

**“Testing a Subcultural Theory of Crime and Delinquency
in a Gang Context”**

by

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Abstract

In this paper, the subcultural theoretical perspective on crime and delinquency is discussed and an empirical assessment of the theory is conducted. The relationship between gang membership and adherence to deviant or criminal values is examined. Next, an assessment is made of the effects of gang membership and such subcultural values on involvement in serious offences, ranging from violence involving weapons to cocaine use to auto theft. Variables based on social control theory, such as parental attachment and academic performance are included in the analysis to assess the relative impact of subcultural values. Empirical evidence in support of the subcultural perspective is found.

Subcultural theories of crime and delinquency have been among the most prevalent and influential explanations pertaining to gangs. Walter Miller’s classic (1958) article on the effects of lower class culture on the development of gang delinquency is widely considered to be a foundational work of subcultural theory.

Miller’s description of the “focal concerns” or central values of the gang subculture continues to affect the ways in which criminologists analyze or measure subcultures. However, Miller’s work was subjected to extensive criticism, focusing particularly on his use of behavioral observations to infer the existence of a subculture of values. Researchers critical of the focus on social class as a correlate of crime and gang delinquency also considerably reduced Miller’s impact on criminological theory. Nevertheless, several of the values discussed by Miller (including risk-taking, resentment of authority, scorn for diligence or hard work, and manipulative attitudes) continue to influence contemporary criminological theory .

Albert Cohen (1955) stresses the role of subcultures in his explanation of gangs and delinquency in his book on gang culture among delinquent boys. Rejection of middle class values and substitution of contracultural values emphasizing malicious and destructive acts is described as the cause of gang delinquency. Similar to Miller, Cohen describes a subculture that repudiates hard work and deferred gratification. Cloward and Ohlin (1960), who, like Cohen, are occasionally classified as “strain” theorists, also emphasized the role of subcultures as causes of gang crime and delinquency. Cloward and Ohlin argued that different types of subcultures (criminal, conflict, and retreatist) existed, depending mainly on the illegitimate opportunities available in a neighborhood. However, most researchers find gangs involved in a broad spectrum of crimes, not just specializing, for example, in drugs or violence. Similar criticism has been directed against Wolfgang and Ferracuti’s (1967) subculture of violence thesis; again, many researchers find a lack of specialization in crime among gangs.

More recent theorizing based on the subcultural perspective includes attempts at greater precision, such as Hagan’s (1992) description of “party subcultures” and “delinquent subcultures,” as well as Kreager’s (2007; 2008) empirical work on subcultures within schools. Kreager has argued that the focus on race and social class has misled prior subcultural theorists, and that instead academic performance may be a meaningful foundation for subcultures. Those who do poorly in school may gain status alternatively through violent behavior; Kreager does find that peer acceptance (only among those who are below average in academic performance) is increased by violent acts. Children whose parents have lower educational attainment levels themselves are likely to enhance status among peers by engaging in violence. In an experimental study by Younts (2009), peer approval of academic dishonesty (regardless of social class or other measures of status) increased the likelihood of student cheating on a computer assignment. Younts interprets this finding as consistent with subcultural theory predictions about the effects of social encouragement of deviance.

Subcultural theorists emphasize different values among those in the subculture, but these values are not generally described as completely distinct from the values of conventional society. Most subcultural theorists have tended to disagree with Cohen’s (1955) description of a criminal or deviant “contraculture,” in conflict with the traditional values of society. Sykes and Matza (1957) describe values that encourage delinquency as rationalizations for violations of conventional social values. These “subterranean” values are a part of the conventional social order that recognize the legitimacy of middle class morality but also allow for occasional violations of conventional rules. For example, being successful is recognized as a universal goal though the means to attain success may involve unethical or even criminal behavior. While social control theorists recognize the influence of deviant values (or “beliefs”), control theorists such as Sykes and Matza do not identify gangs

or subcultures as the origin of such criminal attitudes or values.

