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RESEARCH NOTE

PARENTAL SUPPORT, DELINQUENT FRIENDS, AND DELINQUENCY: A TEST OF INTERACTION EFFECTS

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INTRODUCTION

A central focus of control theories of delinquency is the relationship between a youngster's attachment to his parents and his delinquent involvement. Of particular interest is the notion of sensitivity to parents' wishes or opinions. Simply, the greater the sensitivity, the more likely the child is to consider the wishes and opinions of his parents when contemplating a deviant act. Consequently, major developments of these theories have explored the significance of family relationships in generating a bond to society or stake in conformity.¹ These theories assume that delinquent behavior results when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. Thus, lack of family support is viewed as conducive to delinquency. This weak or broken bond ostensibly minimizes one's sensitivity to the opinions or expectations (*i.e.*, norms) of others, freeing the individual to deviate.² Conversely, the presence of control via parental support is seen as inhibiting delinquency.

According to many theorists and researchers,³ a significant effect of a weak bond to parents is the enhanced importance of delinquent friends. Hir-

schi,⁴ for example, reported that boys with a low stake in conformity were more susceptible to delinquent peer influences, while boys with a high stake in conformity were relatively immune to these influences. In other words, the greater the stake in conformity, the less the impact of delinquent companions. Stanfield⁵ presented data consistent with this interaction hypothesis. He found that frequent peer activity was more strongly associated with delinquent behavior among those boys whose fathers' discipline was erratic or low than where it was consistent. Stanfield suggested that lack of consistent or supportive discipline (*i.e.*, control) made boys more vulnerable to the influence of delinquent friends.⁶

Although both Hirschi and Stanfield demonstrated that family relationships condition the impact of delinquent friends, recent efforts to test propositions derived from control theory have neglected this interaction hypothesis.⁷ For example, Hepburn⁸ attempted to assess the empirical consistency of a control theory model of delinquency based upon Hirschi's formulation of the causal structure of the relationships between parental support, delinquent associates, delinquent definitions, and delinquent behavior. However, he failed to incorporate Hirschi's qualifying condition that the effect of delinquent peers on delinquency is contingent upon the level of family support.⁹ Such an

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¹ See T. HIRSCHI, *CAUSES OF DELINQUENCY* (1969); F. NYE, *FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR* (1958); Toby, *The Differential Impact of Family Disorganization*, 22 AM. SOC. REV. 505 (1957).

² Hirschi contends that the essence of internalization of norms lies not in one's "conscience" but in the bond of the individual to others. T. HIRSCHI, *supra* note 1, at 18-19.

³ See S. GLUECK & E. GLUECK, *UNRAVELING JUVENILE DELINQUENCY* (1950); F. NYE, *NOTE 1 supra*; Weinberg, *Sociological Processes and Factors in Juvenile Delinquency*, in J. ROUECK, *JUVENILE DELINQUENCY* 113 (1958).

⁴ See T. HIRSCHI, *supra* 1, at 157-58.

⁵ See Stanfield, *The Interaction of Family Variables and Gang Variables in the Aetiology of Delinquency*, 13 SOC. PROB. 411 (1966).

⁶ *Id.* at 413-14.

⁷ One notable exception is Jensen's study of parent-child-peer relationships from a differential association perspective, where the same data-base used by Hirschi was examined. See Jensen, *Parents, Peers, and Delinquent Action: A Test of Differential Association Perspective*, 78 AM. J. SOC. 562 (1972).

⁸ See Hepburn, *Testing Alternative Models of Delinquency Causation*, 67 J. CRIM. L. & C. 450 (1977).

⁹ In reviewing Hirschi's work, Hepburn does note that "the greater the stake in conformity, the less the impact

erroneous specification of the basic model seriously questions the validity of his test. Simply, when one variable (parental support) conditions the effect of another (delinquent friends) on the variable of interest (delinquency), tests of overall (or main) effects mask important insights.

Although interaction findings may be the most substantively interesting results of an analysis, most researchers have viewed their existence as a nuisance and have too often chosen to assume them away for sake of simplicity. As interaction is not at all uncommon, more precise theoretical formulations and tests should explicitly focus on discerning regularity in patterns of interaction.

The present study represents an attempt to go beyond the usual concerns with the effect of either family relationships or peer relationships on delinquency to an assessment of the consequences of their interaction. Our basic concern is with the examination of the relationship between association with delinquent friends and delinquency under varying conditions of parental support. One of the major implications of Hirschi's control theory perspective (which has been elaborated upon by Jensen¹⁰) is that parental support and association with delinquent companions exert independent effects on delinquency. On the one hand, the absence of parental controls increases the likelihood of delinquency regardless of delinquent peer association. And, on the other hand, exposure to delinquent peer influences increases the likelihood of delinquency regardless of the extent of parental control. The critical assumption, however, is that delinquent friends will have a greater impact on delinquent involvement when parental support is weak than when it is strong. In other words, association with delinquent friends is argued to be more strongly related to delinquent behavior among those boys who have low parental support.

