A Glimpse Into the Lives of Nine Youths in a Correctional Facility: Insight Into Theories of Delinquency

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Theories explaining delinquency have been examined primarily using quantita-
tive methods. The current study used interviews to gain insight into the lives of
delinquent male adolescents. Results indicate that no single theory best explains de-
linquency, but a combination of theories provides comprehensive representation.

Many theories, such as social control theory, social learning theory, and stress theory, provide an explanation for delinquency and substance abuse in adolescents. Each of these theories adopts a slightly different perspective on the causes of criminal behavior by highlighting specific characteristics that could either prevent or lead to delinquency. A considerable body of research and literature has identified various factors and tested some of these theories (e.g., Bellair, Roscigno, & McNulty, 2003; Zimmermann, 2006); however, the majority, if not all, of these empirical studies have been quantitative. That is, each has been conducted with a priori hypotheses that have directed the study's design and measures. Whereas these studies have produced important results that increase the understanding of delinquent behavior, the voices of delinquent youths have not been heard.

These voices can provide a bird's-eye view of youths' experiences, including their home lives, their peers, and how they cope with various situations— providing personal insight into possible causes of or prevention of engagement in delinquent behavior. The qualitative approach implemented in this study was used with the intention of providing information that may help counselors better understand adolescent delinquent behavior. Qualitative methods provide an effective way to explore the subjective meanings these youths make of their life experiences, and any commonalities among their lives may lead to a better understanding of their current delinquent behavior (Banyard & Miller, 1998). The purposes of this study were to (a) better understand the life situations of juvenile delinquents, (b) determine which theory or theories of delinquent behavior might best provide en-lightenment into unruly and offending behaviors (including substance use and abuse), and (c) provide counselors with effective interventions and helping suggestions.

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Before addressing the youths' narratives, we discuss a few theories of delinquency. Although an exhaustive list and comprehensive description of every theory of delinquency is beyond the scope of the current article, several theories have been frequently discussed and researched in the literature; thus, these were selected for discussion in the current study. These theories include social control theory, general strain theory, economic strain theory, stress and coping theory, and social learning theory. An additional theory, the life-course criminology theory, was also selected because of its recent proposal in the literature (Laub, 2006). These theories and their assumptions are briefly discussed as follows. A more in-depth review of each theory can be achieved from the cited references.

Social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) rests on the assumption that social connections to family, friends, work and school, and other conventional aspects of society minimize the likelihood of engagement in delinquent or criminal behavior. More specifically, social control theory suggests that supervision and adequate shaping of moral behavior by parents (along with peers whose values are honorable) reduce the possibility that youths will engage in delinquency or substance use and abuse (Moos, 2007). Through a study of over 500 adolescent boys, Farrington, Loeber, Yin, and Anderson (2002) supported this theory by determining that the main causes of delinquency included poor parental supervision, low parental reinforcement of appropriate behavior, and low involvement of the youth in family activities. In addition, these authors found that peer delinquency was a strong correlate of youth delinquent behavior but was not the cause of the behavior.

According to general strain theory (Agnew, 1992, 2001), strains or stressors create negative emotions (e.g., anger), which can become intolerable. Once they are intolerable, a person engages in a corrective action to minimize or eliminate the strain. Although this corrective action may be adaptive, it may also be criminal in nature. For example, a youth may steal money he or she desires, may seek revenge against someone by destroying property or exhibiting aggression, or may use drugs to forget or avoid a stressful event.

Economic strain theory, based on Merton's (1938) strain theory, highlights the importance that Western society places on monetary and material objects. An assumption of the economic strain theory is that strain results from economic pressures or, in particular, from a perceived loss of monetary possessions or status. For instance, a disruption in family structure, such as a divorce, could negatively affect family income, possessions, and the recipient's material objects. This disruption could result in delinquent behaviors to gain material belongings (e.g., stealing, selling drugs) or other corrective actions, such as drug use or running away, to avoid the thoughts and emotions caused by the strain (Amato & Keith, 1991). In support of this theory, Bellair et al. (2003) studied 11- to 20-year-old adolescents from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. These authors concluded that, with dismal employment prospects, adolescents realized they could not count on legitimate and conventional employment opportunities, which thus placed them at heightened risk for delinquency.

Kaplan (1996) noted that the main assumption of the stress and coping theory is that stressful life circumstances emanate from family members, friends, and financial problems. These stressors then lead to distress and feelings of alienation, resulting in criminal behavior or substance use. Mack, Leiber, Featherstone, and Monserud (2007) provided an example of the stress and coping theory within the context of a family crisis model. They suggested that psychological distress, resentment, and tension are associated with a disturbance in the family system (e.g., parental death, divorce). After such a crisis, children in the family tend to seek attention and respond by acting out or engaging in diversionary activities, such as antisocial behaviors. Other crisis situations that might trigger such a response include abuse, constant conflict and arguing in the family, lack of structure or stability, and alienation (Moos, 2007).

