

Self-Concept and Delinquency: The Effects of Reflected Appraisals by Parent and Peers

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we consider the relationship between self-concept or identity and juvenile delinquency. Major contributions to the study of deviance based on interactionist theory are reviewed. We conduct an empirical analysis, with a focus on the effects of parental and peer reflected appraisals. Measures based on social control theory are included in the analysis as a comparison with interactionist measures. We find strong support for symbolic interactionist theory.

KEYWORDS: symbolic interactionist theory; reflected appraisals; self-concept; social control theory.

In recent years, researchers have paid more attention to the symbolic interactionist theory of crime and delinquency. Symbolic interactionist theorists, dating back to Mead and Cooley, have emphasized the importance of identity or the individual's self-concept as an important predictor of behavior. Differential association theory includes a focus on the importance of definitions or language as a cause of crime, based on symbolic interactionism. A more recent symbolic interactionist theory, differential social control theory (Heimer and Matsueda 1994), focuses on definitions of behaviour, anticipated reactions of others, and definitions of self (reflected appraisals or self-concept) as predictors of crime. In this paper, we discuss some of the major contributions to the study of deviance based on the symbolic interactionist theory, including work by Schwartz and Stryker (1970). We then present an empirical analysis of the effect of self-concept on delinquency, with a focus on the impact of reflected appraisals by parents and peers. To compare the effects of symbolic interactionist concepts on delinquency, we include measures of social control theory concepts in the empirical analysis.

MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS BASED ON THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

In their monograph on deviance and identity, Schwartz and Stryker (1970) state that behavior is significantly influenced by the content of the "self," which is in turn affected by interaction with others. Schwartz and Stryker borrowed from Albert Cohen's notion that deviants search for an identity and Reckless's theory that focuses on self-concept. Prior

theorists, such as Cohen and Reckless, have predicted that a negative self-evaluation is correlated with delinquent behaviour.

Schwartz and Stryker identify four factors in their measurement of the self-concept: Evaluation, Potency, Activity, and Interpersonal Qualities. Their analysis of a sample of boys 12 - 15 years old from two schools included data collected from teachers and parents. Teachers were asked to rate boys as potentially delinquent or not (labeled as "bad" and "good" boys in the study). The "self" was conceptualized as being composed of a set of discrete "identities" (defined as "internalized designations of position, claimed and validated in social interaction" (1970:14)). Identities may include "son," "friend," and "student"—each identity is embedded or situated in relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. Identities are motivational factors (ie, they cause behavior), and identities develop in a process of social interaction (emerging from relationships with others).

Young, non-delinquent males rated themselves higher on the Evaluation dimension of the self than did male delinquents. Non-delinquents were also found to have higher scores on the self dimensions of Activity, Potency, and Interpersonal Quality. No significant differences by social class were found in terms of self-evaluations. Fathers also were found to rarely have significant effects on the self-concepts of the children (with the exception of older white male children). Peers were often found to significantly affect self-concept, while teachers had some significant effects on self concepts, particularly regarding the Potency dimension.

Rubington and Weinberg (2002) devote attention to issues related to acquiring, maintaining, and transforming a deviant identity. Deviant identity is an interactive process that may involve a cycle of deviant behavior and punishment, which may not deter further deviance but confirm the person in a deviant role (for example, due to resentment or defiance of authority). In somewhat more precise terminology, according to Lemert, "primary" deviance may lead to "secondary" deviance. Initial involvement in deviant acts, such as shoplifting or embezzlement, may be justified by the individual: the store is seen as charging too much, eg; or the embezzler tells himself he is only "borrowing" the money temporarily—such justifications (Sykes and Matza 1957) allow people to avoid defining themselves as deviant or accepting the deviant role. How others respond is therefore crucial to the process of acquiring a deviant identity.

Rubington and Weinberg (2002:352) further point out that association with deviants (and avoiding non-deviants) helps the individual to maintain a deviant identity, as conventional characteristics and ties are lost. Individuals who do not practice or engage in conventional roles are more likely to maintain a deviant identity.