This study provides a direct test of this interaction hypothesis through an examination of the relationship between delinquent friends and delinquency under varying conditions of family support.

METHODS

The relationship will be examined through the use of questionnaire data originally collected and

analyzed by Hepburn in the project cited above.¹¹ Hepburn selected at random 105 white male adolescents ages fourteen to seventeen, who were enrolled in a public school during the 1972-73 academic year and who had no prior record of police contact. Each subject was asked to report to a central location with a "close friend" in order to complete questionnaires. Complete and usable questionnaires were obtained from seventy-two subjects and their friends.¹²

The variables to be considered here are all operationalized from data based on questionnaire responses. Three measures of delinquent involvement for both subject and friend are utilized. First, a measure of the frequency of delinquent activity was obtained through a summed score representing the number of times twelve self-reported delinquent acts had been committed within a year prior to the administration of the questionnaire. Second, a measure of the variety of delinquent involvement was obtained through a summed score representing the number of different delinquent offenses admitted in response to the twelve-item delinquency checklist. And third, a measure of the seriousness of delinquent behavior was obtained through a weighted composite score representing the severity of the self-reported delinquent acts.¹³ Finally, family support was measured by responses to a five-item Likert scale designed to elicit the subject's attitudes concerning his relationship with his parents.

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the results of the two-way analysis of variance tests performed for each of the

¹¹ We wish to extend our sincere appreciation to John Hepburn, Department of Sociology, University of Missouri-St. Louis, for providing us with his original data for analysis.

¹² To insure a sufficient number of subjects with an official police record for his original study design, Hepburn also selected at random from police files 96 white male adolescents, ages 14-17, who had been in formal contact with police at least once during the 1972 calendar year. Hepburn's "sample" was thus composed of two distinct random samples from different target populations. Because the proportion of official delinquents in such a combined sample is much greater than that in the population, inferences based on sampling statistics may be problematic. For our purposes, therefore, we chose to deal only with the high school population.

¹³ Each subject rated the severity of each form of behavior on the 12-item delinquency checklist on a 7-point scale. The mean seriousness score for each item was then multiplied by the reported frequency of delinquency

of delinquent associates on delinquent behavior." Hepburn, *supra* note 8, at 451. Although cognizant of this interaction effect, Hepburn inadequately assessed this effect.

¹⁰ See Jensen, note 7 *supra*.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE TESTS PERFORMED

Dependent Variable	Main Effects	Interaction Effects	F-Value	Significance Level
Y ₁	A		23.26	p < .001
	B ₁		12.05	p < .001
Y ₁		AxB ₁	9.84	p < .005
	A		19.98	p < .001
	B ₂		9.18	p < .01
Y ₁		AxB ₂	6.99	p < .01
	A		21.13	p < .001
	B ₃		10.06	p < .005
		AxB ₃	7.47	p < .01
Y ₂	A		38.52	p < .001
	B ₁		11.07	p < .001
Y ₂		AxB ₁	6.83	p < .01
	A		35.06	p < .001
	B ₂		9.40	p < .005
Y ₂		AxB ₂	5.35	p < .05
	A		34.50	p < .001
	B ₃		7.85	p < .01
		AxB ₃	4.25	p < .05
Y ₃	A		20.88	p < .001
	B ₁		11.04	p < .001
Y ₃		AxB ₁	9.52	p < .005
	A		17.98	p < .001
	B ₂		8.41	p < .005
Y ₃		AxB ₂	6.81	p < .01
	A		18.98	p < .001
	B ₃		9.30	p < .005
		AxB ₃	7.02	p < .01

A = Family Support; B₁ = Frequency of Friend's Delinquency; B₂ = Variety of Friend's Delinquency; B₃ = Seriousness of Friend's Delinquency; Y₁ = Frequency of Delinquency; Y₂ = Variety of Delinquency; Y₃ = Seriousness of Delinquency

possible combinations of variable indicators.¹⁴ For all nine combinations, significant main effects for both family support and delinquent friends were obtained. Specifically, subjects having low family support engaged in more frequent, serious and varied delinquent activity than did subjects having high family support. Subjects having high delin-

quent friends (in terms of either frequency or variety or severity of delinquent involvement) committed more frequent, varied and serious delinquent acts. Moreover, there is a significant interaction between family support and delinquent friends for each variable combination. As will be shown below, the nature of this interaction is as predicted. Thus, the influence of delinquent peers on the subjects' delinquency is greater when family support is low than when it is high.

To illustrate the above effects, we present in Tables 2 to 4 the three homologous combinations involving the three indicators of delinquency for subject and friend, by family support.