Bandura (1997) proposed the social learning theory, which posits that behavior is learned from an individual's role models. He asserted that modeling occurs through observation and imitation of specific behaviors. As long as the individual believes he or she can successfully engage in the behavior and that positive reinforcement is probable, the behavior will increase in frequency. Therefore, delinquent behavior could originate with the youth watching a family member (e.g., mom, older sibling) engage in criminal activity (e.g., stealing) and receive positive rewards (e.g., money). If the youth believes that he or she would be successful in the behavior and has enough self-efficacy, then he or she might attempt the same behavior on a smaller scale (e.g., stealing from his or her mom's purse). If the youth is successful, does not get caught, and uses the money to purchase something that he or she wants (e.g., a CD), he or she will likely continue the behavior. The stealing behavior might then escalate and become increasingly more risky (e.g., stealing from others). In support of Bandura's theory, the family has been found to be the most powerful context for socialization (Dusek & Danko, 1994; Harvey & Byrd, 2000; Zimmer-Gembeck & Locke, 2007). For example, girls who observed their mother's aggressive behaviors toward a partner were more likely to be aggressive toward their own friends (Moretti, Obsuth, Odgers, & Reebye, 2006). Therefore, research supports that parents who engage in criminal activity or use drugs have a higher probability of having children who follow in their footsteps.

The final theory that merits a brief discussion in this study is the one recently proposed by Laub (2006): life-course criminology. Laub outlined five principal dynamics of criminal behavior. First, similar to social control theory, Laub proposed that social ties regulate behavior on the basis of desired principles and values: The stronger social ties to a particular group are (e.g., family, peers), the tighter is the social control. Therefore, if a family engages in delinquent behavior, the youth—as long as he or she is strongly connected to the family—will also engage in delinquent behavior. Laub stressed that the strongest and most consistent effects on delinquency come from family, school, and peer groups. The second principal dynamic Laub suggested was continuity—that is, consistency of behavior. He found that delinquency in

childhood was positively related to troublesome adult behavior. The third principal dynamic of life-course criminology is change. Adolescent behavior can change and be influenced by social ties throughout one's life. Therefore, although behavior tends to be continuous (Principle 2) and even when a youth's parents use drugs and alcohol and/or engage in criminal behavior (Principle 1), if that youth creates a positive, moral connection with another person (e.g., teacher, counselor) or group (e.g., school, church), these experiences or social ties may counteract the influences of early life experiences of delinquency. The fourth principle is human agency, which indicates that, regardless of any other principle, human beings make choices and are active participants in their life. The final principle is prevention and reform. Laub reported that 5% of all families account for half of all criminal convictions—which speaks to the role that family can play in causing delinquent behavior. Therefore, if prevention and reform are aimed at any part of a family system, ultimately they will decrease crime systemically.

Although the aforementioned theories act independently of one another, they have some overlapping features, such as the importance of family influence and individuals' stress. However, with few exceptions (e.g., Flume, 2004), empirical research into the mechanisms of delinquency has focused on a single theory at a time, precluding a potential confluence of theories that can offer the best explanation of delinquency. Proponents of each theory tend to discuss it as a stand-alone model in their explanation of delinquent behavior; however, not one of the previously mentioned theories seems to be comprehensive. That is, no single theory provides a comprehensive explanation of the possible interactions between a person's life experiences and his or her subsequent delinquent behavior. For example, some theories focus on the impact that social connection can have on a youth (e.g., social control theory, life-course criminology); however, these theories do not take into account the impact that stressors can have on a person's life or the interaction of stressors and social connections.

Although one theory may be enough to explain delinquent behavior, it is unclear at this point whether this is true. This is because of the lack of experiential data from delinquent youths. Qualitative methods are a way to provide more in-depth description in participants' natural language. These methods do not begin with preconceived theories but rather rely on the process of gathering and analyzing information to lead to the discovery of hypotheses (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). At this point, most empirical studies examining delinquent behavior have been quantitative, exploring causes and correlates of delinquency on the basis of a priori hypotheses, typically grounded in one of the aforementioned theories. What are missing from such studies may be important aspects of youths' experiences that are not part of the overarching theory but nonetheless affect delinquent behavior. A deeper understanding of social problems is needed, and Berrios and Lucca specifically indicated that qualitative research designs are the most appropriate to investigate the "problems of today" (p. 182), including behaviors more common of delinquent adolescents that place them at risk (e.g., substance abuse, criminality, violence, school dropout, and mental health problems). Therefore, the central aims of this study were to give a voice

to adolescents exhibiting delinquent behavior and determine which theories arise naturally out of their life stories through a qualitative inquiry.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 9 adolescent boys in a juvenile correctional facility in the Midwest. The facility was specifically designed for juvenile boys, 12 to 18 years old, who were charged with felonies, excluding murder and sexual assault. The correctional facility can accommodate up to 12 boys; however, at the time of the study the 9 boys were the only juveniles being held in the facility. The purpose of the facility is to rehabilitate male juvenile delinquents through a behavioral reinforcement system in which the boys receive points for appropriate behaviors and lose points for inappropriate behaviors. As the number of points increases, the boys are closer to being able to reconnect with their families in the community.