Anderson (1999) describes a subculture or “code” of the streets that provides values endorsing the use of violence, often in a gang context. Similar to Wolfgang and Ferracuti’s (1967) analysis of a subculture of violence, Anderson emphasizes the approval of violence for even trivial slights or provocation. In poor, urban neighborhoods with few resources or opportunities to obtain status or prestige, violent retaliation is justified for insults, a minor jostle in a public setting such as a bar, or simply perceived failure to confer common respect. The code of the streets is the principal source of subcultural values that leads to high rates of violence, according to subcultural theorists such as Anderson.

Values that encourage involvement in crime and deviance are a central theme in most subcultural theories, whether the version of this explanation is traditional (such as Miller’s or Cohen’s versions) or more recently developed (such as Kreager’s version). The social strata or groups that foster these deviant values are typically described in terms of social class or peer groups in general. Less emphasis has been placed on gang membership as a source of criminal or deviant values. Yet based on ethnographic studies of gangs (see Miller, 1958; Hagedorn, 1988), it seems likely that gang membership would foster the development of criminal or deviant values.

In this paper, the link between gang membership and deviant or criminal values will be assessed. The effects of gang membership and deviant or criminal values upon delinquent behavior will also be examined. The findings will be interpreted in relationship to the level of support for subcultural theory, a theory arguably developed as an explanation of gang crime and delinquency.

In our data analysis, measures based on social control theory will be incorporated, including attachment to parents and academic performance. Many researchers have found support for multiple theoretical perspectives, rather than regarding a single theory as a sufficient explanation for crime and delinquency.

Data and Measures

In this paper, data for the analyses are taken from a 2006 survey conducted in a large metropolitan area in eastern Canada. The survey was concentrated in neighborhoods known by police to have significant levels of gang activity. A random sample of the participants was generated by selecting names from class lists provided by the schools. Participation in the study was voluntary, and signed consent forms were obtained from the subjects and from parents. More than six hundred ($n = 618$) students returned completed questionnaires.

We assessed the representativeness of the sample by a comparison of both the school population and the sample. Local school boards provided data on basic demographic profiles of the school population. We found that the age and gender composition of the sample and the school population are very similar. Approximately one-fourth of the sample (24.2%) and the school population (24.8%)

are seventeen years of age or older. Slightly more than half of both the sample (52.8%) and the school population (52.1%) are female students.

To examine gang membership, a self-reported item was used. The respondents were asked, "Do you belong to what some people might call a youth gang?" This self-reported measure replicates the item on gang membership used by Hindelang et al. (1981) in the Seattle Youth Study. Such a measure of gang membership has been used in many previous studies (see, for example, Esbensen and Winfree, 1991; Brownfield, 2010).

Subcultural values are measured by a set of four items that are similar to indicators of the social control concept of "belief" and Sutherland's concept of deviant "definitions." For example, respect for the police was assessed by asking respondents to agree or disagree with the following item: "I have a lot of respect for the local police" (RESPECT). Items assessing a manipulative or instrumental attitude towards the law included the following three items: "To get ahead, you have to do some things that are not right" (GETAHED); "It's all right to get around the law if you can get away with it" (AROUND); and, "Some people deserve to be taken advantage of" (ADVANTAGE).

Sampson (2012: 225) uses similar measures to our indicators of subcultural values, in order to create a construct that he terms "moral cynicism." For example, survey items were used such as "Laws are made to be broken"; "It's okay to do anything you want as long as you don't hurt anyone"; and "To make money, there are no right and wrong ways anymore, only easy ways and hard ways." According to Sampson, these attitudes reflect an exemption from social rules or the sense that individuals are not bound to conventional morality. This moral cynicism was found to be positively correlated with homicide rates in Sampson's Chicago study, controlling for measures of poverty, collective efficacy, and racial segregation.

Collective efficacy (Sampson, 2012), measured by solidarity and trust, is found to be a crucial factor accounting for neighborhood differences in crime rates. Yet the moral cynicism measures or values described by Sampson are also important predictors of crime rates, even controlling for the influence of collective efficacy.

