Crime as Communication: A Review Examining Problem-Solving Competency in Youth Offenders

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Abstract
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CRIME AS COMMUNICATION:
A REVIEW EXAMINING
PROBLEM-SOLVING COMPETENCY
IN YOUTH OFFENDERS

A THESIS
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Abstract

This literature review on juvenile delinquency addresses problem-solving competency in youth offenders. Psychological and socioenvironmental theories have different perspectives on the characterological aspects of juvenile delinquency in regards to whether or not delinquent acts are indicative of psychopathology. The literature distinguishes adolescent-limited offenders from lifetime offenders, particularly in that delinquency is more normative in adolescence and can largely depend on the social environment. Delinquency can, for example, be a way of responding to the pressures of adolescence. It is reinforcing for adolescents to assess their autonomy and win peer approval. The research lacks information on covariates to problem-solving competency such as coping, communication strategies and interpersonal negotiation that can influence problematic behaviors. Therefore, the unique contribution of this review is its comprehensive focus on these covariates of problem-solving competency to better understand decision making of youth offenders. The research additionally lacks effective interventions for increasing problem-solving skills prior to adolescence, and interventions with gangs.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................... i

Abstract ..................................................................................................... ii

Introduction .................................................................................................. 1

Measures............................................................................................................ 2

Family Environment & Upbringing............................................................ 3

Psychopathology............................................................................................. 6

Theoretical Framework.................................................................................... 8

Psychological.................................................................................................. 8

Theory of Intelligence...................................................................................... 8

Interpersonal Theory ..................................................................................... 9

Social Learning Theory ................................................................................ 10

Identity Development.................................................................................... 10

Adolescent Egocentrism................................................................................ 11

Socioenvironmental....................................................................................... 13

Strain Theory................................................................................................ 13

Perceived Control......................................................................................... 14

Self-Worth....................................................................................................... 14

Affect............................................................................................................... 15

Vignette.......................................................................................................... 15

Social Control Theory................................................................................... 16

Rational Choice Theory................................................................................ 17
Table of Contents

Theory Integration ................................................................. 18

Problem-Solving Perspective .................................................. 19

   Lack of Alternatives ......................................................... 19

   Positive Outcome Expectancies ........................................ 20

Covariates of Problem-Solving Competency .......................... 20

   Coping ............................................................................ 20

   Adaptive Style ............................................................... 21

   Communicative Competency .......................................... 23

   Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies ............................... 25

Intervention & Outcome Research ....................................... 26

   Coping Course ............................................................. 26

   Mediation of Aggression ................................................. 28

Discussion ............................................................................ 28

References ............................................................................ 32
Introduction

Juvenile delinquency is a label given by courts for any illegal act, whether criminal or status, that is committed by a person under the age of 18 (Shoemaker, 1984). According to the Juvenile Offenders and Victims 2006 National Report, delinquency rates, and particularly violent offenses have increased since the 1980's, with a moderate decrease in recent years. In regards to personal responsibility, adolescence is a unique age range in which the offender may not be permanently penalized for criminal acts. On the other hand, there is a possibility of juveniles being given lifetime sentences for crimes they have committed. In some cases, a juvenile may be incarcerated for a short period of time, or have charges erased off the record upon entering adulthood. This variability depends on the severity of the offense and the leniency and state statutes of the court.

When the first special justice system for juveniles was established in Chicago, the law stated that juveniles have "insufficient abilities to form criminal intent," (Grisso, 1998, p. 3) and thus special considerations are given to them.

The law's emphasis on adolescents not being fully responsible for criminal acts creates ambiguity in court sentencing. Certain offenses may be seen as premeditated, and teens under the age of 18 may not anticipate heavy penalties that may follow for crimes they have committed. However, I argue that the incidence of juvenile delinquency is strongly related to a lack of problem-solving competency in offenders, and there are a lack of conventional alternatives available to crime. My hypothesis is that delinquency is normative rather than pathological in adolescence, especially considering developmental and socioenvironmental variables.
Clinicians are often asked to predict whether an adolescent will engage in future delinquent and/or violent behavior. To do this, they use a multi-factor model that includes what risk factors are present as well as the social context of the behavior (Grisso, 1998). Clinicians also know that there is not one "type" of youth who commits delinquent acts, and most do not go on to commit offenses in adulthood. A consistency in delinquency research is the emphasis that causality cannot be inferred. The variance in types of offenses, backgrounds of offenders and environmental influences is so large that no direct cause and effect relationship can be found. Even if causality is hypothesized, there is no concrete way of proving that one single factor led to a criminal act. However, we can investigate theories of delinquency to help explain patterns in behavior on the macro level, and evaluate research to determine what factors are highly associated or correlated with delinquent behavior.

The first part of the literature review outlines and defines measures and background information on problem-solving competency. It then reviews several current psychological and socioenvironmental theories of delinquency. Next, it integrates the problem-solving perspective with research studies investigating constructs that are found to be highly associated with delinquency: coping skills, adaptive style, communicative competency and interpersonal negotiation strategies. The last section of this review will focus on the effectiveness of interventions on incarcerated youth, followed by a critique of the research and what should be done in the future.

