and direction of the influence that is the key.

The primary learning mechanisms are differential reinforcement (instrumental conditioning), in which behavior is a function of the frequency, amount, and probability of experienced and perceived contingent rewards and punishments, and imitation, in which the behavior of others and its consequences are observed and modeled. The process of stimulus discrimination/generalization is another important mechanism; here, overt and covert stimuli, verbal and cognitive, act as cues or signals for behavior.
to occur. As I point out below, there are other behavioral mechanisms in the learning process, but these are not as important and are usually left implied rather than explained in the theory.

The content of the learning achieved by these mechanisms includes the simple and complex behavioral sequences and the definitions (beliefs, attitudes, justifications, orientations) that in turn become discriminative for engaging in deviant and criminal behavior. The probability that conforming or norm-violative behavior is learned and performed, and the frequency with which it is committed, are a function of the past, present, and anticipated differential reinforcement for the behavior and the deviant or nondeviant direction of the learned definitions and other discriminative stimuli present in a given situation.

These learning mechanisms operate in a process of differential association—direct and indirect, verbal and nonverbal communication, interaction, and identification with others. The relative frequency, intensity, duration, and priority of associations affect the relative amount, frequency, and probability of reinforcement of conforming or deviant behavior and exposure of individuals to deviant or conforming norms and behavioral models. To the extent that the individual can control with whom she or he associates, the frequency, intensity, and duration of those associations are themselves affected by how rewarding or aversive they are. The principal learning is through differential association with those persons and groups (primary, secondary, reference, and symbolic) that comprise or control the individual’s major sources of reinforcement, most salient behavioral models, and most effective definitions and other discriminative stimuli for committing and repeating behavior. The reinforcement and discriminative stimuli are mainly social (such as socially valued rewards and punishers contingent on the behavior), but they are also nonsocial (such as unconditioned physiological reactions to environmental stimuli and physical effects of ingested substances and the physical environment).

Sequence and Reciprocal Effects in the Social Learning Process

Behavioral feedback effects are built into the concept of differential reinforcement—actual or perceived changes in the environment produced by the behavior feed back on that behavior to affect its repetition or extinction, and both prior and anticipated rewards and punishments influence present behavior. Reciprocal effects between the individual’s behavior and definitions or differential association are also reflected in the social learning process. This process is one in which the probability of both the initiation and the repetition of a deviant or criminal act (or the initiation and repetition of conforming acts) is a function of the learning history of the individual and the set of reinforcement contingencies and discriminative stimuli in a given situation. The typical process of initiation, continuation, progression, and desistance is hypothesized to be as follows:

1. The balance of past and current associations, definitions, and imitation of deviant models, and the anticipated balance of reinforcement in particular situations, produces or inhibits the initial delinquent or deviant acts.

2. The effects of these variables continue in the repetition of acts, although imitation becomes less important than it was in the first commission of the act.

3. After initiation, the actual social and nonsocial reinforcers and punishers affect the probability that the acts will be or will not be repeated and at what level of frequency.

4. Not only the overt behavior, but also the definitions favorable or unfavorable to it, are affected by the positive and negative consequences of the initial acts. To the extent that they are more rewarded than alternative behavior, the favorable definitions will be strengthened and the unfavorable definitions will be weakened, and it becomes more likely that the deviant behavior will be repeated under similar circumstances.

5. Progression into more frequent or sustained patterns, rather than cessation or reduction, of criminal and deviant behavior is promoted to the extent that reinforcement, exposure to deviant models, and norm-violating definitions are not offset by negative formal and informal sanctions and norm abiding definitions.

The theory does not hypothesize that definitions favorable to law violation always precede and are unaffected
by the commission of criminal acts. Although the probability of a criminal act increases in the presence of favorable definitions, acts in violation of the law do occur (through imitation and reinforcement) in the absence of any thought given to whether the acts are right or wrong. Furthermore, the individual may apply neutralizing definitions retroactively to excuse or justify an act without having contemplated them beforehand. To the extent that such excuses become associated with successfully mitigating others’ negative sanctions or one’s self-punishment, however, they become cues for the repetition of deviant acts. Such definitions, therefore, precede committing the same acts again or committing similar acts in the future.

Differential association with conforming and nonconforming others typically precedes the individual’s committing crimes and delinquent acts. This sequence of events is sometimes disputed in the literature because it is mistakenly believed to apply only to differential peer association in general or to participation in delinquent gangs in particular without reference to family and other group associations. It is true that the theory recognizes peer associations as very important in adolescent deviance and that differential association is most often measured in research by peer associations. But the theory also hypothesizes that the family is a very important primary group in the differential association process, and it plainly stipulates that other primary and secondary groups besides peers are involved (see Sutherland, 1947, pp. 164–65). Accordingly, it is a mistake to interpret differential association as referring only to peer associations. The theoretical stipulation that differential association is causally prior to the commission of delinquent and criminal acts is not confined to the balance of peer associations; rather, it is the balance (as determined by the modalities) of family, peer, and other associations. According to the priority principle, association, reinforcement, modeling, and exposure to conforming and deviant definitions occurring within the family during childhood, and such antisocial conduct as aggressiveness, lying, and cheating learned in early childhood, occur prior to and have both direct and selective effects on later delinquent and criminal behavior and associations . . . .

The socializing behavior of parents, guardians, or caretakers is certainly reciprocally influenced by the deviant and unacceptable behavior of the child. However, it can never be true that the onset of delinquency precedes and initiates interaction in a particular family (except in the unlikely case of the late-stage adoption of a child who is already delinquent or who is drawn to and chosen by deviant parents). Thus, interaction in the family or family surrogate always precedes delinquency.

But this is not true for adolescent peer associations. One may choose to associate with peers based on similarity in deviant behavior that already exists. Some major portion of this behavioral similarity results from previous association with other delinquent peers or from anticipatory socialization undertaken to make one’s behavior match more closely that of the deviant associates to whom one is attracted. For some adolescents, gravitation toward delinquent peers occurs after and as a result of the individual’s involvement in delinquent behavior. However, peer associations are most often formed initially around interests, friendships, and such circumstances as neighborhood proximity, family similarities, values, beliefs, age, school attended, grade in school, and mutually attractive behavioral patterns that have little to do directly with co-involvement or similarity in specifically law-violating or serious deviant behavior. Many of these factors in peer association are not under the adolescents’ control, and some are simply happenstance. The theory does not, contrary to the Gluecks’ distorted characterization, propose that “accidental differential association of non-delinquents with delinquents is the basic cause of crime” (Glueck & Glueck, 1950, p. 164). Interaction and socialization in the family precedes and affects choices of both conforming and deviant peer associations.

Those peer associations will affect the nature of models, definitions, and rewards/punishers to which the person is exposed. After the associations have been established, their reinforcing or punishing consequences as well as direct and vicarious consequences of the deviant behavior will affect both the continuation of old and the seeking of new associations (those over which one has any choice). One may choose further interaction with others based on whether they too are involved in deviant or criminal behavior; in such cases, the outcomes of that interaction are more rewarding than aversive and it is anticipated that the associates will more likely approve or be permissive toward one’s own deviant behavior. Further interaction with delinquent peers, over which the individual has no choice, may also result from being apprehended and confined by the juvenile or criminal-justice system.

These reciprocal effects would predict that one’s own deviant or conforming behavioral patterns can have effects
on choice of friends; these are weaker in the earlier years, but should become stronger as one moves through adolescence and gains more control over friendship choices. The typical sequence outlined above would predict that deviant associations precede the onset of delinquent behavior more frequently than the sequence of events in which the delinquent associations begin only after the peers involved have already separately and individually established similar patterns of delinquent behavior. Further, these behavioral tendencies that develop prior to peer association will themselves be the result of previous associations, models, and reinforcement, primarily in the family. Regardless of the sequence in which onset occurs, and whatever the level of the individual's delinquent involvement, its frequency and seriousness will increase after the deviant associations have begun and decrease as the associations are reduced. That is, whatever the temporal ordering, differential association with deviant peers will have a causal effect on one's own delinquent behavior (just as his actions will have an effect on his peers).

