Adolescent Reputations and Risk
Developmental Trajectories to Delinquency
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EMERGING AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD
Multiple Perspectives, Diverse Narratives
by Varda Konstam
Adolescent Reputations and Risk

Developmental Trajectories to Delinquency
To our parents for their support and wisdom throughout our academic adventures and especially to Gem, whose strength, resilience, and warmth were great inspirations to her children, family, and friends.
Every society experiences problems with youth crime. Indeed, most crime is committed by the young. Typically (though not invariably), offending behavior is time-limited: it occurs during adolescence and declines or disappears thereafter (Moffitt, 1993, Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, Silva, & Stanton, 1996). The costs of this relatively brief but disturbingly frequent foray are enormous when calculated in terms of lost or damaged property, violated homes, despoiled environments, and physical injuries to victims. The costs are enormous also in terms of the enduring harm to the perpetrators themselves: their young lives can be devastated by dangerous levels of substance use, by engagement in mutually destructive violence, by reckless behavior in the streets or on the roads, by acquiring records that will severely compromise their prospects of ever gaining mainstream employment, and, in some cases, by commitment to institutions where they will be brutalized and recruited to lifelong criminal careers.

Concerns about juvenile delinquency have preoccupied parents, educators, police, youth workers, legal professionals, and policymakers for a long time. In the past 100 years or so, a great deal of research attention has been invested in describing and explaining the origins and courses of delinquency, identifying different types of delinquents, developing and testing preventative measures, and examining the effects of varied treatments or punishments. A range of carefully constructed theories aiming to account for the causes of juvenile offending has been put forward and tested. Considerable information has been amassed about the incidence of different types of crime and their relationship to age.

The theories, the descriptive data, and the research evidence remain controversial, but a lot of progress has been made. We consider some of the progress in this book. Our own work has, of course, been guided and informed by the insights and findings of earlier and contemporaneous researchers; we set our studies in context by beginning with a review of some of the most influential theoretical approaches to the study of delinquency. Our focus is on the motivations of youth at risk and the trajectories they pursue on their routes to delinquent behavior. Following Emler and Reicher (1995), we argue that, for some young people, involvement in delinquent activities is a deliberate choice. We consider why they make that choice, drawing on findings in the literature
and from our own research. We draw also on theoretical work in a different
tradition and one hitherto more typically associated with societally endorsed
outcomes, such as educational achievement and career development. This is
Goal-Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1990). Goal-Setting Theory assumes
that conscious goals regulate human actions and influence performance levels.
We ask what goals delinquents have and how these goals relate to the behavior
of these young people.

Working with young people at risk or already engaged in crime brings
researchers into a variety of environments and highlights a range of behaviors.
We hope that readers who stay with us will learn something about the choices,
goals, and values of young people in schools and on the streets, in clinics and in
detention centers. Among other issues, we will be considering the motivations
and rewards of activities such as antisocial behavior (in and out of school),
substance use, volatile inhalant consumption, body-modification practices, and
car theft. Most of these are seen, by respectable mainstream adults, as self-
evidently undesirable in young people: most are nonetheless very popular
among some sectors of the young. This poses obvious challenges to those
administering law and order but also to researchers interested in explaining
delinquency. An understandable lay account might be that these activities are
popular because they are condemned or, in some cases, because they are design-
nated as the preserve of adults. As we will see, whereas adult disapproval can
make a contribution (albeit the opposite to that intended), the truly potent
forces are often to be found in the social worlds of young people.

Delinquency is complex and multidetermined. We are not offering to deliver
the cause or the explanation. Other factors are relevant, including personality
variables, family histories, adverse environmental circumstances, and the socio-
economic climate. We address some of these factors in the research to be
reported here. Although there are some typical trajectories of involvement
and some recurrent patterns of influence, which will be our principal foci,
there are also less frequent routes into crime, such as those of individuals who
enter into antisocial behavior very early and continue or intensify the problems
(life-course persistent offenders in Moffitt’s terms [Moffitt, 1993]), and there are
some who pursue enduring engagement in crime with indifference to the social
audience. We consider these types of offenders, too. Nevertheless, we will argue
that much adolescent risk-taking and offending needs to be understood in
relation to the social purposes it serves and the goals that are met by undertak-
ing it.

Virtually all observers of youth crime would like to see it reduced or elimi-
nated. Huge amounts of public resources and the energies of many profes-
sionals have been devoted to these aims. The relative inefficacy of many
attempts – often despite high quality and delivery by skilled and resourceful
practitioners – could lead to pessimistic conclusions. To accept defeat would be
to give up on the social and criminologic sciences, to abandon intervention
services, to leave the young offenders and potential young offenders to their
fates, and to serve the broader society with the distressing conclusion that
“nothing can be done.” Certainly, a lot of careful research and systematic treatments, which we summarize in the penultimate chapter, tell us that doing something is not easy, but they also tell us a lot about which strategies are promising and which factors remain to be addressed. Knee-jerk remedies based in short-term political expediencies are rarely beneficial (Frick, 2001; Gendreau, 1996), but theoretically grounded, intensive systematic programs that are attuned to the contexts and motivations of the young people can and do make a difference. Investigating these contexts and motivations is the principal way in which researchers can contribute to these broader goals.
Acknowledgments

In 1991, the first author commenced postgraduate studies at the University of Western Australia. In the Christmas season prior to arrival in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, a terrible tragedy occurred at a suburban intersection of Perth. A 14-year-old juvenile, driving a stolen vehicle at high speeds, smashed into a family car carrying a newborn baby, wife, and husband traveling home from a family gathering. The wife and child were killed instantly. In the United Kingdom, during 1992, two 9-year-old boys coerced a 2-year-old boy out of a shopping center and onto nearby railway tracks. They bludgeoned the defenseless toddler to death and left him on the railway tracks to die. Other tragedies of a similar nature are constantly reported beckoning the questions “Why do young people commit crime?” and “What motivates them to commit acts of delinquency?”

Much of the past 15 years of our collaborative research have been devoted to understanding the motivational determinants for involvement of young people in delinquency. Specifically, we have examined whether some young people are at greater risk than others of becoming involved in crime and whether it is possible to identify those “at risk” before they go on to become chronically involved in criminal activities. We have investigated whether involvement in delinquency is a deliberate choice for some individuals with the development of a nonconforming reputation being a specific goal or whether it may be inherent in the individual as a result of psychopathology (e.g., undiagnosed or diagnosed disorders), interpersonal and affective traits (e.g., callousness, sensation seeking, impulsivity), and/or personal circumstances (e.g., socioeconomic status, family issues, cultural factors) or a combination of all of these factors.

The proposal for this book emanated from a very fruitful and productive research partnership of the four authors and from a vision that placing 15 years of research into a chronological and developmental framework would provide a comprehensive understanding of youth at risk especially those who engage in antisocial and delinquent acts. We are grateful to Roger Levesque, Series Editor, Advancing Responsible Adolescent Development (Springer), for embracing our idea, encouraging us in our endeavors, and publishing the final product.
Collaborative research projects of this nature rarely reach fruition without the hard work and dedication of others. This book is no exception. Therefore, we acknowledge and thank the Australian Research Council who provided funding for much of the research conducted and the thousands of adolescents, parents, teachers, and professionals who willingly participated in the various research studies reported throughout the book. We hope that this participation and the outcomes of the research will divert some young people from a life of crime and the development of negative social, educational, and economic outcomes.

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