Measures

Problem-solving competency is one's ability to effectively create solutions to problems while considering minimal harm to others, asserting one's own needs, and
addressing risks, benefits, and consequences to each solution (Ward & McFall, 1986). As discussed later in this review, this executive skill is not fully developed in some adolescents, which can lend itself to problems with the law. The two measures widely used to assess problem-solving competency are the Adolescent Problem Inventory for boys (API; Freedman, Rosenthal, Donahoe, Schlundt, & McFall, 1978) and the Problem Inventory for Adolescent Girls (PIAG; Gaffney & McFall, 1981). The reason for separate inventories is that some questions are gender-specific. Each inventory's 52 items are administered on a videotape, as the subject is presented with common problem-solving situations he/she may encounter in adolescence. One example would be "Your friend will invite you to a party if you do her paper for her," or "You want to get a new pair of sneakers, but you can't afford them. You are at the store, and no one is at the register."

Subjects then respond with the solution that would be most appropriate. Responses are then rated on a 5-point competence scale by adult "blind" judges of the same gender.

Thorough validation studies for each inventory have yielded supportive results that significantly differentiated delinquent and nondelinquent boys and girls. For both Black and Caucasian Adolescents, Cronbach's Alpha was .79 for boys and .85 for girls, showing strong reliability of the instrument. Inter-rater reliability for the PIAG ranges from .51 to .97. Approximately 72% of the variance in self-report measures of delinquency is accounted for by ratings on the PIAG and API (Ward & McFall, 1986).

**Family Environment & Upbringing**

Before discussing different theories, it's important to note the influence of mediating and moderating variables that may or may not impact the adolescent's problem-solving competency. A mediating variable explains the relationship between a
predictor and a criterion. For example, problem-solving competency could explain the relationship between intelligence and the likelihood of delinquency (K. Brockwood, personal communication, March 21, 2007). Intelligence is mediated by problem solving competency, which influences the likelihood of criminal decision-making. Someone with high intelligence and low problem solving competency may not make the same choices as someone with high intelligence and high problem solving competency.

In contrast, a moderating variable such as age would affect the strength of the relationship between intelligence and the likelihood of delinquency (Kroupa, 1988). The first mediating variable is the adolescent's upbringing and family background, as it acts as a primary source of socialization for the adolescent. A study by Kroupa (1988) investigated the relationship between perceived females' parental acceptance via self-report and reported number of delinquent acts. He found that more delinquent females are significantly more likely to view their mothers as rejecting and neglecting than nondelinquents (p<.05).

Koposov, Vladislav, and Eisemann (2003) studied violence exposure as a mediating variable for juvenile delinquency. It was hypothesized that exposure to violence in childhood years breeds a sense of victimization and powerlessness, which is then fought against in adolescence. There was a moderate correlation (.57) found between violence exposure and antisocial behavior, but it was nonsignificant. In addition, predictive validity was not established for adolescent psychopathology from the witnessing of violence. This research points out that adolescents vary in their reactions to being exposed to violence. While some may engage in delinquent acts, others may be
more resilient. It stresses the notion that no single factor can predict delinquency, and several mediating and moderating variables must be considered (Koposov et al., 2003).

McGee (2003) conducted a similar study, examining community violence in relation to risk and protective factors in African American high school students. She found that direct victimization through community violence was likely to result in externalizing symptoms and delinquency in boys, and internalizing symptoms and relationship difficulties in girls. Coping variables were moderators in this analysis, as more adaptive coping strategies resulted in less problematic behavior. These results were not found to be as strong when community violence was indirect (i.e., arson two miles away), as the adolescents did not feel as victimized in those situations. McGee (2003) emphasized the need for "prevention programs aimed at strengthening protective factors, reducing risk factors, and education about effective coping strategies" (p. 293), as community violence is unpredictable and adolescents may not have the tools to effectively address their feelings when these situations arise.

Other studies have drawn comparison analyses between types of communication in families and their rate of delinquent involvement. Alexander (1973) hypothesized that delinquent families often had defensive, or "system-disintegrating" communication, from a family systems perspective (p. 614). He interviewed 22 normal (nondelinquent) and 20 delinquent families (defined as one or more adolescents involved a delinquent act) to discover how their communication styles differed, specifically focusing on reciprocity and feedback. His hypothesis was supported, as delinquent families often had defensive styles of relating to one another. This model is used to evaluate how families respond to stress, and whether interactions are predominantly supportive or defensive. While this
information is helpful, it is difficult to analyze in retrospect, as families may have become
defensive in response to delinquent involvement, rather than beforehand. Still, if this
theory is true, adolescents who engage in juvenile delinquency often have a home
environment that is invalidating to them (Alexander, 1973).

As evidenced in this review, juvenile delinquency is a broad topic which has
much research, but not enough empirical support in all areas. Much attention has been
given to school violence and the possible factors leading up to similar crimes that are
horrifying, or cause damage and heartbreak to a larger community. The news tends to
perpetuate this culture of pathology, as it shows seconds of the most shocking youth
offenders there are on the streets. It doesn't necessarily offer a balanced or normative
perspective, which is why the research should continue to offer data on all aspects of
juvenile delinquency. The purpose of this review is to draw attention to the evidence and
theories that have been developed relating to the social and environmental aspects that
can influence delinquent behavior, the normative nature of delinquency in adolescence
and the developmental factors that influence adolescents' ability to effectively problem-
solve. Interventions are discussed to outline effective methods for enhancing problem-
solving competency as well as coping skills in juveniles, allowing them to adopt better
alternatives and not engage in criminal behavior.