The average age of the boys in this study was 15 years (SD = 1.11; range = 14 to 17). The majority of the youths self-identified as Caucasian (78%; n = 7), with 2 youths identifying as African American (22%). Twenty-two percent (n = 2) reported living with their biological parents before entering the correctional facility, 11% (n = 1) lived with their biological mother, 22% (n = 2) lived with their biological father, 11% (n = 1) lived with an aunt, and 33% (n = 3) lived with their biological mother and a stepfather. (Percentages have been rounded.) The felonies with which these 9 youths were charged included breaking and entering, burglary, theft, carrying a weapon, grand theft auto, and receiving stolen property. Over half (55%; n = 5) were charged with concurrent offenses at the time of adjudication.

Data Collection Procedure

This study was approved by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's institutional review board. We received parental consent prior to seeking youths' consent to participate. All parents or guardians and youths consented to the interviews and the audiotaping procedure. Before the interviewer, Kelly L. Wester (first author), conducted interviews, she attempted to gain the trust and rapport of each youth by immersing herself in their environment within the correctional facility. For 3 weeks prior to the interviews and after consent was received from youths and parents, the interviewer joined in activities with the youths in the correctional facility. Such activities included eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner in their cafeteria; playing chess and cards during free time; and observing in the classroom.

After 3 weeks of immersion, the interviewer began the interviews. Interviews took place between the interviewer and each youth individually in a classroom setting in the correctional facility. The classroom setting offered privacy and confidentiality with the ability to close the door, as well being a neutral location (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Each interview lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, with one to three interviews per youth. Shorter interviews

with youths were due to some youths' shorter attention spans and earlier fatiguing. Because youth fatigue may alter data, the optimal strategy is to continue data collection at another time (Deatrick & Faux, 1991). All interviews with youths were collected within a 3-week period.

Interviews followed a semistructured format, or "guided conversation" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), and the basic topics were (a) "Tell me about yourself," (b) "Tell me a little about your family," and (c) "Have you ever experienced a stressful situation? Tell me a little about that situation or other situations that were stressful and how you cope with these stressful situations." Probing questions were used in each interview to gain more information from each youth. The goals of the semistructured interview were to gain specific information from all youths but allow each youth the ability to share life stories and experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). All questions were open-ended to ensure that participants' responses were not constrained (C. E. Hill et al., 2005; C. E. Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997).

Data Analyses

Each interview was transcribed and then analyzed using the consensual qualitative research method. With this method, each interview transcript is considered as a separate case (C. E. Hill et al., 2005). Using a team consensus approach, quotes were extracted from each interview and placed into one or more domains (i.e., main topic areas used to group the data) that were based on core ideas that were considered to be the essence of what a person had said (C. E. Hill et al., 2005). Once domains were determined, the researchers then established categories within each domain. Categories are used as a way to examine domains that reach across participants and are based on the frequency with which the domain or category occurs across participants. C. E. Hill et al. (2005) stated that categories can be classified as general (occurring in three or more cases), typical (occurring in two cases), or variant (occurring in only one case). In the analysis process, each researcher analyzed data separately to ensure that his or her thoughts about the data were not contaminated by other researchers' biases (C. E. Hill et al., 2005). Once domains were selected by each researcher separately, we came together to discuss domains and come to a consensus about the final domains that would be used. During these discussions, we ensured that all would have an equal voice by rotating who spoke first as well as sharing written comments by each researcher based on separate coding (C. E. Hill et al., 2005).

A similar process was used for determining categories. Domains and categories were checked with auditors outside of the research team to ensure reliability and validity in the coding. These auditors were familiar with either qualitative research or literature on adolescent delinquency.

Researcher Bias

Because of the potential for researcher bias in qualitative data, the research team was diverse. C. E. Hill et al. (2005) suggested that researchers need to report their biases to ensure that results are valid. In the spirit of C. E. Hill et al.'s (2005) recommendation, the potential biases are listed here. Kelly L.

Wester designed the study, developed the semistructured interview format and questions, and conducted the interviews. Because she designed the study and had previously worked as a counselor for delinquent youths, it was deemed that she might hold opinions about this population. Therefore, two additional researchers were selected for the project on the basis of their lack of connection with this population and literature. In addition, one of the overarching original goals of this study was to gain a better understanding of whether and how delinquent youths in correctional facilities use self-injury as a coping method. However, in the true spirit of qualitative inquiry, Wester allowed youths' experiences to emerge from their perspective and found that self-injury rarely came forward when she asked how youths coped with stress. Instead, what emerged were the following domains and categories about youths' lives, which revolved more around chaos, criminal behavior, and connections with others.