Matsueda (1992) has renewed attention to the symbolic interactionist perspective on deviance with his research on "reflected appraisals." Self-concept has long been accepted as an important factor affecting behavior; however, when self-concept has been measured as "self-esteem" there has not been conclusive or consistent evidence regarding the interactionist theory propositions. Self-esteem has been, at best, weakly correlated with juvenile delinquency.

Matsueda (1992) theorizes that self-concepts may be affected and developed through "reflected appraisals," or perceptions of others' attitudes toward the individual. Both Cooley's "looking glass self" and Mead's "self as an object" consist of actual appraisals, reflected appraisals, and self appraisals (or self-concept). Reflected appraisals may be thought of as causing self appraisals, according to Matsueda (1992), and both of these appraisals are affected by actual appraisals made by others.

Matsueda (1992) analyzes data taken from the National Youth Survey; he finds four appraisal clusters: sociability, success, distress, and rule violator. Prior delinquency is also found to increase the likelihood that parental appraisals will describe children as rule violators, and prior delinquency will slightly reduce the probability of children being appraised as successful. Parental appraisals significantly affect the dimensions of self appraisal (except for the "success" dimension). Finally, prior delinquency is found by Matsueda to affect reflected appraisals indirectly by affecting others' appraisals.

DeCoster (2003) focuses on gender as a factor that channels various expressions of deviance (eg, delinquency versus depression). She argues that role-taking is a process that varies by gender, with females and males seeing themselves differently from the perspective of others. Reflected appraisals of self as a rule violator are more common among males. Boys may be more likely to develop reflected appraisals of themselves as delinquent because they are more likely than girls to be labelled as rule violators, because they are more delinquent, and partially because delinquency is consistent with definitions of being male (DeCoster 2003). Reflected appraisals may have a stronger effect on males because delinquency is consistent with male identity; in contrast, a delinquent identity is in conflict with the appropriate gender identity for females.

Bartusch and Matsueda (1996) examine the effects of reflected appraisals across gender. For both males and females, they find that parental appraisals affect reflected appraisals, which in turn predict delinquent behavior; these effects are stronger for males, however. Males are also more likely to be falsely accused or appraised as rule violators by parents than are females. Stereotypes that characterize males as far more delinquent than females (based on actual gender differences in delinquency) may generate a stronger effect of reflected appraisals on boys than on girls.

Bartusch and Matsueda (1996) find, however, consistent with the gender socialization literature, that males are generally less open in communication and might therefore be somewhat less affected by the appraisals of others than are females. Nevertheless, given the greater probability of their involvement in delinquency (and given stereotypes about boys), it can be expected that the effects of reflected appraisals on delinquent behavior will be greater among males than among females.

Bartusch and Matsueda's findings are consistent with symbolic interactionist theory, with parental appraisals significantly affecting reflected appraisals for both males and females, especially for the "rule violator" appraisals. Appraisals of likelihood of success have relatively little effect for males and females, however.

Several recent studies have provided additional support for symbolic interactionist theory. For example, Zhang (1997) concludes that reflected appraisals of parents or significant others significantly affect involvement in delinquency. Koita and Triplett (1998) examined whether race and gender affected the reflected appraisal process described by Matsueda (1992). Using data from the National Youth Survey, Koita and Triplett found general support for the notion that prior delinquency affected parental appraisals of youths as rule violators. However, Koita and Triplett (1998) found that the impact of reflected appraisals was greater

for males than for females.

Giordano et al. (1999) find that measures of self-concept and identity are significantly related to involvement in violence among spouses or partners. In their longitudinal study, Giordano et al. report that adolescent reflected appraisals had an indirect effect on violence; the influence of adolescent reflected appraisals were mediated by the effect of a measure of adult self-concept. In an analysis of data from the National Youth Survey, Liu (2000) finds that reflected appraisals are significantly correlated with delinquency, controlling for gender and peer delinquency.

Giordano et al (2002) discuss how the interactionist theory concept of "identity" may be linked to concepts based on social control theory. Social control theory is similar in several ways to symbolic interactionist theory. Both theories focus on the role of the primary group. However, control theorists emphasize the deterrent value of primary group attachments, while interactionist theorists emphasize the impact of the primary group on formation of the self-concept. Attachment to others was described by Cooley and Mead as prerequisite for others to have an effect on identity. Giordano et al. (2002) describe stakes in conformity (or "commitment") as an important factor in cognitive transformations or changes in identity in their application of symbolic interactionist theory.