Psychopathology

The majority of juvenile delinquents are first-time, and most likely "adolescent-
limited" offenders (Brezina, 2000, p. 6). Thus, they are unlikely to commit crimes in
adulthood. According to Donellan, Ge, and Wenk (2000), only 5% of males in the entire
population are life-course offenders, most of whom show marked psychopathology and
neurological deficits. This 5% accounts for lower functioning, aggressive individuals who are diagnosed with severe Antisocial Personality Disorder in adulthood. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychological Association, 2000) the most characteristic trait of Antisocial Personality Disorder is a “pervasive disregard for, and violation of the rights of others” (p. 701). One-time offenses are highly normative in adolescence. It is difficult to obtain accurate figures of delinquency rates, as not all youth are arrested and much of the data is based on arrest reports or the number of convictions.

According to Brezina (2000), the temporal instability of adolescent offending makes it difficult to make assumptions about their future criminal intent, especially in absence of obvious psychopathology. Consistent with these findings, longitudinal data show that adolescence-limited offenders generally score higher on tests of cognitive ability (i.e., The California Achievement Test, CTB, 1992) and show more evidence of prosocial skills than life-course-persistent offenders (Donnellan et al., 2000).

Another way to view these data is that criminals with higher skill levels have an easier time finishing school and seeking satisfactory employment than criminals with low Intelligence Quotients (IQ’s). It is hypothesized that people with higher IQ’s have greater confidence in their abilities, which enhances intrinsic motivation to find conventional alternatives to criminal behavior (Donnellan et al., 2000). An important exception to this IQ relationship trend is white-collar criminals. For the purposes of this review, the focus will be on offenses specific to youth offenders.
Theoretical Framework

*Psychological*

There are many psychological theories that attempt to explain juvenile delinquency. This review will discuss the theories best supported by data relevant to juvenile delinquency. These theories are theory of intelligence, interpersonal theory, social learning theory, identity development and adolescent egocentrism.

*Theory of Intelligence*

One psychological theory of delinquency that is perhaps the most outdated discusses the relationship of individual intelligence to deviant behavior (Shoemaker, 1984). It was hypothesized by Alfred Binet and Theodore S. Terman (1916, as cited in Shoemaker, 1984) at the beginning of the century that there is a negative correlation between IQ scores and incidences of delinquent behavior. Generalizing this principle is dangerous because certainly there are people who have low IQ scores and do not commit criminal acts, and conversely there are those with high IQ scores who commit crimes. A more salient explanation is that there is a positive relationship between maladaptive personality traits (e.g., manipulation, impulsivity, narcissism) with instances of delinquent behavior. This is more applicable for adult offenders who have stable personality traits. Adolescents are still developing their personalities as well as their executive thinking abilities, making it a chaotic period of growth and identity formation (Muuss, 1988). With this in consideration, it is highly likely that they will have some distorted thoughts and trouble with impulsivity.
Interpersonal Theory

Sullivan’s interpersonal theory of adolescent development highlights the interaction between personality development and culture of delinquency (1953, as cited in Muuss, 1988). He viewed the self as a system, made up of multiple selves, which function differently, depending on circumstances. Sullivan stated, "Interpersonal relationships are the essential ingredients for normal human development; moreover, their destructive, anxiety-arousing manifestations provide explanations for immaturity, deviance and psychopathology" (as cited in Muuss, 1988, p. 114). Social relationships become a center of focus during adolescence, and these relationships depend upon positive feedback. A person may adjust his/her sense of self to adjust to the peer environment and reduce anxiety. In addition, it’s important to acknowledge that biochemical states vary from one adolescent to the next and may be altered by excitement or anxiety in social situations. This can affect hyperactivity, impulsivity and decision making abilities (Muuss, 1988).

Sullivan called his model social psychiatry, as it fits with concerns of peer-group conformity, peer pressure and intimacy. This explains why adolescents are in a unique limbo period when their decision-making is mediated by their peer environment. This peer environment, which is reciprocal in nature, can be positive or negative on adolescent development. Through this lens, delinquency can be seen as a way to attain things such as popularity and admiration, to belong to a certain social group. Adherence to delinquent acts through social motives could show one’s autonomy from rules and regulations of society, putting the group norms as more important than societal norms (Muuss, 1988).
Social Learning Theory

A third psychological theory of delinquency is Bandura's social learning theory (1977). The basic concept of social learning theory is three faceted: imitation, modeling and identification. In adolescence, people are likely to imitate those whom they admire, whether they are famous athletes, teachers, sisters or friends. This can be seen with speech, mannerisms and dress. In turn, they are likely to respond to modeling behavior, repeating the way people behave around them to form cohesion with the admired person or social group (Muuss, 1988). Imitating the modeled behavior reduces the adolescent's anxiety and inhibitions around committing delinquent behavior. For example, if an adolescent sees a peer using drugs and does the same, it reduces his/her anxiety by repeating a behavior that has already been committed rather than initiating it himself/herself (Muuss, 1988). The adolescent may think, "She drinks alcohol and it's fine, and she seems to be cool when she does it, so I should be fine, too." The third facet of this theory is identification, which involves an introjection of another person's values, attitudes and morals and the adolescent matching his/her own beliefs to fit in with those around him/her.

Identity Development

A fourth psychological theory of delinquency is Erikson’s theory of identity development (1959). This theory dictates that each person must pass through different stages of development, and cannot move onto the next until previous needs are met. The struggle in adolescence is identity development versus role diffusion. As explained by Muuss (1988), "Each individual must establish a sense of personal identity and avoid the dangers of role diffusion and identity confusion" (p. 60). Erikson stated that during this
time, identity must be found in the individual's values, separateness, and unique place in his/her environment. This is particularly difficult to attain during adolescence, when the amount of roles to choose from is limited. The climate of social change allows for a gradual decrease in dependency on parents, an increased dependency on peers and eventually, increased independence.