Results

A review of the nine cases produced three domains and 14 categories (with 2 subcategories; see Table 1 for a list of all domains and categories). The domains and accompanying categories are discussed separately. Pseudonyms are used for all participants in this article.

Family Environment

Chaotic and shifting family dynamics. For most youths in this sample, family setting and structure shifted frequently during the childhood years and into adolescence. Shifting dynamics included (a) parental figures (both biological and stepparents) moving in and out of the home, (b) divorces, (c) remarriages, (d) parents' and siblings' romantic partners periodically living in the home, and (e) repeated moves to other individuals' houses (e.g., from parents to friends or to grandparents) or other cities. In addition, youths experienced violence in their home—both direct and indirect. Two youths described these chaotic dynamics in vivid detail:

> I grew up with my mom and my stepdad, I haven't seen . . . my real dad in years. My sister, I have two sisters . . . [I] moved out because her boyfriend was recently living with us and he started hittin' me and punchin' me and stuff so I moved out, I went with my grandma. I live there . . . and a whole bunch of . . . cops and everything made him move out, I moved back. (reported by Scott)

> [We] moved around a lot too. I been moved like 15 times. I've been to different houses, different apartments, sometimes it's hard to get used to movin' around that much, makin' friends every time you move. We'd move like once a year. We moved like a couple times a year or sometimes every 3 years. It was kind of hard to fit in. (reported by Kevin)

Violence in the home, emotional abuse, and neglectful parenting. Along with shifting, chaotic family dynamics, these youths experienced sporadic and harsh discipline, paired with physical and verbal abuse and neglectful parenting. This was highlighted by Billy, who experienced physical abuse, harsh punishments, and drug use by his parents:

TABLE 1

Summary of Domains and Categories Among Delinquent Youths

Domain and Category	Billy	Scott	Sherron	Kevin	Shawn	Mike	Sam	Cory	Matt	Category Type
Family Environment										
Chaotic/shifting family dynamics	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	General
Violence in the home	✓	✓			✓✓	✓	✓		✓	General
Emotional abuse	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	General
Neglectful parenting	✓	✓					✓			General
Financial strain/responsibility	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	General
Positive family activities		✓								Typical
Relations										
Love is materialistic	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	General
Broken promises	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	Typical
Peer influence		✓			✓					General
Relation with self										
Assume responsibility/self-blame	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓	General
Happy/self-identity						✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	General
Methods of Coping										
Avoidance	✓	✓		✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓	General
Aggressive/violent	✓	✓	✓✓		✓✓			✓	✓	General
Relational	✓	✓			✓	✓✓		✓	✓	General
Creative	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓		General

Note. All names used in this table are pseudonyms for participants.

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> My mom and dad hit me, my mom would hit me with a plastic and wood thing, my
> dad would hit with wood and belts. He'd hit me with boards, belts, and his fists.
> Well, he didn't really hit me with his fists; he'd slap me back of my head. . . . Most
> of the time [they hit me] when they were drinking or smoking.

Shawn reported that his mom would "have her brothers beat me. They would whip me with extension cords because I wasn't listening." Not only did abuse come in the manner of physical punishment and hitting, it took the form of verbal abuse and threats. Scott reported feeling fear because his stepfather continually "threaten[s] he's gonna leave. . . . He says 'I'm gonna leave,' packs all this stuff and he don't leave, but my mom comes and yells at me it's all my fault, it's me and my sister's fault." Matt reported verbal abuse as well: "And then there was always [my dad] puttin' me down. . . . It was hard, I mean I cried every time. He would say some pretty hurtful things."

In addition to abuse and harsh punishments that occurred in the family home, youths experienced aggressive outbursts and violence from parents and other family members. Sam reported violence between his parents: "[My second stepdad] hit my mom, and I grumbled at him. [He got in a fight with my mom] like six times a month. Sometimes he hit her, but not much. It was mainly just yelling." Although some familial aggression seemed commonplace for these youths, it was random. Mike acknowledged fearing his father's volatility:

> I fear my dad, I get scared of him, he's like unpredictable. Like we'll fight and I don't
> know what he's gonna do next. He'll lecture me and sometimes, "I ought to whup
> your ass," and I don't know what he's gonna do so I just sit there and be quiet and
> just listen to it. And then leave and go do drugs.

Financial strain. As highlighted by Billy, sometimes families experienced financial strain that affected their lives and determined where they could live: "[We] had to sleep on the floor of the van . . . and there are some bumps on the road, like running out of gas and getting flat tires, not having enough money to do some things." Matt provided another detailed example:

> I'm like the second man of the house 'cause I was always there for my mom, takin'
> care of her, and my little brother and sister. I was workin' too, I worked all the time.
> Never had, never even rarely got to keep my money. I always gave it to my mom
> so she could buy stuff, you know, food. I always stuck around the house, I always
> gave her my money.