Therefore, both “selection,” or “flocking” (tendency for persons to choose interaction with others with behavioral similarities), and “socialization,” or “feathering” (tendency for persons who interact to have mutual influence on one another's behavior), are part of the same overall social learning process and are explained by the same variables. A peer “socialization” process and a peer “selection” process in deviant behavior are not mutually exclusive, but are simply the social learning process operating at different times. Arguments that social learning posts only the latter, that any evidence of selective mechanisms in deviant interaction run counter to social learning theory (Strictland, 1982; Stafford & Ekland-Olson, 1982), or that social learning theory recognizes only a recursive, one-way causal effect of peers on delinquent behavior (Thornberry et al., 1994; Catalano et al., 1996) are wrong.

**Behavioral and Cognitive Mechanisms in Social Learning**

The first statement in Sutherland's theory was a simple declarative sentence maintaining that criminal behavior is learned, and the eighth statement declared that this involved all the mechanisms involved in any learning. What little Sutherland added in his (1947, p. 7) commentary downplayed imitation as a possible learning mechanism in criminal behavior. He mentioned “seduction” of a person into criminal behavior as something that is not covered by the concept of imitation. He defined neither imitation nor seduction and offered no further discussion of mechanisms of learning in any of his papers or publications. Recall that filling this major lacuna in Sutherland's theory was the principal goal of the 1966b Burgess-Akers reformulation. To this end we combined Sutherland's first and eighth statements into one: “Criminal behavior is learned according to the principles of operant conditioning.” The phrase “principles of operant conditioning” was meant as a shorthand reference to all of the behavioral mechanisms of learning in that had been empirically validated.

Burgess and I delineated, as much as space allowed, what these specific learning mechanisms were: (1) operant conditioning, differential reinforcement of voluntary behavior through positive and negative reinforcement and punishment; (2) respondent (involuntary reflexes), or “classical,” conditioning; (3) unconditioned (primary) and conditioned (secondary) reinforcers and punishers; (4) shaping and response differentiation; (5) stimulus discrimination and generalization, the environmental and internal stimuli that provide cues or signals indicating differences and similarities across situations that help elicit, but do not directly reinforce, behavior; (6) types of reinforcement schedules, the rate and ratio in which rewards and punishers follow behavior; (7) stimulus-response constellations; and (8) stimulus satiation and deprivation. We also reported research showing the applicability of these mechanisms of learning to both conforming and deviant behavior.

Burgess and I used the term “operant conditioning” to emphasize that differential reinforcement (the balance of reward and punishment contingent upon behavioral responses) is the basic mechanism around which the others revolve and by which learning most relevant to conformity or violation of social and legal norms is produced. This was reflected in other statements in the theory in which the only learning mechanisms listed were differential reinforcement and stimulus discrimination.

We also subsumed imitation, or modeling, under these principles and argued that imitation “may be analyzed quite parsimoniously with the principles of modern behavior theory,” namely, that it is simply a sub-class of behavioral shaping through operant conditioning (Burgess and Akers, 1966b, p. 138). For this reason we made no specific mention of imitation in any of the seven statements. Later, I became
persuaded that the operant principle of gradual shaping of responses through “successive approximations” only incompletely and awkwardly incorporated the processes of observational learning and vicarious reinforcement that Bandura and Walters (1963) had identified. Therefore, without dismissing successive approximation as a way in which some imitative behavior could be shaped, I came to accept Bandura’s conceptualization of imitation. That is, imitation is a separate learning mechanism characterized by modeling one’s own actions on the observed behavior of others and on the consequences of that behavior (vicarious reinforcement) prior to performing the behavior and experiencing its consequences directly. Whether the observed acts will be performed and repeated depends less on the continuing presence of models and more on the actual or anticipated rewarding or aversive consequences of the behavior. I became satisfied that the principle of “observational learning” could account for the acquisition, and to some extent the performance, of behavior by a process that did not depend on operant conditioning or “instrumental learning.” Therefore, in later discussions of the theory, while continuing to posit differential reinforcement as the core behavior-shaping mechanism, I included imitation as another primary mechanism in acquiring behavior. Where appropriate, discriminative stimuli were also specifically invoked as affecting behavior, while I made only general reference to other learning mechanisms.

Note that the term “operant conditioning” in the opening sentence of the Burgess-Akers revision reflected our great reliance on the orthodox behaviorism that assumed the empirical irrelevance of cognitive variables. Social behaviorism, on the other hand, recognizes “cognitive” as well as “behavioral” mechanisms (see Bandura, 1969; 1977a; 1977b; 1986; 1989; Grusec, 1992; Staats, 1975). My social learning theory of criminal behavior retains a strong element of the symbolic interactionism found in Sutherland’s theory (Akers, 1985, pp. 39–70). As a result, it is closer to cognitive learning theories, such as Albert Bandura’s, than to the radical operant behaviorism of B. F. Skinner with which Burgess and I began. It is for this reason, and the reliance on such concepts as imitation, anticipated reinforcement, and self-reinforcement, that I have described social learning theory as “soft behaviorism” (Akers, 1985, p. 65).

The unmodified term “learning” implies to many that the theory only explains the acquisition of novel behavior by the individual, in contrast to behavior that is committed at a given time and place or the maintenance of behavior over time (Cornish and Clarke, 1986). It has also been interpreted to mean only “positive” learning of novel behavior, with no relevance for inhibition of behavior or of learning failures (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). As I have made clear above, neither of these interpretations is accurate. The phrase that Burgess and I used, “effective and available reinforcers and the existing reinforcement contingencies,” and the discussion of reinforcement occurring under given situations (Burgess & Akers, 1966b, pp. 141, 134) make it obvious that we were not proposing a theory only of past reinforcement in the acquisition of a behavioral repertoire with no regard for the reward/cost balance obtaining at a given time and place. There is nothing in the learning principles that restrict[s] them to prior socialization or past history of learning. Social learning encompasses both the acquisition and the performance of the behavior, both facilitation and inhibition of behavior, and both learning successes and learning failures. The learning mechanisms account not only for the initiation of behavior but also for repetition, maintenance and desistance of behavior. They rely not only on prior behavioral processes but also on those operating at a given time in a given situation.

### Definitions and Discriminative Stimuli

[In] The Concept of Definitions, Sutherland asserted that learning criminal behavior includes “techniques of committing the crime which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes very simple” and the “specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations and attitudes” (1947, p. 6). I have retained both definitions and techniques in social learning theory, with clarified and modified conceptual meanings and with hypothesized relationships to criminal behavior. The qualification that “techniques” may be simple or complex shows plainly that Sutherland did not mean to include only crime-specific skills learned in order to break the law successfully. Techniques also clearly include ordinary, everyday abilities. This same notion is retained in social learning theory.

By definition, a person must be capable of performing the necessary sequence of actions before he or she can carry
out either criminal or conforming behavior— inability to perform the behavior precludes committing the crime. Since many of the behavioral techniques for both conforming and criminal acts are the same, not only the simple but even some of the complex skills involved in carrying out crime are not novel to most or many of us. The required component parts of the complete skill are acquired in essentially conforming or neutral contexts to which we have been exposed— driving a car, shooting a gun, fighting with fists, signing checks, using a computer, and so on. In most white-collar crime, the same skills needed to carry out a job legitimately are put to illegitimate use. Other skills are specific to given deviant acts— safe cracking, counterfeiting, pocket picking, jimmying doors and picking locks, bringing off a con game, and so on. Without tutelage in these crime-specific techniques, most people would not be able to perform them, or at least would be initially very inept.

Sutherland took the concept of “definitions” in his theory from W. I. Thomas’s “definition of the situation” (Thomas and Thomas, 1928) and generalized it to orienting attitudes toward different behavior. It is true that “Sutherland did not identify what constitutes a definition ‘favorable to’ or ‘unfavorable to’ the violation of law” (Cressey, 1960, p. 53). Nevertheless . . . there is little doubt that “rationalizations” and “attitudes” are subsumed under the general concept of definitions— normative attitudes or evaluative meanings attached to given behavior. Exposure to others’ shared definitions is a key (but not the only) part of the process by which the individual acquires or internalizes his or her own definitions. They are orientations, rationalizations, definitions of the situation, and other attitudes that label the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified.