Several measures based on social control theory are used as comparison and control variables relative to the subcultural theory measures. For example, as a measure of commitment, we used school grade point average (based on a four-point scale ranging from excellent or "A" to below average or "D or lower"). Attachment to parents was measured by items assessing communication with mothers (for example, "Do you share your thoughts and feelings with your mother?" (SHARTHOT), and identification with fathers (for example, "Would you like to be the kind of person your father is?" (IDDAD). As noted above, prior research has found that factors based on more than a single theory tend to significantly affect delinquent behavior; it is necessary to control for variables based on other theories, and these additional factors provide a useful comparison for the focus on subcultural

theory variables.

Our measure of self-reported delinquency focuses on serious offences committed by gang offenders. An index based on five items was constructed based on the following: (1) "Have you ever taken things of large value (worth more than \$50) that did not belong to you?"; (2) "Have you ever taken a car for a ride without the owner's permission?"; (3) "Have you ever used a club, knife, or gun to get something from someone?"; (4) "Have you ever beat someone so badly they probably needed a doctor?"; and (5) "Have you ever used cocaine?" These five items assess relatively serious offences, such as robbery, auto theft, weapons offences, aggravated assault, and cocaine use. (The auto theft item probably measures "joyriding," which is the most common type of auto theft, especially among teenagers.) A latent class analysis (McCutcheon, 1987) was applied to these five items, and we found that they do form a single latent variable or scale ($L_2 = 14.78$, $df = 20$, $p > .10$).

Analysis

In Table 1, bivariate correlations between subcultural values measures and measures of self-reported delinquency, and the bivariate correlations between gang membership and measures of subcultural values are presented. As predicted based on subcultural theory, we find that all four measures of subcultural values are significantly correlated with gang membership. Gang members are more likely ($r = .17$) to disagree with the statement, "I have a lot of respect for the local police" (RESPECT). Subcultural theorists from Miller (1958) to Kreager (2008) have observed for more than fifty years that gang members have contempt for authority figures such as the police. Prior research has documented hostile relationships between gang members and the police, with gang members frequently accusing the police of unfair and even excessively brutal treatment. This disrespect for authority is also likely to be linked with subcultural values that dismiss the legitimacy of conventional rules and values more generally.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Delinquency and Gang Membership

	Gang	Respect	Around	Advantage	Getahed
Delinquency	.19	.17	-.22	-.18	-.15
Gang Membership		.17	-.16	-.14	-.11

Indeed, we find that gang membership is significantly associated with instrumental and manipulative attitudes toward the law. Gang members are more likely than non-gang members ($r = -.16$) to agree or strongly agree that “It is all right to get around the law if you can get away with it” (AROUND).

Our two remaining measures of subcultural values or an instrumental and manipulative ethic are also significantly correlated with gang membership. Gang members are more likely to agree with the statement, “To get ahead, you have to do some things that are not right” (GETAHED; $r = -.11$). We also find that gang members are more likely to agree with the statement, “Some people deserve to be taken advantage of” (ADVANTAGE; $r = -.14$). Both of these items seem to clearly express the degree to which the respondents subscribe to a cynical and manipulative philosophy or ethic.

The index of self-reported offences is also significantly correlated with the measures of subcultural values. This pattern of findings is consistent with the logic of subcultural theory: group sponsored or gang endorsed values are correlated with involvement in serious offences. For example, we find that those who do not respect the local police are more likely to self-report offences such as violence, theft, or cocaine use (RESPECT; $r = .17$). Those who believe it is appropriate to evade the law if punishment can be avoided are also more likely to self-report serious offences (AROUND; $r = -.22$).

Instrumental or manipulative attitudes are also significantly correlated with the index of self-reported offences. Those who agree that it is helpful to succeed or “get ahead” are more likely to self-report offences (GETAHED; $r = -.15$) than those who disagree with such an instrumental attitude. Similarly, those who believe that it is appropriate to take advantage of some people are more likely to self-report serious offences (ADVANTAGE; $r = -.18$).

We next assessed the effect of subcultural values and gang membership in multivariate analyses. These multivariate analyses facilitate an assessment of the relative effect of subcultural values on the likelihood of offending, as well as the extent to which such values help account for the impact of gang membership on delinquency.