Another youth, Scott, reported,

> My stepdad's out 'cause he's gonna have surgery on his back soon, my mom can't
> have a job 'cause of her medication and stuff. So nobody in my house has a job right
> now, all they're goin' on is whatever workman's comp or whatever is, and that comes
> like once a month and they're going off that so I don't know what's gonna happen. I
> plan on gettin' a job and if I do, and I decide to live with my mom . . . she keeps telling
> me no, but I know she's gonna let me because she's gonna struggle so bad.

Positive family activities. Most of the experiences in the family environment described by these youths were prevalent across the majority of participants in this study. Each of these categories was considered to be general (i.e.,

represented across 3 or more participants); however, one other category was typical (existed only across 2 participants). This category was positive family activities, in which parents engaged in an activity that exhibited them as good role models or created a positive connection with the youth. Two youths, Billy and Scott, reported having memories of good times with their parents. Billy reported that his family would "do a lot of things together. We'd go to concerts, fairs, the beach." Scott reported a time when his dad was a good role model for him:

> My dad started going to anger management classes, instead of takin' drugs and alcohol in some form. . . . I mean he's changed a lot. I believe he actually wants to be there for me now, you know. He wants to see me do stuff right and not mess things up.

Relations

Love is materialistic. Primarily, youths reported that love was equated to material objects, such as how much someone bought for them. For example, Cory talked about the money his parents spent on him in various behavioral and substance abuse treatment programs as an indicator that they actually cared about him:

> [My dad] cared about me a lot and I never really saw it until I came here. All the treatment programs he's tried to put me through . . . I mean he spent, every treatment program I've been in cost either $9,000 or $10,000. . . . They're still paying for [all those programs]. They are spending a lot of money on me and I'm now realizing that they care about me.

Billy, 14 years old, declared his anger when talking about his birthday, when he felt shorted compared with others in his family:

> I don't like my birthday being the last in the year 'cause you don't get that much stuff. My sister and my dad's birthday[s] are close to income tax. Mine [is] late in July. . . . And it's like, my sister will get a lot of clothes and shoes . . . and I'll get a lot of money, that's it. But not that much! I get like $200. . . . Yeah, it makes me mad.

Broken promises. In addition to their focus on material objects, along with relational aspects of their families, two youths believed that their families and friends had not really followed through on promises that were made. These youths revealed a lack of trust in parental and other adult role models. Scott provided an example:

> [My dad] had visits with me, weekends and stuff. I was like 4 the last time I seen him. . . . [My mom] and my brother was talking about he don't think I'm his kid and all this stuff. [It makes me feel] bad. I just, that's why I never accepted my stepdad, 'cause I thought that it was my fault that he left my mom.

Shawn reported actual promises that his father made to him but had broken:

> I got sad when my dad, he came back from jail and he made all of these promises when he was up in there, and at that time it was when I was a little kid. . . . So now, when he got out he had a baby by another girl and he spent more time with her and the kid and wouldn't really come spend no time with me. . . . I'd call him and he'd be like, "I'll be there" and he don't never show up.

Peer influence. It seemed that some of the youths wanted to have relationships with their parents or other adult role models but found it difficult to place trust in what those role models had to say. This lack of trust may force some adolescents to turn to peers for more supportive and trusting relationships. In this domain, youths talked primarily about relationships with peers, particularly the kind of relationship and the influence that their peers had over them. Some youths discussed initial drug and alcohol use that took place with friends, and others talked about the difficulties of fitting in. Sherron explained his desire to assimilate as a result of his family's frequent mobility:

> I think I have one of the problems of trying to get people to like me, because I move so much. I try to get the people at that school to like me so I got used to [doing drugs] and just kept doing it, yeah, whatever they did so maybe they'd like me.

Matt indicated,

> With my friends, that was pretty stressful, because there's a lot of peer pressure there, drugs and alcohol and that kinda stuff. Little crimes and stuff like that, there was a lot of peer pressure there. You name it, we did it.

Most of the youths talked about having both "positive and negative" friends. An example is Kevin, who mentioned,

> I have positive and negative [friends]. [But I like to hang out with my] negative friends. Probably 'cause I can get high with them, just go get high and do whatever. . . . It was harder to fit [in] once I hung around the negative [peers] so long, it was harder to go back and hang out with the positive people. I mean I did. . . . They still ended up hanging out with me a lot, so, but they just told me, because they didn't smoke, so they told me, "Just don't smoke around me," and I was like, "All right."

Contrary to popular belief, some peers were found to have positive influences on youths in terms of keeping them out of delinquent behavior. Scott described a close friend of his:

> There's only one friend that I actually have that's really my best friend, and a good friend 'cause every time I try to do somethin', he'd stop me. He'd tell me that's not what, you shouldn't be doin' that. Like smokin' or somethin'. He'll tell me, don't do that, you know you shouldn't do that.

Cory mentioned a similar peer: "Well, this friend is the one that gets me out of mostly doing anything that's illegal. She was actually my girlfriend for a while."