In social learning theory, these definitions are both general and specific. General beliefs include religious, moral, and other conventional values and norms that are favorable to conforming behavior and unfavorable to committing any of a range of deviant or criminal acts. Specific definitions orient the person to particular acts or series of acts. Thus, there are people who believe that it is morally wrong to steal and that laws against theft should be obeyed, but at the same time see little wrong with smoking marijuana and rationalize that it is all right to violate laws against drug possession. The greater the extent to which one holds attitudes that disapprove of certain acts, the less likely one is to engage in them. Conventional beliefs are negative toward criminal behavior. The more strongly one has learned and personally believes in the ideals of honesty, integrity, civility, kindness, and other general standards of morality that condemn lying, cheating, stealing, and harming others, the less likely he or she is to commit acts that violate social and legal norms. Conversely, the more one’s own attitudes approve of, or fail to condemn, a behavior, the greater the chances are that he or she will engage in it. For obvious reasons, the theory would predict that definitions in the form of general beliefs will have less effect than specific definitions on the commission of specific criminal acts.

Definitions that favor criminal or deviant behavior are basically positive or neutralizing. Positive definitions are beliefs or attitudes that make the behavior morally desirable or wholly permissible. They are most likely to be learned through positive reinforcement in a deviant group or subculture that carries values conflicting with those of conventional society. Some of these positive verbalizations may be part of a full-blown ideology of politically dissident, criminal, or deviant groups. Although such ideologies and groups can be identified, the theory does not rest only on this type of definition favorable to deviance; indeed, it proposes that such positive definitions occur less frequently than neutralizing ones.

Neutralizing definitions favor violating the law or other norms not because they take the acts to be positively desirable but because they justify or excuse them. Even those who commit deviant acts are aware that others condemn the behavior and may themselves define the behavior as bad. The neutralizing definitions view the act as something that is probably undesirable but, given the situation, is nonetheless justified, excusable, necessary, all right, or not really bad after all. The process of acquiring neutralizing definitions is more likely to involve negative reinforcement; that is, they are verbalizations that accompany escape or avoidance of negative consequences like disapproval by one’s self or by society.

While these definitions may become part of a deviant or criminal subculture, acquiring them does not require participation in such subcultures. They are learned from carriers of conventional culture, including many of those in social control and treatment agencies. The notions of techniques of neutralization and subterranean values (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Matza and Sykes, 1961; Matza, 1964)
come from the observation that for nearly every social norm there is a norm of evasion. That is, there are recognized exceptions or ways of getting around the moral imperatives in the norms and the reproach expected for violating them. Thus, the general prohibition “Thou shalt not kill” is accompanied by such implicit or explicit exceptions as “unless in time of war,” “unless the victim is the enemy,” “unless in self-defense,” “unless in the line of duty,” “unless to protect others!” The moral injunctions against physical violence are suspended if the victim can be defined as the initial aggressor or is guilty of some transgression and therefore deserves to be attacked.

The concept of neutralizing definitions in social learning theory incorporates not only notions of verbalizations and rationalizations (Cressey, 1953) and techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) but also conceptually similar if not equivalent notions of “accounts” (Lyman & Scott, 1970), “disclaimers” (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975), and “moral disengagement” (Bandura, 1976, 1990). Neutralizing attitudes include such beliefs as “Everybody has a racket”; “I can't help myself, I was born this way”; “It's not my fault”; “I am not responsible”; “I was drunk and didn't know what I was doing”; “I just blew my top”; “They can afford it”; “He deserved it.” Some neutralizations (e.g., non-responsibility) can be generalized to a wide range of disapproved and criminal behavior. These and other excuses and justifications for committing deviant acts and victimizing others are definitions favorable to criminal and deviant behavior.

Exposure to these rationalizations and excuses may be through after-the-fact justifications for one's own or others' norm violations that help to deflect or lessen punishment that would be expected to follow. The individual then learns the excuses either directly or through imitation and uses them to lessen self-reproach and social disapproval. Therefore, the definitions are themselves behavior that can be imitated and reinforced and then in turn serve as discriminative stimuli accompanying reinforcement of overt behavior. Deviant and criminal acts do occur without being accompanied by positive or neutralizing definitions, but the acts are more likely to occur and recur in situations the same as or similar to those in which the definitions have already been learned and applied. The extent to which one adheres to or rejects the definitions favorable to crime is itself affected by the rewarding or punishing consequences that follow the act.

References

Do Women and Men Differ in Their Neutralizations of Corporate Crime?

Lynne M. Vieraitis, Nicole Leeper Piquero, Alex R. Piquero, Stephen G. Tibbetts, and Michael Blankenship

In this selection, Lynne Vieraitis, Nicole and Alex Piquero, Stephen Tibbetts, and Michael Blankenship examine gender differences in the effects of techniques of neutralization in decisions to engage in unethical decision making in a corporate setting. One very interesting aspect of this study is that their sample is made up of students in a master of business administration (MBA) program, and a significant portion of this group were in an executive MBA program, meaning that they had many years of corporate experience. The students were asked how they would deal with the knowledge that a drug their company sold was found to be harmful to those who take it. Readers will likely find the results quite surprising and insightful.


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Since its publication in 1957, Sykes and Matza's "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency" has been one of the most influential and most frequently cited articles in the criminological literature—accounting for over 2,800 citations in Google Scholar as of September 2012. Their work was groundbreaking for its divergence from the then current assumption by criminological theorists that most delinquents were "committed" to delinquent values. It also marked a departure from the dominant thinking in psychology that individual behavior was undertaken in response to a series of positive and negative stimuli. In contrast, Sykes and Matza argued that most delinquents were not committed to delinquent values and did not conceive of themselves as delinquents or criminals. To maintain this "noncriminal" self-image, offenders justified their behaviors by employing one or more of the five techniques of neutralization as delineated by Sykes and Matza (1957), including denial of responsibility ("It’s not my fault"), denial of injury ("No one got hurt"), denial of victim ("The victim had it coming"), appeal to higher loyalties ("I didn’t do it for myself, I did it for my children"), and condemnation of the condemners ("The police are corrupt"). Subsequent studies on neutralization theory have produced additional excuses and justifications, including metaphor of the ledger ("I’ve done a lot of good things in my life"; Klockars, 1974), the claim of normality ("Everyone else is doing it"; Benson, 1985; Coleman, 2006), the defense of necessity ("I didn’t have a choice"; Benson, 1985; Coleman, 2006; Minor, 1981), justification by comparison ("I’m not as bad as others"; Cromwell & Thurman, 2003), and the claim of entitlement ("I deserve this, they owed me"; Coleman, 2006).

Yet despite the number and scope of crimes and criminals examined by researchers, the gender differences among offenders’ use of neutralizations are rarely examined and the differences between men and women remain an underexplored area of criminological research (for exceptions, see Copes & Vieraitis, 2012; Daly, 1989; Klenowski et al., 2011; Zietz, 1981).

Background

Current Focus

This article builds on prior research in the application of techniques of neutralization to white-collar/corporate crime by examining the degree to which men and women use specific techniques to account for their corporate offending. To the extent that techniques of neutralization operate as a general theoretical process, then we should find that men and women do or do not use the techniques in the same manner. Such a view does not negate the possibility of differences in the average values of techniques themselves. On the other hand, some gender-specific theoretical models and more gendered theories of crime would suggest that the theoretical processes underlying the gender–corporate crime relationship will evince differences not only in degree but also differences in kind. That is, the techniques men and women rely on to rationalize the same offending behavior should be used in different ways, such that some should matter for one group but not the other.

Data and Method

Data were obtained from a questionnaire administered to a convenience sample of 133 students enrolled in either a traditional MBA program (80%) or the executive MBA program (20%) at a single university.¹ The use of a sample of MBA students for this particular study is justified for at least three reasons. First, MBA students include a cadre of persons with knowledge about the business world and thus find themselves in situations where the opportunity for corporate misbehavior may occur. Second, although on the younger side of a typical business age structure, MBA students are to become future managers and corporate executives over the next few decades of their professional careers and understanding their decision-making styles provides a unique window into the sorts of things that may influence their decision making. Finally, on a practical level, there are very few secondary sources available that

¹The academic content of the executive MBA program does not significantly differ from that of the traditional MBA program but is designed to accommodate full-time working professionals and business executives. As such, those enrolling in the executive MBA program tend to have much more business or "real-world" experience than their counterparts in the traditional MBA program.
permit analyses of corporate malfeasance and none that contain the array of theoretical variables elaborated in neutralization theory with respect to corporate crime decision making.