Table 2 shows the simultaneous effects of family support and frequency of friend's delinquency on the frequency of the subject's delinquency. We note that both the friend's delinquency and family support are independently related to the commission of delinquent acts. In other words, regardless of the

engaged in for each activity. The resulting values were subjected to a principal component factor analysis without iteration. No rotation was performed since a single factor solution was assumed. The factor loading for each activity was multiplied by its respective standardized score and the products were summed. See Armour, *Theta Reliability and Factor Scaling*, in H. COSTNER, *SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY 1973-1974* 17 (1974). Each individual's score thus represents a weighted composite of the severity of his self-report delinquent behavior.

¹⁴ For the analysis of variance tests, scale scores for our measure of family support and our three measures of friend's delinquency were dichotomized at their respective medians.

friend's delinquent activity, increases in family support are associated with decreases in the frequency of delinquency. Similarly, regardless of strength of family support, an increase in the friend's frequency of delinquency is associated with an increase in the subject's frequency of delinquent involvement.

Taken together, these two variables differentiate subjects in terms of delinquent behavior quite well. While the average number of times delinquent offenses have been committed by adolescents who have high family support and friends with low delinquent involvement is less than four, the average number of times acts have been committed by those having low family support and friends with high delinquent involvement is more than thirty. In other words, youths in the latter group have engaged in nearly eight times the number of delinquent acts than youths in the former group have.

Furthermore, it is clear that the effect of the friend's delinquent activity on delinquency is not the same across levels of family support. The weaker the family support, the greater the impact

of delinquent companions. Those boys having strong family support and friends with high delinquent involvement are more frequent offenders than those boys who have strong family support and friends with low delinquent involvement. Those boys with friends having high levels of delinquent activity are much more likely than those with friends having low levels of delinquent activity to be frequent offenders when both have weak parental support.

Table 3 summarizes the effects of our second measure of the delinquent friend's influence, the friend's variety of delinquent activity and family support on variety of the subject's delinquent activity. Again, both family support and delinquent friends are shown to be independently related to delinquency. Also, their joint impact effectively distinguishes adolescents according to the variety of delinquent involvement. On the other hand, boys who perceive strong parental support and have low delinquent associates have committed on the average less than two different types of delinquent offenses during the previous twelve months,

TABLE 2

AVERAGE NUMBER OF TIMES DELINQUENT ACTS COMMITTED (Y_1), BY FAMILY SUPPORT (A) AND FREQUENCY OF FRIEND'S DELINQUENT ACTIVITY (B_1)

		Family Support		
		Low	High	Total
Frequency of Friend's Delinquency	Low	9.50 (20)	3.88 (17)	6.92 (37)
	High	30.50 (14)	5.52 (21)	15.51 (35)
	Totals	18.51 (34)	4.79 (38)	11.10 (72)

NOTE: In Tables 2 to 4 numbers in parentheses represent the number of cases in the subgroups for which the means of the dependent variable were computed.

TABLE 3

AVERAGE NUMBER OF DIFFERENT DELINQUENT ACTS COMMITTED (Y_2), BY FAMILY SUPPORT (A) AND VARIETY OF FRIEND'S DELINQUENT ACTIVITY (B_2)

		Family Support		
		Low	High	Total
Variety of Friend's Delinquency	Low	3.06 (18)	1.47 (17)	2.29 (35)
	High	5.50 (16)	1.86 (21)	3.43 (37)
	Totals	4.21 (34)	1.68 (38)	2.88 (72)

while boys who perceive weak family support and have high delinquent peers have committed on the average over five different types of offenses.

Further inspection of Table 3 reveals that the impact of the friend's delinquency is more pronounced among adolescents who perceive low parental support. Delinquent companions make for greater difference in variety of delinquent involvement among those with weak family relationships than among those with strong family attachments.

Finally, as shown in Table 4, the use of the seriousness index as the measure of delinquent involvement yields the same pattern of effects of family support and delinquent friends as produced by both the frequency and variety indices. Here we find that for boys who perceive strong parental support and have low-serious delinquent peers the average seriousness score is less than two, while for boys who perceive weak parental support and have high-serious delinquent associates the average seriousness score exceeds ten. Again, we note that family support and association with serious delinquent peers exert independent effects on the severity of delinquent behavior. Furthermore, the greater the family support, the less the impact of delinquent companions.