Relation with self. As some youths talked about their delinquent behavior, they signified their pride in this identity. For example, Shawn highlighted this pride:

> I rolled blunts for [my family] and everything so half of the time I loved it. I could get free weed, I'd pinch weed off of them and they would never find out about it. . . . Things that I wasn't allowed to do, I did. Things that I got caught, I found ways not to get caught doing it so it was like, learn from my mistakes. . . . I really didn't care.

Although some youths were proud, almost all of the youths (8 of the 9 interviewed) in the correctional facility indicated responsibility for their behavior and a desire to remove the delinquent label. Matt reflected,

When I was with my little brother, I had a good time with him all the time. I let, I regret this now . . . Whenever I was doin' drugs and stuff he always used to watch me do drugs, smoke weed with my friends, and one day he was like, "I want to try that," and I let him try it and he liked it. . . . I don't want him to be like that. . . . I just felt bad lettin' him do it like that 'cause I don't want him to be stupid. I want him to be smart, intelligent. He used to get straight As in school and stuff and then he, that time he smoked weed with me, now he gets Ds and Fs. . . . I look at that now and think that was stupid.

Cory reported,

It is a big smack in the face, I'll tell you that. I'm kicking my ass every day telling, "Why, why have I done all that stupid shit?" I have done so much stuff to that man [my dad]. Man, just thinking about it makes me pissed. [Doing all that stuff] to my family, I should say.

Methods of Coping

Avoidance coping. Youths were asked how they coped with stressful situations. Each youth reported myriad coping methods, including forms of avoidance coping, and some youths reported aggressive and violent forms of coping, relational coping, or creative coping methods. For avoidance coping, most youths reported using drugs or alcohol to escape a situation, zoning out, running away, or engaging in self-injurious behavior. It seemed as if these behaviors removed youths from stressful situations, allowing them temporary relief. For example, Scott indicated,

Normally, when I'm at home and somethin' happens I just get on my bike and I leave or I walk somewhere. I don't, I'll ask to stay the night at somebody's house that night and then I'll stay late, just, I don't know, just like runnin' away from all my problems you might as well say, I just don't want to face 'em.

Matt mentioned,

And then there was always [my dad] putting me down like I said. It was hard, I mean I cried every time. He would say some pretty hurtful things. It was hard for me, but I always dealt with it. I mean I used drugs and alcohol to deal with it, and smoked weed. I did other drugs, too.

Cory reported engaging in a form of self-injury to avoid emotions, particularly anger: "[I would pierce or tattoo] almost every day, but I'd only do little things, like dots, because those are easily taken off." Some youths seemed to have insight that avoidance coping might not be the best solution but had never attempted anything else. For example, Cory reported,

I used drugs and alcohol most for that. That just numbs it a little bit, to the point where I . . . just keep on doin' it. Let's just say I just do it until I pass out or if I wake up I'll start again until I figure out a better solution. I mean if I'm in the hospital with alcohol poisoning, I mean a better solution would be to just deal with it, but I've never done that.

Aggressive/violence coping. In addition to avoidance coping, some youths indicated using various forms of aggression or violence as additional coping methods. Shawn highlighted this by saying, "I'd just go upstairs and start hittin'. I'll hit my head on the wall, I'll punch the wall or door." Sam reported similar behaviors when he said,

[When I'm mad I] hit my wall, throw a baseball and stuff. Rage. Nobody can stop me, I'll just keep goin' and goin' like the Energizer battery. . . . It calms me down, 'cause it takes my frustration out. . . . Whenever I have nothin' to smoke, I hit things.

Relational coping and creative coping. Although most of the coping methods may not seem to be positive, some of the youths did mention talking to others when stressful situations arose or engaging in socially appropriate or creative forms of coping to decrease stress. One youth devised a creative coping method of revising song lyrics to release his anger and frustration. Some chose to talk to family members (e.g., sisters, aunts, brothers) or friends. Matt described a strong relationship he had with his aunt, who helped him to stay out of trouble and cope with various life situations:

Well, when my aunt was alive, I talked to her about it all the time, and then she passed away and I was, I was real close to her. That was like my main person to talk to. 'Cause she always kept me straight, I mean she was always there to talk to me and help me cope with things that are stressful and stuff like that. And after she passed away it was like, what am I gonna go do now? I didn't know what to do. But if she was alive I probably wouldn't be here [in the correctional facility] right now. Yeah, I would never have started drinkin', doin' drugs, probably never. 'Cause she, she would've kicked my butt. . . . She kept me straight. She had me walkin' that straight line.

Other youths indicated that they would not talk to others but used gym classes, football practice, or working out as a way to deal with stressful situations. Scott indicated that he played sports and used that as an outlet:

I played football, I've played basketball, and I can't play basketball no more 'cause I used to get fouls left and right. So I can't do that. So I can play football, and it may sound strange but defense is my favorite part 'cause I like to hit people, and you can't physically hit anybody but if I tackle them that's lettin' anger out for me.