The survey included a range of questions about attitudes toward business practices and also asked respondents to indicate their purported intentions to engage in a specific behavior after reading a scenario about a hypothetical drug (see Appendix A). All 133 students were presented with the purpose of the study, were asked to participate, and all of them gave voluntary consent and completed the full survey. On average, the sample was over 30 years of age ($M = 30.70, SD = 7.37$, range: 22–55), mostly White (77%), and predominately male (67%).

**Dependent Variable**

The use of scenarios (or vignettes) has been common in previous white-collar/corporate crime research (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996; N. L. Piquero, 2012; N. L. Piquero et al., 2005; N. L. Piquero, Exum, & Simpson, 2005; Simpson, Paternoster, & Piquero, 1998; Simpson & Piquero, 2002). This methodology presents a scenario to respondents depicting a hypothetical situation in which a character engages in a particular behavior or act. Following each scenario, respondents are typically asked (on a Likert-type scale) whether they would do what the character in the scenario did. The current study presented respondents with a scenario regarding the inhibition or promotion of a hypothetical drug, Panalba, which was banned by the Food and Drug Administration (see Appendix A). Serving as the main outcome variable, respondents were asked to report the extent to which they would promote or inhibit the distribution of Panalba, which is known to harm persons. This measure was coded on a scale ranging from 1 to 6 as follows: (1) recall Panalba immediately and destroy all existing inventories, (2) stop production of Panalba immediately but allow existing inventories to be sold, (3) stop all advertising and promotion of Panalba, but continue distribution to those physicians who request it, (4) continue efforts to effectively market Panalba until its sale is actually banned, (5) continue efforts to market Panalba while taking legal, political, and other actions to prevent its banning, and (6) continue efforts to market Panalba in other countries after the FDA bans the drug in the U.S. The average score was 2.57 ($SD = 1.70$), which suggests that the average respondent chose to either stop production but allow existing inventories to be sold or to stop all advertising and promotion but continue distribution to physicians who request it.

**Techniques of Neutralization**

Our measures of the techniques of neutralization are informed by the early research on neutralization, where studies used scenarios to assess the degree to which people accepted neutralizing statements under the assumption that delinquents would be more accepting of neutralizing statements than nondelinquents. Maruna and Copes’s (2005) review of these studies provides strong validity for the techniques measures, and we use these as the starting point for our measures that are reoriented to the business domain. Specifically, we operationalize Sykes and Matz’s five techniques of neutralization with modifications to reflect the context of the workplace environment and workplace decision making (see Hollinger, 1991; N. L. Piquero, Tibbetts, & Blankenship, 2005). All 5 items had response options that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores on all 5 items, which did

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1As with any sampling frame, the use of university students, even in MBA programs, is limited. Still, given the lack of available data on business decision making within a criminological context (Simpson & Piquero, 2002), the application of techniques of neutralization across gender in the current study provides a baseline to which future studies can be modeled after and results compared against.

2We recognize that there may be some concerns over the use of the vignette methodology and the solicitation of purported offending intentions. For example, the method has been criticized because it places individuals in a hypothetical situation that may not be realistic or that such persons may not (now or ever) find themselves in. And while such methods have been routinely used in criminology generally (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993; A. Piquero & Tibbetts, 1996) and the study of white-collar/corporate crime in particular (Simpson et al., 1998; Simpson & Piquero, 2002; N. L. Piquero, 2012; N. L. Piquero, Tibbetts, & Blankenship, 2005), there is the issue about whether purported intentions equate perfectly with actual behavior. Importantly, the survey used in our study was modeled closely after those that have been successfully administered and judged valid and realistic by survey respondents (including our own, who rated the scenario as very believable) and furthermore there is a sizable number of studies showing a strong concordance between projected and actual behavior (Pogarsky, 2004).
not lead to concerns over multicollinearity as judged by variance inflation factors (VIFs) and the fact that the highest correlation among the five techniques items was $r = .435$, indicate stronger levels of neutralization and should be positively associated with increased intentions to promote and sell Panalba.

**Denial of injury (government exaggerates dangers to consumers).** Respondents were asked, “The government exaggerates the danger to consumers from most products.” According to N. L. Piquero et al. (2005, p. 170), by agreeing with this statement, respondents are able “to deny the injury of the act by claiming that the government is overly cautious in assessing the danger to the public. This belief also relates to denial of responsibility in the sense that it implies that there is minimal danger in the use of marketed products, so the companies that produce such items should not be held responsible if injuries do happen to occur from usage.”

**Condemnation of the condemners (regulations impede).** Respondents were asked: “Government regulations impede business.” Here, the blame of the act is deflected to the government and the strict regulations it places on business.

**Appeal to higher loyalty (profit most important).** Respondents were asked: “Profit is emphasized above everything else at my place of work.” By placing the blame onto the organization or company for which the respondent works for, he or she is able to deflect feelings of guilt associated with the behavior and its outcomes.

**Denial of victim (Caveat emptor motto).** Respondents were asked: “‘Caveat emptor’ (let the buyer beware) is the motto of my employer.” By deflecting the blame of the act onto the victim the respondent can claim that the victim should have known better.

**Denial of responsibility (anything to make a profit).** Respondents were asked: “Where I work, it is all right to do anything to make a profit unless it is against the law.” Here, the individual places the responsibility of the act onto the organization (by its rules and culture of how it does its business) in which he or she is employed and thus can deny his or her own individual responsibility for the behavior and its outcomes.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for study variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial of injury</td>
<td>2.82 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condemnation of condemners</td>
<td>2.55 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to higher loyalty</td>
<td>2.90 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of victim</td>
<td>2.30 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of responsibility</td>
<td>2.42 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = M, 2 = F)</td>
<td>1.33 (0.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>30.70 (7.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (1 = W, 2 = NW)</td>
<td>1.77 (0.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program (1 = MBA, 2 = Exc)</td>
<td>1.21 (0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentions to offend</td>
<td>2.57 (1.67)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analytic Plan**

To examine the extent to which techniques of neutralization relate to the marketing and sale of the unsafe drug Panalba across gender, we begin by examining the extent to which there are any gender differences with respect to (a) intentions to offend and (b) techniques of neutralization. To presuppose our findings, we do indeed observe some average differences for these two constructs. These preliminary results support the need to examine split-gender models where we examine the extent to which the techniques of neutralization relate to offending intentions in similar or unique ways for males and females using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. A series of coefficient comparison tests will also be conducted to examine the equality of regression coefficients across gender (see Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, & Piquero, 1998).

**Results**

**Bivariate Analysis**

Initial results show that men and women significantly differ on the overall intentions outcome variable, with men ($M = 2.82$) reporting a significantly higher average value.

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*Although the distribution of the outcome variable did not evince any extreme skew, we also estimated supplemental Ordered Logistic Regression models, the results of which were substantively the same as those reported in the main text with OLS.*

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compared to women ($M = 2.04$; $t = 2.78$, $p < .05$). Figure 1 provides a graphical portrayal of this relationship. Here, it can be seen that while there are a higher percentage of women at the two lower decision options (recalling Panalba, stopping production of Panalba), at the other end of the continuum there is a higher percentage of men who would impede the ban of Panalba or who would continue to market Panalba outside the United States.

Having established a bivariate relationship between gender and offending intentions, we next examine how men and women responded to the five techniques of neutralization items. As seen in Table 2, there are significant differences on two of the items and no differences on the other three items. With respect to the two items that differ across gender, (a) men are more likely than women to agree that the government exaggerates the danger to consumers from most products (denial of injury) and (b) women are more likely to agree that government regulations impede business (condemnation of the condemners).