As adolescents begin to explore and develop their identities, they may create cliques, peer groups and gangs. It is within these groups that they can create their own norms and rules, whether they are consistent with or counter to the norms and rules of the dominant culture (Muuss, 1988). Thus, in this context it can be understood that sometimes delinquency is performed in peer groups that desire to challenge the rules and test the boundaries of society in hopes of creating their own group and individual identities.

*Adolescent Egocentrism*

In conjunction with identity development, there is a noticeable amount of egocentrism that is characteristic of the adolescent years. A final psychological theory of delinquency is Elkind's theory of adolescent egocentrism (1967). In the transition from childhood to adulthood, teens haven't fully abandoned the idea of invincibility. They know that death happens, and that pregnancy happens, but neither will happen to them yet. Though they may be conscious of some consequences to delinquency, they may assume that such consequences aren't applicable to them. This idea extrapolates to an adolescent group or clique thought process that consequences to delinquency are negotiable or nonexistent. There is egocentricity to adolescence for many reasons: identity formation, developing sexuality and increasingly complicated and confusing
relationships. The above concerns often cause adolescents to turn their focus inward, as they are often preoccupied with their own feelings. Additionally, there is the concept of an imaginary audience in the adolescent's life, in which he/she is the main character on stage. According to Muuss (1988):

> The adolescent imagines that he is the center of attention of this audience of peers -- a product of his own thinking rather than a real audience. The construct of the imaginary audience may help to account for the adolescent's common feeling of self-consciousness. (p. 170)

In this frame, everyone around the adolescent is revolving around him/her, paying attention to his/her speech, dress and actions, and reacting with approval or disapproval. This is partially due to feelings of peer pressure and being on the spot to make decisions, especially whether or not to participate in delinquent acts.

A study by Chandler (1973) evaluated egocentrism in 45 delinquent boys and 45 nondelinquent boys across three age groups. Half of the participants were Black, six immigrated from Puerto Rico, and the remaining were European-American, making this a diverse sample. It was found that egocentrism actually has a significant relationship with antisocial behavior. The researcher hypothesized that adolescents who repeatedly offend have some "developmental lag in their ability to successfully adopt to the roles or perspectives of others" (p. 331). These conclusions were true across socioeconomic status and intellectual levels.

According to Chandler (1973), mild egocentrism in adolescence is normative, but an excess of egocentrism can become characterological and hard to part with into adulthood. The downside to egocentrism is a lack of awareness, cooperation and
consideration of the needs of others, which can be detrimental to social functioning and relationships. However, intervention efforts teaching role-taking skills significantly decreased high social egocentrism. This suggests that the egocentrism is merely a protective balloon for adolescents, to compensate for an identity that is still developing underneath. This vulnerability has positive implications for the effectiveness of interventions, which will be discussed in a later section.

**Socioenvironmental**

Socioenvironmental theories such as strain theory (Brezina, 2000), social control theory (Shoemaker, 1988) and rational choice theory (Shoemaker, 1984) support the notion that delinquency is problem-solving behavior and can be an action taken in response to distress and frustrating social relationships.

**Strain Theory**

Robert Merton's strain theory argues that youth are pressured by the media to attain material resources (e.g., cars, money, beauty products) without the means or resources to attain these goods (1983, as cited in Brezina, 2000). Youths enlist Daseinstechniken, or coping techniques, to make their worlds more bearable (Brezina, 2000). Delinquent acts can, in turn, be in effort to adapt to an unpredictable environment or to avoid or alleviate the strain. The heuristic model highlights that many problem areas are salient during adolescence, and can be solved with either conventional or delinquent solutions to attain their goals. The three problem areas identified for this age range are perceived control, positive evaluation of self-worth, and dysphoria/negative affect (Brezina, 2000).
Perceived control. The first problem area of perceived control in strain theory highlights the need for human beings to have a sense of mastery over their environment. The perception that one has, to some extent, control over his/her environment can help reduce fear and anxiety. Adolescents are in limbo between childhood and adulthood emotionally, physically and mentally. This transition means that adolescents desire to make adult decisions, but find themselves unable to because parents and authority figures are ultimately in control. This lack of congruence between desired reality and actual reality causes a rift in the adolescent's sense of his/her environment. To reduce anxiety, he/she must restore control, and according to Brezina (2000), "To restore control, individuals may choose deviant means when conventional alternatives are unavailable" (p. 13). Choosing a deviant alternative to solve a problem can be less anxiety provoking than the helplessness that ensues when a teen feels he/she has absolutely no control over undesirable circumstances.

Self-Worth. The second problem area for adolescents, according to strain theory, is positive evaluation of self-worth. According to Brezina (2000), "From early to mid-adolescence, teenagers are sensitive to the thoughts of others, and develop the insight that other people are the centers of thinking and feeling" (p. 9). The reactions of others are of high importance, as the adolescent often looks to peers for a reflection of his or her self-worth. Therefore, positive evaluation of self-worth is contingent on each situation the adolescent encounters. Impressing friends with acts of vandalism, shoplifting or drug use may result in high self-worth, even at the cost of breaking the law. This fragile and impressionistic sense of self-worth fluctuates, vulnerable to peer pressure and poor decision-making.
Affect. The third problem area for individuals is dysphoria and negative affect (Brezina, 2000). Some adolescents may be exposed to highly restrictive and/or punitive home environments that do not foster open communication or democratic problem solving strategies. Often, these teens internalize anger and become highly dysphoric, finding fault with themselves and frustration with their lives. These adolescents can become too emotionally distressed and feel helpless to problem solve efficiently, and may resort to delinquency on impulse. They show a pattern of committing truancy, attempting to run away from home or using alcohol and drugs.