Several criminologists have combined elements of differential association and social control theories. Thornberry (1987) develops an "interactional" theory that focuses on reciprocal causation (attachment to parents may affect delinquency, and vice versa) and developmental aspects, with the importance of parental attachment declining over the life course of adolescents and delinquent values becoming more influential over time.

Using data from the Rochester Youth Development Study, Thornberry et al (1991) find support for the hypothesized reciprocal causation between delinquency and bonds to family and school. The relationship between delinquency and social bonds is not unidirectional. Using measurement scales of attachment to parents (focusing on emotional bonding) and commitment to school (focusing on school performance and whether students like school), Thornberry et al. find that bonds do reduce delinquency (and that delinquency can subsequently reduce parental attachment and school commitment).

Heimer and DeCoster (1999) conclude that both differential association and control theory measures are significant in accounting for gender differences in violence. However, they report that males are more affected by direct controls (such as parental supervision), while females are more affected by emotional bonds (such as feeling close to families).

Heimer and Matsueda (1994) develop and empirically test a differential social control theory. Based on the symbolic interactionist perspective (and drawing upon differential association, social control, and labelling theories), they focus on the effects of role-taking on delinquency. Indeed, they find that reflected appraisals as a rule violator has the largest effect on delinquency (besides a measure of prior delinquency). Delinquent peers and delinquent attitudes also have significant direct effects on delinquency. Heimer and Matsueda (1994) report that attachment to family has an indirect effect through delinquent attitudes, reflected appraisals of self, anticipated reactions of others, and delinquent peers (all part of their interactionist theory). This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that identity is a more proximal cause of delinquency than social control theory measures.

Dornbusch (1989) argues that as adolescents age, parental domination of decision-making declines and youthful autonomy increases. Similar to Thornberry's (1987) observations, Dornbusch believes that as parents lose their influence, peers become more powerful in influencing decisions. However, the level of influence for each group may depend on the issues faced by youth. Dornbusch states that when choices are posed to youth regarding peer relations, peer pressure tends to be the most powerful influence. Yet adolescents may be more prone to follow the normative and behavioural lead of parents on issues they deemed to be more important.

The developmental argument advanced by Dornbusch (1989) suggests that the reflected appraisals of parents and peers should be analyzed separately. If peers take on a more influential role in adolescence than parents (as Thornberry also suggests), the measures of reflected appraisals based on combined perceptions of parents' and peers' appraisals may be misleading. In this paper, we measure reflected appraisals of parents and peers separately.

Drawing on Mead's conception of behavior as often habitual or very stable over time, Heimer and Matsueda (1994) note that prior delinquency is an important predictor of future delinquency. (Unfortunately, we do not have a measure of prior delinquency available in our data set.) Although stability in behaviour is prominent, changes over time may also occur as there are changes in role-taking, association with delinquent peers, and delinquent attitudes. This conception of stability and change is similar to or parallels the debate between those advocating a life-course perspective and those who conceive of criminality as a stable aspect of individual character.

Giordano et al. (2002) point out some important differences between social control theory and symbolic interactionist theory. Symbolic interactionists tend to view individuals as affected by their own active or

“agentic” processes, as opposed to being passively affected by social forces. Social control theorists are more inclined to interpret behaviour as determined or caused by external factors, such as parental supervision; symbolic interactionist theorists tend to believe that individuals participate actively in the creation of their own identities, which in turn influences their behaviour.

Control theory and symbolic interactionist theory seem to be logically compatible or consistent in most respects. Individuals who lack social ties may be more likely to develop an identity or self-concept as a rule breaker or “troublemaker.” Indeed, we find that the measures of attachment and delinquent self-concept used in this paper are significantly correlated ($r = .26$). Given that identity is a more proximate cause or correlate of behavior than social ties such as attachment to others (Heimer & Matsueda 1994), we expect that symbolic interactionist measures will be more strongly related to delinquency than are control theory measures.