### Full-Sample Analysis

Next, we estimated a full-sample OLS regression model predicting offending intentions with the five techniques of neutralization measures, gender, and three control variables (age, race, MBA program status). Three of the techniques variables are significantly associated with higher intentions to offend: denial of injury (government exaggerates), condemnation of the condemners (regulations impede), and appeal to higher loyalty (profit is most important), and the model explains almost 20% of the variation in offending intentions. Higher agreement with each of these techniques was associated with continued interest in marketing and selling Panalba. Confirming the bivariate results, we found that women were less likely to market and sell Panalba and instead more likely to recall it or stop its production. Of the control variables, only program status was significant, indicating that executive MBA enrollees were less likely to report affirmative intentions to offend. In short, these findings show that techniques of neutralization relate to corporate misbehavior in some similar ways when compared to how neutralizations have been found to relate to other deviant acts. Yet, we also find some differences in that not all techniques that have been found to relate to deviance in other studies relate similarly to corporate deviance, supporting Sykes and Matza’s suggestion that certain techniques are better adapted to particular deviant acts than others (p. 670). Further, the results indicate that certain techniques of neutralization appear better adapted to corporate misbehavior than other techniques, but whether this pattern of findings replicates across gender is unknown and becomes the focus of the next set of analyses.

### Gender-Specific Models Predicting Offending Intentions

Next, we estimate split-gender models to ascertain the relationship between the techniques of neutralization and neutralization and gender.
offending intentions for men and women (see Table 3). Among men, two of the five techniques were significantly associated with offending intentions: denial of injury (government exaggerates) and appeal to higher loyalties (profit most important). Once again, agreeing with these techniques was associated with continued efforts to impede the ban of Panalba or market the sale of Panalba outside the United States. Among women, two of the five techniques of neutralization were significantly associated with offending intentions. Specifically, women who agreed that the government exaggerates the danger from most products (denial of injury) to consumers were more likely to report affirmative offending intentions. On the other hand, and opposite of the corresponding male coefficient, women who believed that their place of business eschewed the belief that it was acceptable to do anything to make a profit unless it was against the law (denial of responsibility) were more likely to report higher offending intentions. None of the other three techniques of neutralization were significantly related to offending intentions among women. One control variable, MBA program status, had a negative and significant effect on offending intentions among women, with women in the executive MBA program reporting lower offending intentions. However, there were only eight women in the executive MBA program and this effect should be interpreted with caution.

In short, we find that some techniques operate in the same way across gender (denial of injury), others are gender-specific (i.e., higher loyalties for males but denial of responsibility for females), and others that are unimportant for either males or females. Thus, some neutralizations appear gender-neutral while others may be gender-specific.

### Discussion

Sykes and Matza’s neutralization theory has been applied to a wide variety of offenders. Although a sound empirical knowledge base has accumulated (Maruna & Copes, 2005), the examination of the role of gender has received limited attention. The present study assessed the extent to which techniques of neutralization related to corporate offending decisions varied across gender. In doing so, it sought to contribute to underdeveloped and underexplored research areas in criminology more generally, by focusing on potential gender differences in corporate offending (see N. L. Piquero & Moffitt, 2012). Using a sample of MBA students, four key findings emerged from our analysis.
First, bivariate comparisons showed that men were more likely than women to indicate their intention to commit corporate crime by agreeing to continue to market or sell the banned drug Panalba. Second, men and women differed from one another on two of the five techniques of neutralization: Men were most likely to rely on denial of injury to justify their intention to offend, while women reported greater agreement with condemnation of condemners. Third, regression analyses of the full sample indicated that women were less likely to continue to market and sell Panalba and more likely to recall the drug or stop its production and that three techniques of neutralization (appeal to higher loyalties, condemnation of condemners, and denial of injury) were associated with greater corporate offending intentions. Finally, split-gender analysis indicated that one of the techniques, denial of injury, was significantly associated with greater intentions to offend for both men and women, while appeal to higher loyalties was a significant predictor among men and denial of responsibility was a significant predictor among women. A series of coefficient comparison tests of the relationship between the five techniques of neutralization measures and corporate offending intentions across gender failed to indicate any significant difference between men and women.

In short, our analyses showed gender differences in intentions to offend and minor mean-level differences between men and women for only a few of the techniques of neutralization. Our finding that women were less likely than men to report intentions to engage in corporate crime (by marketing and continuing to sell Panalba) is consistent with what little is known about white-collar offending differences between men and women. Data from convicted white-collar offenders repeatedly suggest that men are more commonly involved in the more complex white-collar crimes (i.e., antitrust and securities fraud), while women are involved in the less complex offenses such as bank embezzlement (Weisburd, Waring, & Chayet, 2001; Weisburd et al., 1991). In fact, Daly (1989) found that the female share of corporate crime was quite low, approximately 1%, and thus, noted that almost all of women’s white-collar crimes were petty offenses.

Authors’ Note
Michael Blankenship passed away on April 21, 2011. He was responsible for the data collection used in this study and we are indebted to his contribution and friendship.

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REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the additional neutralization techniques that have been added over the years to Sykes and Matza’s original five that they presented back in 1957?
2. Which gender showed significantly higher intentions to engage in unethical corporate practices?
3. According to the reported results of the split-gender regression models, did the estimated model do a better job of explaining unethical decision making by women or men?

READING 22

In this selection, David May estimates the influence of fear on carrying firearms to school among approximately 8,000 public high school students. He bases this test on two theories, the first being a variation of Sutherland’s differential association theory, which we have examined in previous selections in this section. The second is Travis Hirschi’s social bonding theory, which we have not examined in previous selections, so we will now briefly review it here, and a more elaborate explanation can be found in the section introduction.

Hirschi’s social bonding theory, a well-known control theory, is actually quite straightforward. First, like all other control theories, Hirschi’s theory assumes that individuals are born selfish, greedy, and so on; thus, it assumes that criminal offending is a natural state of human beings, which is consistent with Sigmund Freud’s concept of being born with an “id” that constantly seeks pleasure even if it means violating others. So instead of explaining why people offend, the challenge is to explain why human beings actually conform or do not violate the law. Hirschi’s social bonding theory claims that what inhibits individuals from engaging in offending behavior is the strength of one’s “social bond” to conventional society. According to Hirschi, this social bond is made up of four components, which we will now briefly review.

Specifically, the social bond consists of four elements or components: (a) attachments to others, (b) commitment to conventional society, (c) involvement in conventional activities, and (d) moral beliefs that violation of law is wrong.
The stronger or higher the levels on each of these components of the social bond, the lower the likelihood that individuals will conform to rules of society and the lower the likelihood that they will follow their natural tendencies to commit crimes against others.

While reading this selection, readers are encouraged to put themselves in the shoes of public high school students and imagine the fear they may have of being victimized, as well as whether such fear could justify carrying a firearm to school. In addition, consider the validity of the two theoretical models that were used by the author to explain this phenomenon and whether you feel these two models were good choices. Would you have chosen other theoretical frameworks if you had performed this study?

**Scared Kids, Unattached Kids, or Peer Pressure**

*Why Do Students Carry Firearms to School?*

David C. May

Firearm homicides are the second leading cause of death for youngsters 15 to 19 years old and are the leading cause of death for Black males aged 10 to 34 years (Fingerhut, 1993). Between 1980 and 1990, there was a 79% rise in the number of juveniles committing murder with guns (Senate Hearings, 1993) and in 1990, 82% of all murder victims aged 15 to 19 years and 76% of victims aged 20 to 24 years were killed by firearms (Roth, 1994).

The problem of violent crime among adolescents is particularly acute in places where youth spend much of their time. Arguably, there is no single place where youth consistently congregate more than at school. Although deaths at school as a result of violence are rare events (76 violent student deaths in the 1992–1994 academic years), the general perception is that school-associated crime is on the increase (Kachur et al., 1996). Although Kachur et al. indicate that this does not appear to be the case, school violence, and particularly gun violence at school, is a problem that is not easily ignored. Some have argued that approximately 100,000 students take guns to school every day (Senate Hearings, 1993; Wilson & Zirkel, 1994). Estimates of the percentage of students who take guns to school vary widely, however; the percentage has been determined to be anywhere from .5% (Chandler, Chapman, Rand, & Taylor, 1998) to approximately 9% who carry a gun to school at least “now and then” (Sheley & Wright, 1993, p. 5). Furthermore, a majority of students say it would be little or no trouble to get a gun if they wanted one (Shelley & Wright, 1993). It is obvious that firearms in our schools are a problem.