Mike indicated that he liked to work out as a first choice method for coping before he turned to drugs: "Sometimes it depends, if I'm in the mood, like I have a weight bench in my room, so I'd work out, and if [my parents] come upstairs in my room, I'd just leave and go get high."

Examining all domains and categories, one can see that the majority of the comments and experiences provided by these 9 youths tended to be general (see Table 1). That is, these domains and categories were experienced by the majority of the youths in this study. Only two of the categories (i.e., positive family activities, broken promises) were classified as typical, or reported by only 2 of the youths. Further explanations of these findings are presented in the Discussion section.

Discussion

The youths' narratives have touched on all of the theories previously discussed. However, it seems that none of these theories adequately encompasses all of the experiences that led these youths to engage in delinquent activities. We next discuss the relationships between domains and categories, calling for an integration of explanatory theories; draw comparisons with others' studies; and address implications for future research and practice.

Most youths in this study reported family environments that were chaotic, violent, and unstable, with parents or legal guardians who were abusive or neglectful. Rarely did it seem that parents were good role models or provided adequate supervision. Instead, parents seemed to adopt a "do as I say, not as I do" mentality, using drugs but punishing their kids for the same behavior. A few even had a "do as I do" attitude, given that some of the youths used drugs and alcohol for the first time with their parents.

If it is true that connections to family, friends, school, and other conventional aspects of society minimize the chance that one will engage in delinquency or criminal behavior, then it stands to reason that negative, delinquent connections with parents or poor parenting and discipline in the home can lead youths to actually engage in delinquency and criminal behavior. Hirschi (1969) and Farrington et al. (2002) both indicated that poor parenting, low parental reinforcement, and low involvement in positive family activities are all causes of delinquency. This is supported by the present study.

These findings about the family environment seem to blend the stress and coping theory and its accompanying family crisis model, social control theory, economic and general strain theories, social learning, and life-course criminology. Although none of these theories addresses every aspect of the findings of the family environment domain, blended together they provide a comprehensive view of what these 9 youths were saying. In particular, the unstable family environment, frequent moves, and harsh punishments (e.g., social control theory, life-course criminology, strain theories, and stress and coping theory) seemed to be related to increased stress in these youths' lives—including the loss of material objects, loss of significant others, and a continual need to make friends. The pairing of these events involving upheaval with having parents who were extremely passive, delinquent in their own behavior, or encouraging of youth delinquent behavior (e.g., social learning theory) seemed to result in youths' delinquency. Other studies have indicated similar results (e.g., Kaplan, 1996; Mack et al., 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck & Locke, 2007), including that of Zimmermann (2006), who confirmed that family structure, particularly that which has been disrupted, was one of the discriminating factors for adolescent boys who engaged in delinquent behaviors.

It seems that no single incident or single aspect of the family environment plays a role in youths' delinquent behaviors, but instead a combination of family characteristics is most influential. It may be the case that if only one facet of the family were causing stress (e.g., frequent geographic moves), whereas others were conventional or stable (e.g., adequate parental supervision, positive parental role models), then the youth might not experience an extraordinary amount of strain that would lead to aberrant behaviors to relieve the stress or intolerable feelings. Even if the family environment were primarily chaotic but remained geographically stable, it might be the case that youths could develop constructive, lasting relationships within their community (e.g., school, peers, mentors), which would provide a positive escape to help them cope with their family environment. In the current study,

some youths were able to remain out of trouble when they had a positive role model (e.g., Matt, who reported a close relationship with his aunt and began engaging in criminal activity once she died), which seemed to buffer the negative impact the chaotic family environment had on them.

Family environment was not the only aspect that played a role in youths' delinquent behavior. Several youths repeatedly spoke of their peers. Particularly, these youths indicated the ease of fitting in with negative friends versus trying to engage in activities with positive friends. Although many youths indicated that this was a result of frequent moving, it also seems to relate to self-efficacy—or the belief that one has the ability to fit in with positive friends. Navigating transitions and making new friends in adolescence can be difficult situations by themselves; when these are paired with frequent changes in family dynamics, economic strain, and lack of positive role models or conventional connections, youths may be led astray to engage in delinquent behaviors. When we combine the narratives of the 9 youths' life experiences presented here, we need to take into consideration almost every theory previously presented to explain their delinquent behavior.

In an attempt to relieve stress, most of the youths in this study engaged in avoidant coping methods, such as running away or using drugs and alcohol, whereas some engaged in aggressive behavior, talked with others, worked out, or played sports. Those who engaged in the latter two methods of coping seemed to delay substance abuse and delinquent behavior (e.g., Scott's and Cory's relationship with friends and Matt's relationship with his aunt; Mike indicated working out before using drugs). Therefore, regardless of why a youth engages in delinquent behaviors, it seems that if youths develop more adaptive or positive ways of coping with the strain, they may be less likely to engage in delinquent behavior and substance use. Regardless of the method of coping, it seems that simply having a strong, positive connection with another person who projects dismay at delinquent behavior may be enough persuasion to avoid criminal behavior and substance use.