Based on our review of symbolic interactionist theory and research, we will examine the following research hypotheses:

- (1) Reflected appraisals by parents and peers will be significantly associated with self-reported delinquency.
- (2) Self-concept will be significantly associated with self-reported delinquency.
- (3) The effects of reflected appraisals on self-reported delinquency will be greater among males than among females.
- (4) Symbolic interactionist theory measures of reflected appraisals and self-concept will be more strongly associated with delinquency than social control theory measures.

METHODS

In this paper, we analyze data taken from a recent study of high school students in a large urban community in Canada conducted in 2001. In this study, more than five hundred ($n = 543$) students completed questionnaires. Among the students who were randomly selected and asked to participate in the study, a high percentage (92.7%) agreed to be interviewed and returned signed parental consent forms. Although this study uses cross-sectional data, prior longitudinal research (e.g., Matsueda 1992) has demonstrated a causal or time ordering of variables consistent with symbolic interactionist theory.

Our measure of delinquency was based on Hirschi's (1969) index of self-reported theft, vandalism, and violence. (The scale of self-reported delinquency has a range of 0 to 6, a mean of 1.51, and a standard error of .09.) We constructed measures of the “reflected appraisals” of both parents and peers. Reflected appraisals are defined as how the individual perceives the way others see that individual.

From items based on the National Youth Survey, conducted by Elliott and his colleagues, we constructed two separate indices of parental and peer reflected appraisals. Three dimensions or domains of self-concept or identity are included in each index: measures of sociability, success, and rule violation. Reflected appraisals by parents were measured based on responses to the following five items: (1) My parents agree I am well liked; (2) My parents agree I get along well with others; (3) My parents agree I am likely to succeed; (4) My parents agree I get into trouble; and (5) My parents agree I break rules. Reflected appraisals by peers were based on responses to five parallel items (substituting “friends” for “parents” in each item). All of the parental and peer reflected appraisals items had response categories ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.”

Three indices were constructed to measure the social control theory concepts of attachment, commitment, and belief. The first index or scale measures attachment, based on responses to the following items: “Do you talk about your thoughts and feelings with your mother?” and “Would you like to be the kind of person your mother is?” Both of these questions were asked with reference to the father as well. These four items were determined to form a single latent variable ($L2 = 42.89$, $df = 37$, $p > .10$).¹

An index or scale measuring commitment was based on the following items on school performance and the importance of school grades: “Compared to other students in your school, how do you rate yourself in the school work you do?”; “How important would you say your grades are to your own satisfaction?”; and “How important would you say your grades are to getting the kind of job you want?” Beyond a self-assessment of school performance, these items also seem to measure the students' investment in doing well, or what they might risk losing by getting into trouble with the law. A latent class model provided an adequate fit for these items on educational commitment ($L2 = 14.78$, $df = 11$, $p > .10$).

The third index based on social control theory focuses on the element of belief. The following items were analyzed to construct a latent variable scale. “To get what you want in this world, you have to do some things which are against the law.” “Suckers deserve to be taken advantage of”; and “It's all right to get around the law if you can get away with it.” These three items seem to measure an instrumental morality that indicates the level of belief or faith a person has in conventional values and the law.² A latent class model provided a good fit for these three items ($L2 = 14.37$, $df = 10$, $p > .10$).

RESULTS

Latent class models were fit for both indices of reflected appraisals (McCutcheon 1987). For the index of parental appraisal, a latent class model provided an adequate fit ($L2 = 17.86$, $df = 18$, $p > .10$). A latent class model also provided a good fit for the items measuring peer reflected appraisals ($L2 = 13.02$, $df = 16$, $p > .10$).

Both of these indices are similar to scales used by Matsueda and others. However, these indices indicate that the scales can be constructed around the source of the appraisal (parents or peers), rather than on the specific dimension of self-concept, such as sociability, distress, or rule violation.

In Table 1 and Table 2, we present bivariate correlation matrices for our interactionist and social control theory measures. We find first that the reflected appraisals of parents and peers are significantly correlated with self-concept, measured by the item, "Do you think of yourself as a 'delinquent'?" Parental appraisals ($r = .24$) and peer appraisals ($r = .25$) are equally strongly correlated with a delinquent self-concept. The individual's identity is significantly affected by how others perceive or see the person.