Although numerous studies have examined prevalence of firearms possession among school-aged adolescents (Callahan & Rivara, 1992; Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, 1993; Chandler et al. 1998; Hechinger, 1992; Roth, 1994; Wilson & Zirkel, 1994), the study of causes of firearm possession at school has all but been neglected. Of those researchers who have attempted to examine determinants of adolescent firearm possession, many argue that protection is an often cited reason for weapon possession and provide various explanations for this finding (Asmusen, 1992; Bergstein, Hemenway, Kennedy, Quaday, & Ander, 1996; Blumstein, 1995; Bergstein, Ander, & Kennedy, 1996; Sheley, 1994; Sheley & Wright, 1993); in fact, Sheley and Wright (1995) determined that 89% of the gun carriers in their sample of youth...
in correctional facilities and inner-city youth felt that self-protection was a very important reason for owning a handgun. Only one study (Sheley & Brewer, 1995), however, examines the association between fear and firearm possession at school (see below for detailed discussion).

There have been many studies that have attempted to determine characteristics of adult firearms owners as well as research that seeks to determine individuals’ motivation for owning guns. One explanation that has surfaced to account for why adults own firearms is the “fear and loathing hypothesis” (Wright, Rossi, & Daly, 1983, p. 49). The fear and loathing hypothesis suggests that people buy guns in response to their fear of crime and other incivilities present in our society. According to the fear and loathing hypothesis, individuals, fearful of elements of the larger society (e.g., crime and violence), go through a mental process in which they begin to deplore crime, criminals, and the like and purchase firearms for protection. Recently, many researchers have diminished the loathing aspect of the hypothesis and have examined what would more accurately be called the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis.

Several studies have attempted to test this hypothesis, with mixed results (Arthur, 1992; Lizotte, Bordua, & White, 1981; Smith & Uchida, 1988; Wright & Marston, 1975). These studies, however, are limited in that they use only adult populations; excluding the study conducted by Sheley and Brewer (1995), the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis has never been tested using a sample of adolescents.

Sheley and Brewer (1995), in an examination of suburban high school students in Louisiana, were the first to specifically test the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis among adolescents by investigating the effect of fear on adolescent gun possession at school. They determined that fear had a nonsignificant association with carrying firearms to school, particularly for males. Their study was limited, however, by the fact that they used a single-item indicator of fear of criminal victimization, a method often criticized in the fear of crime literature (see Ferraro, 1995, for a review).

Although there may be no reason to treat gun ownership among adults as a deviant behavior, gun possession among juveniles should be treated as such. Despite the fact that legislation allows adults to carry firearms in many areas, it is illegal in all areas for juveniles to carry firearms to school. This act is not only a violation of the law, it also undermines the authority of schoolteachers and other officials. For these reasons, this act must be considered delinquent.

Furthermore, it is expected that the correlates of delinquency should be the same as the correlates of juvenile gun ownership. Although many of the aforementioned evaluations offer various explanations as to why youths possess firearms, often arguing that the possession is due to structural or personality factors, none attempt to test the effects of fear of criminal victimization on adolescent firearm possession, while controlling for competing explanations of delinquent behavior. These studies, although accepting that carrying a weapon for protection may be due to fear of criminal victimization, fail to examine the specific relationship between fear of criminal victimization and firearm possession. This study attempts to fill that void.

The study makes two major contributions to the literature concerning adolescent firearm possession. First, I test the effect of the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis on juvenile firearms possession at school using a cumulative index to represent fear of criminal victimization, an effort heretofore unexplored. Second, this analysis enhances the relevant scholarship by controlling for variables in Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory and a derivative of Sutherland’s (1939/1947) differential association theory, a much-needed improvement in this area (see Benda & Whiteside, 1995, for a discussion).

Following social control theory, youth whose bond to society is weakest will be more likely to carry guns to school; advocates of differential association would argue that delinquent tendencies of a juvenile’s associates would induce the adolescent to carry firearms to school. On the other hand, following the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis, those youth who are most fearful would be most likely to carry guns to school. Thus, this study seeks to determine if fear of criminal victimization is associated with juvenile gun possession at school, controlling for two acknowledged explanations of delinquency.

### Fear of Criminal Victimization Hypothesis

The fear of criminal victimization hypothesis argues that firearm ownership and possession among some people has been motivated by fear of criminal victimization.
(Newton & Zimring, 1969). Consequently, according to the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis, a group of gun owners purchase guns for protection from crime and criminals; consequently, those who are most fearful of criminal victimization will be those most likely to own a firearm.

According to the fear of crime literature, females, the elderly, those with lower income and education, urban residents, and African Americans are more fearful than their counterparts (Baumer, 1985; Belyea & Zingraff, 1988; Box, Hale, & Andrews, 1988; Braungart, Braungart, & Hoyer, 1980; Clemente & Kleiman, 1976, 1977; Garofalo, 1979; Kennedy & Krahn, 1984; Kennedy & Silverman, 1984; Larson, 1982; Lawton & Yaffee, 1980; Parker, 1988; Sharp & Dodder, 1985). It follows that these groups would also be the most likely to purchase and carry guns.

As alluded to earlier, tests of this hypothesis have produced inconclusive results. Some authors find that those who are most fearful are most likely to own guns for protection (Lizotte et al., 1981; Smith & Uchida, 1988); other researchers have found little evidence that fear of crime influences carrying a gun for protection (Adams, 1996; Arthur, 1992; Bankston & Thompson, 1989; Bankston, Thompson, Jenkins, & Forsyth, 1990; Williams & McGrath, 1976; Wright et al., 1983).

Although a tremendous volume of research has been produced in the area of fear of criminal victimization and its effect on adult gun ownership and use, two glaring inadequacies remain. The fear of criminal victimization hypothesis has not been tested on adolescents; by the same token, it has not been tested either against, or along with, any other theory of juvenile delinquency or as an explanation for delinquent behavior. The purpose of this study is to fill this void within the literature. This study will attempt to determine the impact of the fear of criminal victimization on juvenile firearms possession. This relationship then will be tested against the relationship between the control that social instructions (such as family and school) have and the influence that peers have on adolescents’ firearm possession, to determine the association that these factors have on adolescent gun possession.

The fear of criminal victimization hypothesis, social control theory, and differential association all offer explanations for juvenile firearm possession; the substance of each theory’s explanation, however, varies greatly. According to the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis, adolescents who are more fearful would be more likely to carry guns; advocates of control theory would argue that adolescents with weaker bonds to society would be more likely to carry guns; and finally, proponents of differential association theory would argue that youth whose peers were most approving of engagement in delinquency would be most likely to carry guns. Thus, if, after controlling for two known explanations of deviance, the relationship between fear of criminal victimization and adolescent firearm possession still persists, support for the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis will increase.

### Method

#### Sample

Data for this study were obtained from a study of Mississippi high school students conducted in the spring of 1992. As the South has the highest rate of gun ownership by region (Kleck, 1997), and Mississippi was the site of the first of several highly publicized schoolyard shootings in the academic year of 1997–1998, gun-carrying behavior of Mississippi adolescents is of particular interest in this field of inquiry.

#### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is juvenile firearm possession at school and was operationalized through the questions, “How many times have you carried a gun to school?” Responses were collapsed into two categories, with those who answered never coded (0) and those who responded one or more times coded as (1). Only 637 students (8.1%) indicated that they had carried a firearm to school one or more times.

#### Independent Variables

The independent variables include an index representing fear of criminal victimization, an index representing the strength of the adolescent’s bond to society (social control), and a similar index representing deviant attitudes of the adolescent’s peers (differential association). Due to their significant associations with delinquent behavior found in the literature, race, gender, residence, number of parental figures in the household, socioeconomic status, and gang membership are used as control variables. Finally, as neighborhood incivility has been determined to be a strong predictor of fear of crime among adults (Bursik & Grasmik,
an index of perceived neighborhood incivility is included as a control variable as well.

**Perceived Neighborhood Incivility Index**

The exogenous variable, perceived neighborhood incivility, was obtained by constructing an index using responses to statements concerning how the respondent viewed his or her neighborhood, such as “There are drug dealers in my neighborhood.” The construct demonstrated an internal reliability of .753, indicating that the index is a reliable measure of perceived neighborhood incivility.

**Fear of Criminal Victimization Index**

The fear of criminal victimization hypothesis states that those who are more fearful will be more likely to carry guns (Wright et al., 1983). This hypothesis does not postulate that excessive fear leads to crime commission. In contrast, its premise is that the fearful will carry firearms to protect themselves from crime.