The results of this study indicate that each theory has equal validity in highlighting important aspects of the development of delinquent behavior (e.g., general strain, economic difficulties, family influence, role modeling, interpersonal relationships), but in combination the theories demonstrate greater capacity to provide a better understanding of delinquency. Whereas counselors may select one theory as a foundation or base for interpreting and understanding their adolescent clients' delinquent behavior, they can integrate the ideas of the other theories to gain a holistic picture of the reasons for theft, use of weapons and violence, or drug use.

Implications for Counselors

In his discussion of the principles of life-course criminology, Laub (2006) indicated that social ties to a specific person or group can regulate a person's beliefs and rules. Therefore, if the counselor can influence the youth's family—the unit that includes significant role models and social connections—in the areas

of parenting, stability, and substance use, the youth may have a fighting chance of avoiding delinquent behaviors. This is also what Laub said when he indicated that 5% of all families account for half of the criminal activity. When counselors can intervene at the family level by creating structural stability and improving parenting skills, youth delinquency will likely decrease. In addition, N. E. Hill, Ramirez, and Dumka (2003) found that family support tends to be a buffer or a barrier to youths in attaining their goals. Although there would likely be a number of daunting challenges, the family is an important unit with which to work when one is attempting to alter a youth's possible delinquent path.

Counselors can also promote youth connections with positive or conventional groups at school—for example, a sport in which a client can release anger and stress in a conventionally appropriate manner. It seemed that some youths in the present study attempted these kinds of coping skills before engaging in substance abuse or avoidance behaviors. Therefore, counselors should focus not only on providing or increasing a conventional tie for youths but also on providing an alternative coping method and helping youths increase their adaptive coping skills. Ultimately, this could help youths enter into an adaptive "corrective action" to reduce the strain and stress they may be experiencing at home or in other areas of their life.

In addition to working with the family and helping youths to connect with conventional school activities, another possibility is to connect the youth with a potential role model whom he or she could respect. For example, some of the youths indicated that a specific friend kept them out of trouble. Even more specifically, Matt talked about a relationship that kept him "on the straight and narrow." Unfortunately, once this individual died, he no longer had a confidant. He began to use drugs and alcohol to escape his stress, which led to time in a correctional facility. Matt acknowledged the fact that if his aunt were still alive, he never would have been in his present situation. Thus, our results suggest that counselors should promote positive social ties for their clients to help them to maintain a nondelinquent life. In the case of Matt, this intervention might even allow counselors to help change his life direction and disprove the concept that past behavior predicts future behavior (Laub, 2006). As mentioned by Laub, a principal dynamic of delinquent behavior is change. An adolescent can be changed simply through a single positive social tie. Therefore, helping clients make a positive connection with a peer or an adult could ultimately shift their life course of delinquent behavior.

Some limitations in the current study should be noted. This study was limited to 9 youths in one correctional facility. All youths were male. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to youths in other correctional facilities, to female juvenile delinquents, or to the larger delinquent youth population. However, this study was not designed to generalize, given the qualitative nature. It was designed to examine the lives of youths who have

been identified as delinquent and to gain some insight into the validity of existing theories of delinquent behavior. The interviews were short in nature; however, this was deemed appropriate for the age group and the attention span of the population (Deatrick & Faux, 1991).

This study does have implications for future research. Because the majority of quantitative studies have only examined one theory of delinquent behavior, future studies should combine various components of each theory to determine what truly predicts delinquent behavior—or whether one aspect or characteristic explains a larger portion of variance. Most studies have found that the family environment and behavior are strong predictors of delinquent behavior; however, if the family environment were combined with other components—such as a strong social connection to a positive role model—would the former relationship be nullified? In addition to quantitative studies, there continues to be a need for qualitative inquiry into these youths' lives to better understand and explain delinquent behavior and substance abuse (Berrios & Lucca, 2006).

Conclusion

Through the youths' stories, it seems that any single theory of delinquency viewed in isolation does not adequately explain its causes. Rather, the combination of theories provides a more holistic picture. Each youth experienced multiple strains, family crises, and negative role models. When positive ties with friends, family, and adults outside of the family are strengthened, the life course of a delinquent adolescent might be changed. Counselors may create these ties for youths or may help them recognize connections that already exist. Once a youth has a connection to a positive role model, helping the youth use this positive connection may result in more adaptive ways of coping. Rather than avoiding a situation or simply releasing aggression, the youth may learn to make alternative, constructive choices with the potential to change the present and the future. The voices of these youths were enlightening and, at times, heartbreaking. Stories like Matt's (i.e., he had chaotic, violent family environment but had a strong connection to his aunt, who kept him out of trouble until she died) suggest reason for hope and affirm the important role that counselors can play in helping these youths cast off their delinquent label.

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