Before we consider the multivariate regression analysis, several additional bivariate correlations were also estimated. Self-reported delinquency (measured by a scale of items on theft, violence, and vandalism) is significantly correlated with our measure of self-concept and the measures of reflected appraisals. These findings support our first two research hypotheses.

Interestingly, the reflected appraisals measures are more strongly linked to self-reported delinquency than is the measure of a delinquent self-concept ($r = .28$). Peer appraisals ($r = .47$) is the single strongest correlate

of delinquency at the bivariate level, even stronger than our measure of peer delinquency ($r = .32$). Parental appraisals ($r = .42$) are nearly as strongly correlated with delinquency as are peer appraisals.

Self-concept ($r = .28$) is about as highly correlated with delinquency as is peer delinquency ($r = .32$). Given that peer delinquency is consistently one of the most powerful predictors of self-reported delinquency, the magnitude of these correlations for the interactionist theory items is impressive. Consistent with prior research, we also find that gender is a significant correlate of delinquency. Gender is not a very strong correlate of our measures of reflected appraisals by parents or peers, however.

Consistent with the research of Bartusch and Matsueda, we find that parental and peer reflected appraisals are significantly related to delinquency for males and females. In the multivariate analysis, there was no significant interaction effect for gender and peer appraisals ($\beta = .02$). In a separate multivariate equation, an interaction term for gender and parental appraisals also was not significant ($\beta = -.01$). We therefore reject our third research hypothesis (that the effects of reflected appraisals on self-reported delinquency will be greater among males than among females).

In our multivariate analysis, we included controls for gender and peer delinquency along with the interactionist theory measures. Peer reflected appraisals remains the best predictor of self-reported delinquency, controlling for the other variables. Controlling for peer reflected appraisals, in fact, eliminates the effect of parental reflected appraisals. This finding was not unexpected, given the high level of intercorrelation—

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Self-Reported Delinquency and Symbolic Interactionist Measures.

	Delinquency	Peer Appraisals	Parental Appraisals	Self Concept	Sex
Peer Appraisals	.47				
Parental Appraisals	.42	.70			
Self-Concept	.28	.25	.24		
Sex	.15	-.08*	-.18	-.15	
Peer Delinquency	.32	.33	.33	.09*	-.17

*n.s. at .05 level

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Self-Reported Delinquency and Social Control Theory Measures.

	Delinquency	Attachment	Commitment	Belief	Sex
Attachment	.22				
Commitment	.24	.04*			
Belief	-.44	-.16	-.05*		
Sex	.15	-.10*	.04*	.19	
Peer Delinquency	.32	.11*	.21	-.11*	-.17

*n.s. at .05 level

Table 3. Regression of Self-Reported Delinquency on Symbolic Interactionist Theory Measures, Demographic Variables, and Peer Delinquency.

Variables	b	SE	β	p
Parental Appraisals	.17	.15	.08	.26
Peer Appraisals	.67	.15	.35	.0+
Self-Concept	.28	.10	.15	.0+
Sex	.10	.09	.06	.26
Social Class	-.04	.03	-.07	.34
Race	.03	.05	.02	.45
Age	-.02	.04	-.03	.42
Peer Delinquency	.25	.10	.14	.01
(constant)	.05	.21		.81

$R^2 = .31, p < .01$

($r = .70$) between parental and peer appraisals. In a separate latent class analysis, however, we find that the parental and peer reflected appraisals items form two separate indices. To avoid problems of multicollinearity, we estimated a separate regression equation excluding the index of parental reflected appraisals; the results reported in Table 3 were not significantly affected by eliminating the parental reflected appraisals index.

Gender also has no significant effect controlling for interactionist measures and peer delinquency. Variables that control for race, social class, and age are not significantly related to self-reported delinquency. The truncated age range for this sample (14 to 18 years old) may account for the lack of a significant effect of age. In Table 3 neither race nor social class, as measured by parental education, are significantly related to self-reported delinquency in our multivariate analysis.

In the multivariate analysis, both self-concept and peer delinquency are significantly related to delinquency. Self-concept ($\beta = .15$) and peer delinquency ($\beta = .14$) have about the same level of standardized coefficient. The total explained variance is about one-third, a comparatively high level of variance accounted for by a small number of variables.