Fear of crime among the adolescents was measured through construction of a fear of criminal victimization index composed of nine items. The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .896. It is hypothesized that those respondents scoring higher on the fear scale will be more likely to have carried a gun to school.

**Social Control Index**

The research reviewed earlier suggests that those adolescents with stronger bonds between themselves and family and school institutions will be less likely to commit delinquent acts (Hirschi, 1969; Jensen, 1972; Reiss, 1951; Wiatrowski, Griswold, & Roberts, 1981). The adolescent’s involvement with social institutions was measured by creating a social control index. The index consists of 11 questions or statements. The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .734. It is hypothesized that those adolescents scoring at the lower end of the scale will be more likely to carry a firearm to school than those on the higher end of the scale.

**Differential Association Index**

As noted from the research reviewed earlier, those adolescents whose peers have the greatest amount of definitions favorable to violation of the law and engage in the most deviant acts are more likely to engage in delinquent acts (see Williams & McShane, 1999, for a review). Following differential association theory, an index was created to represent the deviant definitions and activities of one’s peers.

Cronbach’s alpha, used to measure the reliability of the index, was .614. It is hypothesized that those adolescents scoring at the higher end of the scale will be more likely to carry a firearm to school than those on the lower end of the scale.

**Demographic Characteristics**

It is feasible to suggest that as adolescents age and become familiar with their school surroundings and peers, they will be more able and thus more likely to obtain a firearm if they desire. Thus, it is hypothesized that older youth will be more likely to bring firearms to school than their younger counterparts.

Race will also be used as a control variable. As the overwhelming majority of Mississippi residents fall into one of two racial categories (White and African American), responses to the race question were dichotomized into two categories: White and Black. Several researchers have determined that Whites are less delinquent than Blacks (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Rosen, 1985) and Whites are less fearful than non-Whites; subsequently, Blacks will be more likely to carry guns to school.

Regardless of the theory employed when predicting delinquency, males are more likely than females to be delinquent (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987, 1992; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1994). However, the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis would predict that females, the more fearful group, would be more likely to carry firearms. Shleley and Wright (1995) further determined that protective gun possession was more common among females than males in their sample. The question used to assess firearm possession in this study, however, does not allow the researcher to gauge reasons for possession. Thus, even though females may be more likely to possess firearms for protection, it is hypothesized that males will be much more likely to carry guns to school than will their female counterparts, a finding confirmed in numerous studies (e.g. Arria, Wood, & Anthony, 1995; Shleley & Wright, 1995).

Several researchers have identified an inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and delinquency (Reiss, 1951; Rosen, 1985; Wiatrowski et al., 1981). People with
lower incomes also are more fearful. Thus, those youth from households with lower household income will be more likely to carry firearms to school.

Although some have argued that family structure does not affect delinquency, particularly violent delinquency (Salts, Lindholm, Goddard, & Duncan, 1995), many have indicated that juveniles from disrupted households (those with one parent) will be more likely than those from intact households (two or more adults in the household) to commit delinquent acts (Gove & Crutchfield, 1982; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1994; Matsueda & Heimer, 1987; Reiss, 1951). Such findings support Hirschi’s control theory. According to Hirschi (1969), two parents will have more control over the juvenile and his or her whereabouts than will one, especially if one of the two parents is not employed. It is reasonable to assume that the relationship will be the same for firearm possession at school as well. Following control theory, it is expected that those juveniles from disrupted family settings will be more likely to carry a gun to school than will their counterparts from households with two parents.

Finally, gang members have been demonstrated to engage in disproportionate amounts of delinquency, including carrying guns (Block & Block, 1993; Blumstein, 1995; Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997; Knox, 1991; Spiegel, 1990). Thus, it is hypothesized that gang members will be more likely to carry guns as well.

### Results

Characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Table 1 classifies the sample into gun carriers and nongun carriers. There were several statistically significant differences between the two groups. First, the mean score was significantly higher for the gun carriers than for the nongun carriers on the favor scale (17.101 vs. 14.271, p < .001) and the perceived incivility scale (7.139 vs. 5.842, p < .001). Gun carriers also scored significantly lower on the social control index (27.250) than did the nongun carriers (30.568, p < .001) and significantly higher on the differential association index (6.932 vs. 5.394, p < .001).

The percentage distributions in Table 1 also reveal important differences between gun and nongun carriers. As expected, the percentage of gun carriers who were male (83.7%) is much larger than the percentage of nongun carriers who were male (41.5%), as was the percentage of gun carriers who were gang members (61.5% vs. 4.6%). The percentage of gun carriers who were Black (55.4%) was also larger than the percentage of nongun carriers who were Black (46.2%). A lower proportion of the gun carriers came from two-parent households (50.7%) than did nongun carriers (58.0%). Furthermore, a larger percentage of youth from the 17 to 18 years and 19 to 20 years age groups (61.1% and 11.8%, respectively) were found among the gun carriers than among the nongun carriers (54.6% and 5.2%, respectively). Finally, there was little difference between gun carriers and nongun carriers across household income or place of residence.

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that significant associations exist between adolescent firearm possession and the independent variables included in this study. To determine the effect of the factors reflected in the perceived incivility index, the fear index, the social control index, and the differential association index on adolescent firearm possession, controlling for the demographic variables, logistic regression will be used.

The results obtained from regressing adolescent firearm possession on the demographic variables not shown indicate that, as expected, gender, race, age, parental structure, income, and gang membership had statistically significant associations with adolescent firearm possession. The regression coefficients indicate that males were six times as likely as females to possess a firearm at school, whereas Blacks were 1.4 times as likely as Whites to carry a firearm to school. Older adolescents were also more likely to carry guns to school than were their younger counterparts. The association between parental structure and adolescent firearm possession was also significant, as those youth from households with other than two adults were significantly more likely than their counterparts from two-parent homes to carry a firearm to school. Those students from families with higher incomes were more likely than students from families with lower incomes to carry guns to school. Finally, gang members were nine times as likely to carry firearms to school as adolescents who were not in gangs. Place of residence had no statistically significant effect on adolescent firearm possession at school.

The second model regressed adolescent firearm possession on the variables included in the first model with the addition of the perceived neighborhood incivility index and the fear of criminal victimization index. Males were again six times as likely as females to indicate that they had carried a firearm to school. Interestingly, however,
Table 1  Characteristics of Gun Carriers and Nongun Carriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Gun Carriers</th>
<th>Nongun Carriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social control scale</td>
<td>27.250***</td>
<td>4.915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential association scale</td>
<td>6.932***</td>
<td>1.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear scale</td>
<td>17.101***</td>
<td>6.215</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived incivility</td>
<td>7.139***</td>
<td>2.302</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>3,011</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>4,238</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>Total n</td>
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<thead>
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<th>%</th>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>3,901</td>
<td>53.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>3,348</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>n</th>
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<td>13–14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–16</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>2,866</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17–18</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>3,954</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–20</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total n</td>
<td>636</td>
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<td>7,246</td>
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<th>Parental arrangement</th>
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<td>2 or more parents (intact) household</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>4,205</td>
<td>58.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single-parent (disrupted) household</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>49.1</td>
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<td>Total n</td>
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<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>922</td>
<td>12.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>$10,000–$19,999</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>1,368</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000–$29,999</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>1,546</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000–$39,999</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>1,503</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $40,000</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>1,652</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total n</td>
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<td>6,991</td>
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<th>Gang membership</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
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<th>%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>6,523</td>
<td>95.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total n</td>
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<td>6,838</td>
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<th>Place of residence</th>
<th>n</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rural farm</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural nonfarm</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>1,580</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside suburbs</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>1,020</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In suburbs</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>1,831</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near center of city</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>2,212</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total n</td>
<td>634</td>
<td></td>
<td>7,222</td>
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***p < .001
with the addition of perceived neighborhood incivility and the fear of crime index, the effect of race became nonsignificant. Youth from two-parent homes were again significantly less likely than youth from other than two-parent homes to carry a firearm to school, whereas older youth continued to be significantly more likely than younger youth to carry a firearm to school. Gang members remained significantly more likely to carry a firearm to school than youth who were not in gangs. The association between household income and adolescent firearm possession remained statistically significant, with those youth from households with greater income again significantly more likely to carry a gun to school than their counterparts from households with lower incomes. The perceived incivility index and the fear of criminal victimization index had statistically significant effects on adolescent firearm possession at school, indicating that those youth who perceived their neighborhood to be most disorderly and those youth who were most fearful of criminal victimization were significantly more likely to carry a gun to school than their counterparts, who perceived their neighborhood to be less disorderly and who were less fearful, respectively. Thus, following the fear of criminal victimization were significantly more likely to carry a gun to school than their counterparts, who perceived their neighborhood to be less disorderly and who were less fearful, respectively. Thus, following the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis, those youth who are most fearful and who perceive their neighborhoods as most disorderly are most likely to carry a gun to school.