The first reason for this pattern is because the adolescent desires a sense of freedom from a home or school that is invalidating, or full of negative affect. The second reason is that adolescents may be trying to replace the positive affect that is missing from their environment by self-medicating with drugs and alcohol. This is the most problematic and concerning pattern in juvenile delinquency, mostly because adolescents who are in these environments often feel isolated and lost (Brezina, 2000).

Vignette. The following is a vignette for the purpose of illustrating this theory: A 13-year-old boy named Jason wants to attend a rock concert on a school night. He mowed the lawn and washed cars for people in his neighborhood to save up enough money to go to the concert. The day of the show, Jason and his friends practice playing baseball in his back yard. Jason hit a foul ball over to the driveway, which hit the windshield of his father's BMW and broke it. That night, Jason's parents told Jason that he must give them the money that he'd earned for the concert to pay to replace the windshield. Furious, Jason snuck out of the house and beat another teen up in the parking lot to get a ticket to the show.
As shown in this example, delinquency served as a means to an end, as Jason only wanted to go to the concert. Jason was so upset about missing the concert that he was willing to be violent with an innocent bystander to fulfill his goal. His attack on the boy was not premeditated, but arose out of desperation to attend a social function. Acts of delinquency can have short-term positive effects on the adolescent, affirming autonomy and independence from adult rules (Brezina, 2000). It replaces powerlessness with a sense of power. The social, psychological and physiological effects of delinquency (when unnoticed by authority figures) can be reinforcers for deviant behavior. In this scenario, Jason chose the deviant act because no conventional alternatives were available to attain his goal. Perhaps a conventional alternative for his parents to use would be to allow Jason to go to the concert but have him clean the house that weekend to earn the money for the windshield.

*Social Control Theory*

A second socioenvironmental theory of delinquency is social control theory (Shoemaker, 1984). This has four components: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. To understand how or why delinquent acts have occurred, we must understand if there is attachment between people involved, to the degree that they would care about each others' thoughts and feelings about the situation. Commitment refers to the cost-benefit analysis that adolescents consider before committing a delinquent act (e.g., What are the chances are getting caught? Does the benefit outweigh the risk?). Involvement is the connection between the adolescent and the community (Shoemaker, 1984). An example would be the number of community roles he/she is involved with as well as friends and community activities. Similar to strain theory, adherence to conventional
activities highly depends on conventional alternatives to delinquency being available. If the adolescent has a community support system, he/she is less likely to need to rely on crime to achieve a goal. Finally, belief refers to the degree to which the adolescent follows conventional thinking systems. Social control theory is helpful when examining family and domestic relationships, as attachment plays a large role in delinquency related to those areas. However, the criticism of control theory is that these four aspects can covary greatly, lowering the reliability of being able to predict or explain delinquent behavior by this theory alone (Shoemaker, 1984).

Hirschi and Gottfredson (1996) explained control theory as the natural model of our society. Though control is an illusion, power is desirable, and thus we are continuously trying to attain both power and control. It is theorized that although consequences to delinquency seem clear, the subjectivity of every individual involved in the delinquent act and the authorities who may or may not penalize them makes it less clear. Crime declines with age as adolescents learn to generalize cause and effect.

*Rational Choice Theory*

A final socioenvironmental theory is rational choice theory. According to Shoemaker (1984), the theory argues that "Criminal behavior is predicated on the use of calculations, reasoning, and rational consideration of choices" (p. 16). This theory assumes that the individual is committing a crime in self-interest because it has the most favorable outcome, despite the fact that it's against the law. This theory recognizes the human being's capacity to behave in accordance with his/her own free will and to make choices that make sense to him/her. However, this theory makes it unclear as to which motives are the most likely to result in choosing delinquent alternatives over conventional
alternatives. In addition, rational choice theory is applied more to adults than adolescents, as adults have a more fully developed prefrontal cortex that allows for executive decision making and rational thought (Shoemaker, 1984). This developmental facet contributes to the notion that juvenile delinquency is often problem-solving behavior in the absence of more conventional solutions. It's possible that adolescents haven't developed enough rational thinking to be aware of conventional solutions to problems.

*Theory Integration*

The psychological and socioenvironmental theories both contribute a different angle to examine the problems, but neither is complete on its own. Strain theory is the most supported framework by socioenvironmental theorists because of its widespread applicability to a variety of offenses (Brezina, 2000). Most notably, research has found that countries with the least amount of economic inequality have the least amount of violent crimes (Savolainen, 2000). In regards to economic distress, not only do adolescents often have limited spending money, but the media also targets them as consumers for beauty products, compact discs and electronics. This discrepancy causes a strain that is universal across the U.S., as well as other developed countries (Brezina, 2000). However, examining delinquency of individual offenders is just as important as looking at the problem from a global perspective.

Biochemical and psychological states of each individual adolescent are quite important for understanding delinquency. For example, levels of dopamine and testosterone can affect degree of hyperactivity, impulsivity and aggression (Brezina, 2000). Integrating these theories would be helpful when examining an individual youth offender who is on trial. By integrating psychological, biological, ecological and
socioenvironmental theories of delinquency, we can begin to understand whether the adolescent is likely to have problems in adulthood or if there is something in his/her environment that can be changed to create conventional alternatives to delinquency (Brezina, 2000).