CONCLUSIONS

The influence of delinquent peers on delinquent involvement has been extensively documented and widely accepted. The research is so prevalent that it would be surprising to find it omitted from any general discussion of delinquency. However, the dynamics ascribed to peer interaction differ. Control theory argues that the greater the stake in conformity, the less the impact of delinquent peers. Specifically, association with delinquent peers is argued to be more strongly related to delinquency in those situations where parental support is weak. Although early empirical work¹⁵ demonstrated that family relationships condition the impact of delinquent friends, recent efforts to test propositions derived from control theory have neither fully incorporated nor replicated this interaction.¹⁶

The present study reports the results of an empirical test of this interaction hypothesis derived from Hirschi's formulation of control theory. The relationship between delinquent peers and delinquency was examined within varying conditions of family support. The data supported the predicted

pattern of interaction: delinquent friends made a greater difference in delinquent involvement for adolescents who have weak family support than for those who have strong family support. The present findings thus offer evidence in favor of two basic arguments of control theory:

1. Adolescents with weak parental support are more susceptible to influences of delinquent associates than are those with strong parental support.
2. The greater the exposure to delinquent peers, the greater the difference in delinquent activity between adolescents with weak and those with strong parental support.

If a child is not sensitive to the opinions of his parents, their control over him is reduced. This is important when considering that parents are the center of any communication network aimed at reducing delinquent involvement. What is critical from a control theory perspective is that the parent-child relationship be filled with open communication. If the child and his parents do not talk with one another, the child does not have to care what his parents' reactions to his misconduct are, nor is he able to anticipate them. By failing to provide any form of disapproving feedback for him, the parents free the child for delinquent involvement. Simply, he is free to behave as he desires since his activity is unlikely to come under their purview. As Hirschi notes, the child can be assured that "today's play . . . will at no time in the future be reviewed."¹⁷

Also consistent with previous research, family support and association with delinquent friends exerted independent effects on delinquency. The probability of engaging in delinquent acts increased with increases of delinquency of companions irrespective of the strength of parental support. Additionally, the probability of delinquency decreased with increases in parental support, regardless of the delinquency of friends. The former finding tends to support the operation of group processes in the production of delinquent activity. A major implication of the group process perspective is that delinquent companions may be a source of situationally induced pressures to deviate.¹⁸ The most prominent elaboration of this theoretical approach is Short and Strodtbeck's¹⁹ work on gang

¹⁵ See T. HIRSCHI, *supra* note 1, at 108.

¹⁶ See Briar & Piliavin, *Delinquency, Situational Inducements, and Commitment to Conformity*, 13 SOC. PROB. 34 (1965).

¹⁹ See J. SHORT & F. STRODTBECK, *GROUP PROCESS AND GANG DELINQUENCY* (1965).

¹⁵ See T. HIRSCHI, note 1 *supra*; Stanfield, note 5 *supra*.

¹⁶ See, e.g., notes 8 & 9 and accompanying text *supra*; Hindelang, *Causes of Delinquency: A Partial Replication and Extension*, 20 SOC. PROB. 471 (1973).

TABLE 4
 AVERAGE SERIOUSNESS OF DELINQUENT INVOLVEMENT (Y_3), BY FAMILY SUPPORT (A) AND SERIOUSNESS OF FRIEND'S
 DELINQUENT ACTIVITY (B_3)

		Family Support		
		Low	High	Totals
Seriousness of Friend's Delinquency	Low	3.47 (19)	1.46 (17)	2.52 (36)
	High	10.22 (15)	2.09 (21)	5.48 (36)
	Totals	6.45 (34)	1.81 (38)	4.00 (72)

delinquency. Although they concur that involvement in delinquent activity is situationally induced, they maintain that such behavior is a rational, rather than impulsive, response to the situation or aleatory risk. Apparently, delinquent youngsters are not rejecting "out-group" values, as Merton's anomie perspective posits; rather, they are seeking "in-group" approval and concomitant status and recognition of their delinquent peers. In short, interaction with delinquent friends provides the short-run impetus for delinquency in spite of parental control.

Our finding that parental support is negatively related to delinquency regardless of the friend's delinquencies supports control theory. This result thus contradicts the competing "push-pull" model of parental versus peer influence advanced by Coleman.²⁰ In other words, the data refute the contention that youths who are concerned with the opinions of their peers are necessarily estranged from the opinions of their parents.

Rather, from a control theory perspective, family support inhibits delinquent involvement because the child does not want to jeopardize his relationship with his parents. Therefore, boys who have strong attachment to parents will tend not to befriend delinquent peers since such companions are perceived as more likely to get them into trouble with their parents. In the present study, we found that boys with strong family support are unlikely to have friends who are highly involved in delinquent activity. For example, for those with weak family support, the average number of delinquent acts committed by friends during the past year was over twenty, while for those with strong family support the average number was only five.

Overall, impressive evidence in favor of a control theory interpretation of delinquency was discovered. A direct test of the interaction hypothesis supported Hirschi's contention that attachment to parents minimizes the impact of delinquent associates. It is thus suggested that subsequent investigations explicitly incorporate the interaction component in tests of parental-peer effects on delinquent involvement.

²⁰ See J. COLEMAN, *THE ADOLESCENT SOCIETY* (1961).