The third model in Table 2 presents the results of regressing adolescent firearm possession on the variables included in the second model with the addition of the social control index and the differential association index. Males, Blacks, older respondents, youth from other than two-parent homes, gang members, and respondents with higher levels of household income continued to be significantly more likely than their counterparts to carry a firearm to school, whereas those adolescents who perceived their neighborhoods as disorderly and those adolescents who were most fearful were again significantly more likely than their counterparts to indicate that they had carried a firearm to school. Moreover, those who scored lower on the social control index and those who scored higher on the differential association index respectively were significantly more likely to indicate that they had carried a firearm to school. Thus, as expected, those youth with weaker bonds to society and those youth with more deviant friends were more likely to carry a firearm to school.

### Discussion

The results of this study generally support the findings of previous studies dealing with social control, differential association, and delinquent acts. Those children who scored lower on the social control scale, exhibiting lower parental and familial attachment, were significantly more likely to possess firearms at school, as were those youth who scored higher on the index measuring differential association. Both of these findings are consistent with the literature reviewed earlier.

The findings concerning family structure also conform with those from other studies; namely, those children from single-parent homes were significantly more likely to carry guns to school. The evaluation also is consistent with previous studies in demonstrating that males, Blacks, and gang members were more likely to commit the delinquent act in question. As expected, age was positively associated with gun carrying, the older youth were more likely to carry guns to school than were their younger counterparts. Household income also had a statistically significant positive association with carrying firearms to school; those youth who were from families with higher household income were more likely to carry firearms to school. As this finding is contrary to the literature concerning social control, differential association, and the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis, this finding deserves some explanation. There are two divergent explanations for this finding. It could be that those youth from homes with higher household income had greater financial resources to purchase firearms, thus allowing them to carry a gun to school, whereas other youth might choose some less expensive weapon. This study is limited in that it is unable to examine that relationship.

A second, and perhaps more likely, explanation is that the relationship between household income and adolescent firearm possession may be due to the methodology of the study. Adolescents were asked to estimate their household income; it is quite probable that many of the youth did not have this knowledge and may have exaggerated their household income. Finally, the size of the sample also leads one to question the substantive value of this finding. In a sample this large, associations may achieve statistical significance ($p < .05$) but not substantive significance. Whatever the explanation, this finding should be viewed with extreme caution.
Place of residence had no statistically significant association with adolescent firearm possession. This contradicted the hypothesis concerning the relationship between these variables. One explanation for this might be that the adolescents are unaware of the actual size of their residence; furthermore, inasmuch as the sample consists of adolescents from Mississippi, a primarily rural state, even those who classified themselves as living at the center of the city probably live in areas that could not be characterized as traditional, urban residents.

The most interesting finding from this study concerns the relationship between perceived neighborhood incivility, fear of criminal victimization, and adolescent firearm possession. Adolescents who perceived their neighborhoods as most disorderly and who were most fearful were significantly more likely to carry a gun to school. These findings support the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis: at least in part, students carry guns to school because of the fear of classmates and the perceived criminogenic conditions of their neighborhoods that they experience. It is evident that fear of criminal victimization in juveniles creates similar reactions to fear of criminal victimization in adults.

On further review, the association might not be as peculiar as it sounds. With the prevalence of guns in our society, guns are readily available for juveniles. As mentioned earlier, a majority of students know where to get a gun if they desire. Those students who are most fearful might take action to get a gun and take that gun to school for protection. Another plausible explanation might be that those juveniles who are most delinquent are also most fearful of other delinquents with whom they may interact. If this is the case, their fear might be a result instead of a cause of delinquency. It could be that the delinquents develop their fear after they have committed delinquent acts.

It also could be that adolescents’ fear might be explained by the lifestyle approach, which states that those individuals who put themselves in situations in which crimes will occur are more likely to commit crimes and to be victimized by them (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978). These adolescents could very well develop the fear because they see so many delinquent acts being committed by their peers (as this study shows, those adolescents whose peers were most delinquent, as well as those youth who were gang members, were also more likely to carry firearms) and thus become fearful that one day their delinquent friends, or adversaries of their friends, might harm them. It is beyond the nature of this study to test this temporal relationship. However, further research in this area would be beneficial. A longitudinal study might be used to determine which occurs first: the fear or the firearm-related delinquency.

**Implications**

The purpose of this study was to examine the association between the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis and adolescent firearm possession, while controlling for more traditional explanations of delinquency—namely, differential association and social control theory. Analysis of the results indicates that the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis, social control theory, and differential association are all statistically significant indicators of adolescent firearm possession.

The implications of this study are twofold. First, social control theory, differential association theory, and the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis have a significant association with firearms possession. Second, the fear of criminal victimization hypothesis seems to apply to gun ownership and possession at least as well among juveniles as among adults.

As the findings from this study indicate, at least part of the reason that youth carry firearms to school is because of a fear of criminal victimization at school and a perception that their neighborhoods are dens of criminal activity. The findings from this study explicate a phenomenon known to social science researchers for quite some time but only recently identified and prioritized by policy makers. To reduce the number of firearms in school, the circumstances that cause youth to bring firearms to school must be reduced. Although taking steps to alleviate the problem of fear on the school grounds is important, it is equally important that these steps be taken in the neighborhoods where these youth live as well. It is imperative that we find measures to reduce the fear of crime of students at school, as well as their fear of crime in their neighborhoods.

There are a number of steps that could be implemented in this regard that are already in place with adult populations. First, as Kenney and Watson (1998) suggest, adolescents should be empowered to make use of school
and police resources to reduce fear and disorder problems at school and at home. By implementing problem-solving methods widely used by police and Neighborhood Watch programs throughout the country, adolescents can be empowered to identify sources of fear of crime in their environment and identify and implement steps aimed at alleviating those conditions.

Second, it is well demonstrated that much of the public perception of crime in the United States is strongly influenced by the media. Thus, it is imperative that more accurate information about the problem of guns and violence in schools be presented. Universities throughout the country regularly publish reports identifying the crime that goes on at their campus. It is quite possible that if junior high and high schools throughout the country were to implement a similar reporting system, the perception that crime, particularly crime with guns, is rampant at schools could be alleviated and thus reduced.

Finally, an important step in this effort to curb violence and fear of violence among adolescents might be to ensure that adolescents do not carry firearms to school. Although various measures have been implemented in an attempt to curb this activity (e.g., metal detectors, banning book bags, increased use of locker searches), each needs to be evaluated to determine its effectiveness in combating crime at school. Those measures that are most effective subsequently can be implemented in schools throughout the country. When these measures are institutionalized, the first step will be taken in reducing firearm possession at school and concomitantly reducing school violence.

References


1. What does the author have to say about the impact of firearms in causing injury or death among juveniles and the existing research regarding this phenomenon? Do these statistics and findings convince you that this is a major problem in U.S. society? State your reasons.

2. How important do you feel the fear of victimization is among public high school students? How important do you feel it is for other individuals in U.S. society? Do you feel it justifies carrying weapons, even if it is illegal to do so?

3. How does fear of crime affect your daily life? For example, do you lock your doors and windows at home when you leave, or do you lock your car doors, or do you avoid going to certain places at certain times? If not, why don’t you take any of these precautions against crime?

4. According to the findings of the study, to what extent do the two theories (Sutherland’s and Hirschi’s) appear to have importance in explaining why high school students carry firearms to school? What does the author propose as policy implications? Do you agree with these recommendations? Explain your reasoning.