Problem-Solving Perspective

*Lack of Alternatives*

The first aspect of the problem-solving perspective that is important to discuss is the adolescent’s perceived lack of alternatives. As outlined in the vignette, the roots of the problem-solving perspective on juvenile delinquency are in the lack of conventional alternatives. Brezina (2000) explained that while some crimes may create an increase in material resources (i.e., shoplifting, theft, prostitution), others are committed for increase in status and self-validation (vandalism, drugs, assault). There is an age-crime relationship that resembles a bell curve. Most juvenile delinquency occurs between the ages of 14 or 16, with less occurring before and after these ages (Brezina, 2000). Before the age of 14, adolescents are developmentally more focused on securing friendships and social activities.

Before the age of 14, it is less likely for adolescents to commit crimes as they do not usually feel the strong sense of needing autonomy and independence as they do in their mid-teens. After the age of 16, fewer crimes are committed as well. This makes sense from a judicial perspective; as the legal age of adulthood is approaching, there would be stronger punishments for offenses (Brezina, 2000). In addition, leaving home at the age of 18 is often a positive change for teens, who may have previously felt trapped and not in control of their home environment. It's important to note that strain theory is
mostly applicable to teens that grow up in a relatively stable home environment, and not necessarily for those who are homeless or in foster homes.

Positive Outcome Expectancies

According to Brezina (2000), another strong contributing aspect of delinquent problem-solving is the incidence of positive outcome expectancies from deviant behavior. This refers to the extent that a reward is expected which justifies and counteracts the negative consequences for delinquent behavior. An example of a positive outcome expectancy is getting high through the use of marijuana or other drugs. Adolescents may use drugs as a coping mechanism, and thus it is seen as a short-term solution. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1996), "Delinquency may allow youths to cope in the short run, but in the long run, it tends to exacerbate problems" (p. 141). The question becomes, how can we intervene to help teens develop long-term coping strategies so that they do not resort to short-term, maladaptive coping strategies? The second part of this review will focus on research findings, assessments and interventions with adolescent offenders.

Covariates of Problem-Solving Competency

Coping

The ability of a person to adapt to threatening events and loss is his/her coping style (Bartek, Krebs, & Taylor, 1993). These may be effective or ineffective, depending on the person. Someone who doesn't cope well usually responds to these circumstances with defensiveness. This could appear through blaming others for the event and denying vulnerable feelings (Bartek, 1993). Studies show that low-coping and highly defensive people perform below their level of moral competence when they respond to dilemmas.
Therefore, when faced with the choice of whether or not to commit a crime to solve a problem, an adolescent might have a hard time choosing a conventional solution if they are highly defensive with low coping skills. In addition, youths who are exposed to trauma and significant life changes (parents' divorce, a long-distance move) are more likely to commit offenses. This reaction to life changes is a response to the adolescent's feeling of not having control over his/her environment, and/or not being able to cope with the transition (Grisso, 1998).

*Adaptive Style*

Another factor that could influence adolescents' participation in delinquent acts is their adaptive style. According to Steiner and Feldman (1995), adaptive style is made up of coping strategies, problem-solving abilities and unconscious defense mechanisms. It was hypothesized by Steiner and Feldman (1995) that an adolescent's adaptive style can help predict risk factors for delinquency, eating disorders, social problems and family conflict. Three groups of participants were studied: a group of incarcerated delinquents (n=66), a group with somatic complaints/disorders from a pediatric psychiatry program (n=75), and a normal comparison group obtained from two local high schools (n=131). All participants were between the ages of 15 and 16 years old. The high school students were recruited through health classes and the incarcerated adolescents were recruited from group treatments for behavior and eating disorders (Steiner & Feldman, 1995).

The participants were assessed using the Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ; Andrews, Singh, & Bond, 1983), which has been modified for adolescents with a reduction in adult-specific items (Steiner & Feldman, 1995). This instrument assessed nine different defense mechanisms on a Likert scale: projection, passive aggressiveness,
somatization, denial, regression, undoing, inhibition, splitting, acting out, fantasy, repression and withdrawal. These defenses can be highly adaptive, as they arise to reduce anxiety without confronting a problem.

Participants were additionally assessed using the Weinberger Adjustment Inventory (WAI; Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990). This instrument measures distress, restraint, impulse control and consideration of others. It addresses four affective states for these traits: anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and low well-being. Analyses of this scale in clinic and nonclinic samples show internal consistencies of .85 to .91 across age and socioeconomic status (Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990).

The results were mixed, as there were not significant between-group differences on the DSQ. However, a significant negative correlation ($r=-.69$, $p=.02$) arose within groups: the lower the defensiveness (as measured by the DSQ) the higher the resilience and adaptive style (as measured by the WAI). Therefore, higher coping resources resulted in lowered risk factors and lower defensiveness. The higher the coping resources, the less likely the adolescent is to somaticize problems or use delinquency as an alternative to solving a problem. Additionally, socioeconomic status was significantly correlated with mature defenses for boys ($r=.18$, $p=.05$), and with denial for girls ($r=.285$, $p=.04$). This shows that socioeconomic status was an important covariate to consider when interpreting these findings. A limitation of this study was that the sample wasn't balanced, as somatic complaints were sampled only from girls and delinquency was only sampled from boys. In addition, the DSQ and the WAI measure overlapping constructs, and it may be difficult to interpret significant correlations within similar domains.
Communicative Competency

Another factor that affects adolescents' ability to problem-solve is their communicative competency. This is the degree to which adolescents are able to communicate their wants and needs assertively and effectively, as well as their ability to compromise and reason with others. Oyserman and Saltz (1993) explored the notion that communication and sense of competency are strongly linked to social context and the adolescent's view of his/her possible selves. For example, a 15-year-old girl may have three possible selves: her school self, her gang self and her family self. Navigating between selves can often cause anxiety, as each self requires different identity formulations. In order to reduce anxiety, possible selves should be congruent with the adolescent's self-concept (i.e., she sees herself as a gang member and isn't forced into it). This model is illustrated in Figure 1. The arrows indicate the directions to which one factor of delinquent involvement influences the others.