In Table 2, the multivariate logistic regression analysis of the effect of gang membership and subcultural values on self-reported delinquency is presented. Note first that all four measures of subcultural values (respect for the police, getting around the law, taking advantage of others, and the desire to get ahead) remain significant predictors of serious offences. The measure of gang membership ($B = .09$, $p = .60$) does not remain significantly correlated with self-reported serious offences after controlling for the four measures of subcultural values. This latter finding can be interpreted as support for the subcultural theory hypothesis that subcultural values may provide an explanation for the influence of gang membership on crime. Those who are gang members may be acquiring subcultural values that

lead directly to involvement in serious offences. Gang members may be encouraged by others to develop moral cynicism, or are reinforced for expressing instrumental and manipulative attitudes.

Table 2. Logistic Regression of Delinquency on Gang Membership and Subcultural Variables

	B	SE	p
Gang Membership	.09	.18	.60
Respect	.31	.06	.01
Around	-.14	.05	.01
Advantage	-.12	.05	.04
Getahed	-.12	.05	.02

Constant = -.49, SE = .31, p = .12

Model Chi-square = 87.98, p < .001

Additional factors or conditions may influence participation in gang subcultures besides deviant values. Variables derived from social control theory, such as measures of family relationships and academic performance, may also play a significant role (or even account entirely for the effects of subcultural values on delinquency). We added measures of school grades and attachment to parents (sharing thoughts and feelings with mother, and identification with father) to our multivariate analyses of self-reported serious offences. The results are summarized in Table 3, including subcultural values and social control theory measures.

Two of the social control theory measures, sharing thoughts and feelings with mother (SHARTHOT) and school grades (GRADES) are significant predictors of self-reported delinquency, controlling for the measures of subcultural values. Higher school grades are correlated (B = .21) with lower levels of self-reported serious offences. Increased levels of communication with mothers is also correlated (B = .15) with lower levels of self-reported delinquency. There was no significant effect of identification with the father (IDDAD) in our multivariate analysis.

Gang membership also remains insignificantly related to self-reported serious offences after adding the social control measures to the multivariate analysis. In Table 3, we also find that two of the measures of subcultural values (ADVANTAGE and GETAHED) are no longer significantly correlated with self-reported delinquency after adding the social control theory measures. It seems that social control theory measures such as school grades account for the effects of certain instrumental attitudes (such as taking advantage of others). Two measures of subcultural values remain significant predictors of self-reported delinquency, after

introducing the social control theory variables in the multivariate analysis. First, respect for police (RESPECT; $B = .36$) is the strongest predictor of self-reported delinquency, based on the magnitude of the standardized coefficient. Lack of respect for the police is linked to higher levels of self-reported serious offences. Those who agree that it is appropriate to break the law if punishment can be avoided (AROUND) are also more likely to self-report serious offences, holding constant the effects of the social control theory measures.

Table 3. Logistic Regression of Delinquency on Gang Membership, Subcultural Values, and Control Theory Variables

	B	SE	p
Gang Membership	.08	.20	.65
Respect	.36	.06	.001
Around	-.27	.06	.001
Advantage	.02	.06	.69
Getahed	-.07	.05	.26
Sharthot	.15	.07	.03
Iddad	.03	.06	.55
Grades	.21	.03	.001

Constant = -2.13, SE = .45, $p < .001$

Model Chi-square = 183.86, $p < .001$

Conclusion

Consistent with prior research, we find support for both subcultural theory and social control theory as explanations of serious offences. The subcultural theory hypothesis that gang membership encourages the development of deviant or criminal values is supported by the empirical analysis. Those who are gang members are found to be more likely to endorse manipulative and instrumental attitudes toward the law. For example, gang members are more likely to believe that breaking the law can lead to personal success. Gang members are also more likely to endorse a subcultural lack of respect for the police. These subcultural values, in turn, are found to be significant predictors of self-reported serious offences, such as assault with a weapon and cocaine use. Further, the effects of gang membership on serious offences seems to be fully accounted for by our measures of subcultural values.

The effects of social control theory measures such as academic performance or school grades are also significant. Parental attachment (measured by intimacy of communication with mothers) is also found to be a significant predictor of serious offences. Although we find evidence in support of subcultural theory hypotheses, the explanation of serious crimes may very likely need to incorporate factors identified by several theories.

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