Theoretical Foundations: Delinquency Risk Factors and Services Aimed at Reducing Ongoing Offending

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Abstract

Utilizing theory to understand youth in the context of their larger environment is of vital importance when assessing youth delinquency risk, and subsequent adjudication service assignment. Using a person-in-environment approach, theories that posit risk factors for delinquency are explored based on individual attributes associated with delinquency, then expand to theories that describe family, peer, and community risk factors, connecting the interrelatedness between the individual and their environment. Theories for services aimed at reducing ongoing delinquency are guided by Carpiano and Daley and begin with the broad ecological framework, then narrow the scope to address mediators between thoughts and actions. A theoretical framework for delinquency risk factors gives us context as to why youth may offend and offers a road map to service providers, while a theoretical framework for services extends the interconnectedness between youth and their environment, and the significance of social learning. Social workers in practice settings are tasked with assessing clients to determine risk factors, develop treatment goals, and link with specialized services. Social workers and agencies should develop assessments and services that are theory driven, and incorporate youth, family, peer, and community components.

Keywords Theory · Delinquency · Risk factors · Services

Although delinquency is multiply determined (Calley, 2012; Hawkins et al., 2000; Soyer, 2013), risk factors for youth involved with the juvenile justice system are well known, such as poverty (Ryan, Williams, & Courtney, 2013), childhood abuse and neglect (Ryan et al., 2013; Widom, 2000), parental history of criminal involvement (Calley, 2012, Cottle, Lee, & Heilburn, 2001, Van de Rakt, Ruiter, Dirk De Graaf, & Nieuwbeerta, 2010), peer associations with others involved in delinquent behavior (Calley, 2012), a history of aggressive and oppositional behavior (Lochman & Wells, 2003), low intelligence (Loeber, Burke, & Pardini, 2009), and a high crime neighborhood (Slattery & Meyers, 2014). Furthermore, risk factors often overlap with each other, making it a challenge to posit the true nature of delinquent behavior. Because of the overlap in risk factors, services are often multi-fold and include individual, family, peer, and community components (Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Slattery & Meyers, 2014). Services employed to reduce continued delinquency range from locked detention to in-home treatment (Lipsey, 2009), with the severity of delinquent acts used as a determinant for service assignment and delivery (Lipsey & Howell, 2012). This manuscript explores theoretical foundations of risk factors for delinquency and subsequent services aimed at reducing ongoing delinquency. Using a person-in-environment approach, theories that posit risk factors for delinquency are categorized based on individual attributes associated with delinquency, then expand to theories that describe family, peer, and community risk factors, exploring the interrelatedness between the individual and their environment. Theories for services aimed at reducing ongoing delinquency are guided by Carpiano and Daley (2006) and begin with the broad ecological framework, then narrow the scope to address mediators between thoughts and actions.

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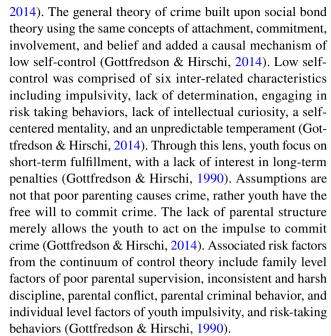# Theory and Associated Risk Factors for Delinquency

The person-in-environment approach views the individual and their multiple environments as a dynamic, interactive system, in which each component simultaneously affects and is affected by the other (Hare, 2004). Theories that explain risk factors for offending with a focus on the individual are known as trait theories. Theories that posit a connection between the individual and their family and peers are the continuum of control theory and social learning theory. Explicating the connection between the individual and their environment is strain theory.

The Individual

There are three components to biological theories of crime, known as trait theories, including individuals who were born with criminal traits, individuals who were afflicted by a disease that caused criminal acts, and individuals whose mental and emotional make up create a criminal disposition (Peskin, Gao, Glenn, Budo-Hutt, Yang, & Raine, 2013). Studies using twins, both monozygotic and dizygotic, have correlated crime to biology, finding evidence that antisocial behaviors such as aggression and opposition can be inherited and act as a causal agent for delinquent behavior. More recent biological studies have focused on understanding the correlation of neurotransmitters such as serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine and crime; the role of testosterone in aggressive behaviors, the central nervous system measuring brain abnormalities and the correlation to crime, and environmental components such as the role of nutrition, and toxin intake on aggressive and oppositional behavior (Peskin et al., 2013). Associated risk factors for trait theories include individual level factors of low intelligence, internalized behaviors of hyperactivity and impulsiveness, and externalizing behaviors of aggression (Fox, Jennings, & Farrington, 2015).

The Individual, Their Family, And Peers

A hallmark theory from the neo-classical framework is social bond theory, known as part of the continuum of control theory, which posits a person is free to commit delinquent acts because their connections to society's order have been damaged (Hirschi, 2014). Social bond theory is described through concepts of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. When social bonds, often with parental figures are compromised, youth have free will to commit delinquent acts (Hirschi, 2014). From social bond theory, the general theory of crime was developed (Gottfredson & Hirschi,

2014). The general theory of crime built upon social bond theory using the same concepts of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief and added a causal mechanism of low self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2014). Low self-control was comprised of six inter-related characteristics including impulsivity, lack of determination, engaging in risk taking behaviors, lack of intellectual curiosity, a self-centered mentality, and an unpredictable temperament (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2014). Through this lens, youth focus on short-term fulfillment, with a lack of interest in long-term penalties (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Assumptions are not that poor parenting causes crime, rather youth have the free will to commit crime. The lack of parental structure merely allows the youth to act on the impulse to commit crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2014). Associated risk factors from the continuum of control theory include family level factors of poor parental supervision, inconsistent and harsh discipline, parental conflict, parental criminal behavior, and individual level factors of youth impulsivity, and risk-taking behaviors (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