As indicated by Figure 1 (Oyserman & Saltz, 1993), problem-solving for adolescents becomes complicated when many different factors come into play during the situation; the social environment, the adolescent's values and interpersonal dynamics are only a few of these factors. Therefore, it is reasonable that many adolescents struggle with proper problem-solving competency and communicative competency, for it is normative to want to break the rules, not follow them. Based on these hypotheses, Oyserman and Saltz (1993) selected 230 youths, ages 13 to 17. Half of the youths were enrolled in Detroit inner-city public schools and half were held in the Wayne County Detention Center.
Sanger, Coufal, Scheffler, and Searcey (2003) conducted a study comparing 23 delinquents and 23 nondelinquents between the ages of 15 and 17 concerning how they viewed their own communicative competence. This construct was assessed using two 20-item questionnaires: Performance of Conversational Behaviors and Knowledge of Personal Behaviors. Surveys were developed by 12 speech and language pathologists by conducting a pilot study with adolescents who were violent. These questionnaires featured either a yes/no or a Likert-scale rating of conversational practices and understanding of behaviors such as taking turns, being polite and using nonverbal conversational behaviors. The ANOVA results were nonsignificant, revealing that delinquent girls and the nondelinquent controls did not differ greatly on their sense of their own communicative competency.

This study's limitations are that it was self-report and used a very small sample (Sanger, 2003). However, it demonstrates that these females at baseline (versus in a
crime scenario) do not differ greatly in their judgments of communicative abilities. An additional limitation was that the delinquent adolescents were all incarcerated. This may have lowered the delinquents' self-perception of communicative competency.

**Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies**

Another facet of problem-solving skills is interpersonal negotiation strategies (INS). This involves an individual's ability to read social and emotional cues, practice assertiveness, compromise and communicate effectively with others. A study by Leadbetter, Allen, Hellner, and Aber (1989) assessed the interpersonal negotiation strategies among high-risk youth in Boston, New York City and Pittsburgh. The participant demographics were as follows: 150 males, 121 females, 29% Black, 23% Hispanic, 45.5% White, 2.5% Other, ranging from age 13 to 18. Levels of engagement in delinquent acts (e.g., running away, unprotected sexual activity) and hard drug use were two and three times higher than norms for 16 to 17 year-olds in national samples.

The Adolescent Problem Inventory for boys (API) and the Problem Inventory for Adolescent Girls (PIAG) were used to assess the effectiveness of interpersonal problem solving skills. Slight modifications were made to make items more relevant to urban populations. Scores were averaged in the manual and rated by professional psychologists and students for an overall measure of social skills.

A principal-components factor analysis was used to examine interrelations among problem behaviors and interpersonal negotiation strategies (INS). Specific analyses were run for boys and girls, exploring a developmental model for the assessments of levels and styles of interpersonal negotiation strategies used by youth offenders. Forty-five percent
of the variance in males' social problem-solving skills and forty-three percent of the variance in females' social problem-solving skills was explained by INS.

Significant associations were found within groups among their levels of interpersonal negotiation strategies, styles of interpersonal orientation, competence in social problem-solving skills, and involvement in problem behaviors. Older males with lower INS scores who used passive-aggressive and aggressive negotiation strategies showed significantly greater involvement ($p = .03$) in problem behaviors. In addition, a significant negative correlation ($r = -.17$, $p = .04$) was found between INS and observed problem behaviors in females of all ages (Leadbeater et al., 1989).

These research findings echo past research on interpersonal negotiation strategies (Freedman, Donahoe, Rosenthal, Schlunt, & McFall, 1978) that show a negative trend between the level of interpersonal effectiveness and the number of problem behaviors reported by youth. This shows the importance of the social aspect that can motivate and perpetuate delinquency, especially in regards to communicating effectively with others (Leadbeater et al., 1988). A critique of this study is that the measures were geared towards problematic situations, which can produce anxiety (especially for teens who are conscious of their struggles in decision making). A suggestion would be to add a measure that asks about interpersonal negotiation strategies in positive, everyday situations. This would help to figure out whether these findings are generalizable cross-contextually.

**Intervention/Outcome Research**

**Coping Course**

In the literature on delinquency, universally effective interventions have been limited. This is probably due to the variability across groups of youth offenders, and
difficulty in attaining random samples of adolescents. However, some studies have been effective in targeting and intervening with some aspects of delinquency. For example, a study by Rohde, Jorgensen, Seeley and Mace (2004) evaluated the effectiveness of a cognitive-behavioral course to enhance coping skills in incarcerated youth. This course has previously been used to treat adolescents with depression, but is being modified on the incarcerated population. The participants were 76 male offenders across a broad age range (12-25) at the Oak Creek Correctional Facility in Oregon. Participants were randomly assigned to the Coping Course (n=46) or usual care (n=30). A pretest/posttest questionnaire assessed demographic variables, youth self-report of behaviors, current suicidal ideation/Attempts, life attitudes, coping skills, self-esteem, loneliness, optimism, social adjustment and knowledge of cognitive behavioral concepts.