In our bivariate analysis, all three social control theory indices are significant correlates of delinquency. In Table 2, the index measures of attachment ($r = .22$) and commitment ($r = .24$) are moderately correlated with delinquency, while the index of belief ($r = -.44$) is about as strongly correlated with delinquency at the bivariate level as are the reflected appraisals measures.

Next, we included the latent variable indices of attachment, commitment, and belief in another multivariate regression analysis with our symbolic interactionist measures. In Table 4, we summarize the results of this multiple regression analysis. Again, we find that peer reflected appraisal ($\beta = .19$) is the strongest predictor of self-reported delinquency, holding

Table 4. Regression of Self-Reported Delinquency on Symbolic Interaction Theory Measures, Social Control Theory Measures, Sex, and Peer Delinquency.

Variables	b	SE	β	p
Parental Appraisals	.10	.08	.06	.20
Peer Appraisals	.35	.13	.19	.01
Self-Concept	.25	.09	.14	.01
Sex	.02	.10	.01	.85
Peer Delinquency	.13	.09	.07	.16
Attachment	.08	.03	.10	.04
Commitment	.10	.06	.08	.19
Belief	-.20	.04	-.12	.01
(constant)	2.32	.29		.0+

$R^2 = .39, p < .01$

constant the other variables including the control theory indices. Self-concept ($\beta = .14$) is also a significant predictor of self-reported delinquency. Both gender and peer delinquency, along with parental reflected appraisals, are not significantly related to delinquency in this multivariate analysis.

Of the three indices based on social control theory, both attachment ($\beta = .10$) and belief ($\beta = -.12$) remain significant predictors of self-reported delinquency.

However, these control theory measures are not as strongly related to delinquency as are the symbolic interactionist theory measures of self-concept and peer reflected appraisals. This supports our fourth hypothesis, based on the argument that the interactionist theory measures are more proximate correlates of delinquency than control theory measures.

CONCLUSION

Our findings demonstrate substantial support for the interactionist theory prediction that peer reflected appraisals are associated with self-reported delinquency. The bivariate associations also showed support for an association between parental reflected appraisals and delinquency, but this effect was eliminated after controlling for self-concept and peer reflected appraisals. We also continued to find a significant association between peer delinquency and self-reported delinquency, but surprisingly peer delinquency had a weaker effect than the symbolic interactionist measure of peer appraisals. Our other findings show that the effect of reflected appraisals on delinquency was similar for males and females, and measures derived from social control theory are somewhat weaker correlates of delinquency than peer reflected appraisals.

These findings raise some important temporal issues about the role of self-concept and significant others' appraisals of youth and their contributions to delinquent conduct. In recent years, behavioural geneticists and developmental criminologists have become more

interested in the role of reactive G/E (genetics/environment correlation). Our findings reveal that reactive environment has implications for the probability of delinquent conduct and self-concept. Reactive environment refers to the way that parents, peers, siblings, teachers, and others in the youth's environment react to temperament and evocative behaviour (Walsh 2002).

These suggestions remind us of several limitations in our data. We would like to have direct (or actual) appraisal measures from peers and parents to determine how actual appraisals are associated with reflected appraisals. Strain theorists may be particularly interested in this dynamic if a disjunction between actual and reflected appraisals is a source of frustration or strain. There is no measure of prior delinquency in our data set; prior delinquency has been found to significantly affect subsequent identity measures as well as future involvement in delinquency. Finally, we lack data on reflected appraisals of teachers, a source of potentially significant effects on delinquency and self-concept (Schwartz and Stryker 1970). Schwartz and Stryker argue that teachers should have more significant effects than parents on identity and delinquency, since teachers are arguably more clearly representative of the moral standards of society.

ENDNOTES

1. Note the use of the L2 statistic; it is the likelihood ratio chi-square that indicates the goodness of fit of a model, with an associated p-value given the number of degrees of freedom (similar to the Pearson chi-square statistic).

2. Several criminologists, including Liska and Messner (1999), have noted the conceptual and empirical similarity between the concept of "belief" and delinquent "definitions," based on differential association theory.

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