The intervention consisted of sixteen treatment sessions over an 8-week period. Group leaders were therapists from the Oregon Research Institute. Adolescents were taught social skills, distress tolerance, relaxation techniques, cognitive restructuring, communication and effective problem solving strategies. Adolescents were provided with handouts, quizzes, learning tasks and homework assignments. Modifications were made for the incarcerated population based on empirical research to focus on other negative emotions besides depression, shorten the sessions, make examples more relevant and simplify the vocabulary. In pilot studies, these changes made the course much more effective and relevant for this population. The Coping course had positive, significant changes for reducing externalizing problems, building communication skills and increasing disclosure with staff members (p<.05).
Mediation of Aggression

A study by Guerra and Slaby (1990) investigated the effectiveness of an intervention that assessed cognitive mediations of aggression in adolescent offenders. The participants were 120 adolescents, males and females ages 15 to 18 who were housed in a juvenile correction facility. Participants were randomly assigned to a treatment group or control group. The intervention consisted of 12 weeks of cognitive mediation training, which taught the adolescents strategies for dealing with aggression and addressing problem-solving skills deficits. The eight-step sequential problem-solving model contained questions such as "Is there a problem? Stop and think: Why is there a conflict? What do I want? Think and evaluate the results." Participants also talked about how to identify and address social problems. The results showed the following to be significant (p<.001) predictors of delinquent behavior: defining aggression as a legitimate response, defining the problem, thinking victims deserve aggression, and type of goal selection. The intervention was successful in changing social problem-solving skills and beliefs supporting aggression. However, it was not successful in other areas, such as self-esteem and negative image.

Discussion

As this review suggests, there are many perspectives available in the literature about juvenile delinquency. However, the most salient and universal is the problem-solving perspective explained by strain theory. Adolescents don't always take the time to consider conventional alternatives, or are motivated by group dynamics rather than thinking about consequences. Perhaps one of the biggest motivators of delinquency is economics. Adolescents experience an influx of media attention from the consumer
market, with products designed just for them, promising to make them popular, beautiful and carefree. The strain between resources and desire to get better products is evident in society, and adolescents act as a magnifier of what is happening on a larger level.

While this theory is the most inclusive, it still does not encapsulate the motive for each delinquent act, or the situation for each adolescent. Ms. Benita Presley, an African-American case manager at a youth development center in North Portland, Oregon had thoughts contrary to the literature in this area:

The issue is not just a deficiency in problem-solving skills. It's...well, a lot of black adolescents, especially those in poverty just don't have role models. Their fathers are in jail or absent from their lives, and the kids do drugs or commit crimes as a learned behavior; they do it to survive. No one wakes up one day and wants to be a drug user or a criminal. That identity is developed through desperation. (B. Presley, personal communication, April 5, 2007)

What Ms. Presley describes is an interaction of multiple deficiencies in addition to problem-solving skills. She is noticing that some teens become persistent offenders if they don't have the support they need at home. Her testimony wasn't contrary to the research, and it expressed the concern that although research in this area is thorough, it is not complete.

It's important to note that there are several issues of diversity that intersect with these theories, most notably, class differences. Juvenile offenders are often of lower income levels, especially if they commit property offenses. However, drug use, rape and status offenses are evident in every social class (Shoemaker, 1984). I did not focus on finding racial differences or gender differences in juvenile delinquency, as competency
with problem-solving skills is an issue with all groups, given that it is a developmental task of adolescence (Shoemaker, 1984). It would be useful to examine how these theories and research findings apply to homeless and runaway adolescents.

The fact that many adolescent offenders do not persist with criminal activity in their adult lives is encouraging. However, for adolescents, delinquent problem-solving choices have consequences for adulthood (i.e., drunk driving). There need to be more interaction studies done with problem-solving competency, availability of adult role-models, access to resources and family history of criminal behavior. In addition, more longitudinal research needs to be done to discern what long-term interventions are effective for increasing problem-solving competency in youth offenders. A strength of the research outlined in this review is the demographic homogeneity of samples, especially in regards to representation of age and ethnicity within and between groups. In adolescent and child research, it is particularly important to have a narrow age range for study participants. A difference of mere months in age could be a confounding variable with this population, as there can be developmental differences between a boy who is thirteen and a boy who is just turning fourteen.

An important finding of this review was that skills deficits in problem-solving competency are highly correlated with delinquency. In addition, mediating and moderating variables such as coping style, communicative competency and age should be addressed when assessing problem-solving competency. The PIAG and the API are both validated measures for problem-solving competency, and can additionally give information about resources for the adolescent (Gaffney & McFall, 1978). Another important finding is the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral coping interventions for
incarcerated adolescents. Significant findings were found for these interventions, as incarcerated adolescents gained many new skills in finding solutions to problems and reducing their aggressiveness. However, there aren't enough studies on successful interventions with adolescents in school settings, or other real-world settings. Using the drunk driving example, schools have drug prevention programs with abstinence-only policies. However, it might be more realistic to give adolescents more credit for making their own decisions and generalizing effective problem-solving skills for all situations. This research would be beneficial for parents, law officials and teachers to be educated about in order to be more sensitive to the developmental course of delinquency.
References