In contrast, social learning theory (Akers, 2009; Watt, Howells, & Defabbro, 2011) posits delinquency is learned through conditions that are favorable to commit crime. Edwin Sutherland's theory of differential association provides a foundation for social learning theory and suggests delinquent behavior is learned through interactions with others, particularly those closest to the individual. Through these interactions, individuals learn favorable and unfavorable characterizations of delinquency, suggesting when those favorable, outweigh those that are unfavorable, crime is committed. Social learning and differential association theory both posit delinquent behavior is learned through interactions with others; however social learning theory added definitions for favorable and unfavorable conditions using behavioral learning terms such as operant conditioning, modeling, and reinforcement to describe conditions when delinquency may occur (Watt et al., 2011). Associated risk factors of social learning theory include peer level factors of relationships with others who are delinquent, peer rejection, and poor integration into the social environment, and a lack of role models demonstrating prosocial behaviors (Watt et al., 2011).

The Individual, and Their Larger Environment

Strain theory (Agnew, 1992) posits that the pursuit of monetary success or middle-class status is desired by everyone; however, some individuals and groups within society are inhibited from achieving this status. Factors that influence achieving success include the lack of parental support, lack of access to individuals who can model prosocial skills, poor community structures such as inferior school and neighborhoods, or discrimination in

the job or college market (Ou & Reynolds, 2010). When there is a chasm between the pursuit of, and ability to achieve success, crime may occur. The individual can compensate by resorting to delinquent behaviors such as theft, selling drugs, or prostitution. General strain theory (Agnew, 1992) builds upon classic strain theory, positing when individuals cannot obtain success such as money and status, they experience strain. From this strain, delinquency can occur as a reaction to a lack of success and from negative incentives that invite crime to occur. General strain theory suggests delinquency results from negative relationships with others that prevent or inhibit the development of positive goals, the removal of positive interactions with those close to the individual, or when crime may appear more appealing than experiencing environmental stressors. Associated risk factors for general strain theory include economic factors of poverty, family factors of poor parental supervision and child maltreatment, and neighborhood factors such as lack of resources (Agnew, 1992). Individual level risk factors are created as a reaction to strain including those such as substance use, and development of aggressive behaviors (Rebellon, Manasse, Van Gundy, & Cohn, 2012).

Theory and Services Aimed at Reducing Continued Delinquency

Because services aimed at reducing ongoing delinquency are multi-modal, it was necessary to identify a way to conceptualize theory and services. Carpiano and Daley (2006) published a guide and glossary on post-positivist theory which identifies the role of theory and conceptual models within population health. Carpiano and Daley (2006) suggest a first step of choosing a framework which identifies a set of related variables to account for a broad phenomenon. The second step is to narrow the framework and choose a theory that explains the relationship between concepts identified in the framework. In the third step, a model is identified. Models are developed and used to make specific assumptions about a set of related variables. As the broad scope decreases, the connection and specificity increase. The ecological framework developed by Bronfenbrenner (1989) was used to describe the relationship between youth and the many systems that impact their life. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) was utilized to examine the relationships between elements of the ecological framework and services provided to adjudicated youth, and the social cognitive model (Lochman & Wells, 2002, 2003) posits assumptions between elements of the ecological framework and the application to services for youth who offend.

Ecological Framework

Ecological systems framework originated in the biological sciences, and focuses on the interactions between an individual and his or her environment. The environment is conceptualized as a nested model: the microsystem (family, close friends), nested within the mesosystem (school, church, social networks), nested within the exosystem (neighborhoods, communities, government entities), all of which are encased within the macrosystem (cultural ideas, beliefs, histories, traditions). The ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) suggests individuals are influenced by all levels of their ecological system (e.g., family, community, culture, religious institution), and for an individual to succeed, a balance between systems must be achieved. Within this framework, individuals are constantly adapting to a changing environment in an attempt to maintain stasis between needs and resources.

When faced with a stressor, an individual identifies the stressor and decides the best course of action for coping and maintaining stasis, adjusting to meet new demands within their ecological system. Individuals cope by changing aspects of themselves, their environment, or some combination of the two, in order to improve the interconnection between themselves and their environment. Discord between an individual and his or her environment may occur when the individual struggles to maintain safety, establish healthy relationships, locate adequate social supports, establish a positive self-concept, or obtain financial resources. Sometimes the adaptation to this kind of crisis is positive and promotes well-being, and at other times the adaptation is negative although relieving immediate tensions with long-term consequences, such as substance use or delinquency. Within ecological systems framework, services for youth primarily operate in the microsystem, mesoystem, and exosystem (Day, Kowalenko, Ellis, Dawe, Harnett, & Scott, 2011; Derzon, 2010; Litschge, Vaughn, & McCrea, 2010; Park, Lee, Bolland, Vazsonyi, & Sun, 2008). The microsystem includes services that address youth characteristics such as aggression and impulsivity through aspects of individual-level counseling and skill building (Litschge et al. 2010), while the mesosystem, composed of inter-relationships between two or more microsystems, may include counseling services focusing on the relationship between youth characteristics and parenting practices, parent-child communication, or peer relationships (Day et al., 2011; Derzon, 2010). The exosystem may include community service (Park et al., 2008), or restorative programs (Lipsey, 2009). Within these interconnected systems, the importance of prosocial behavior begins to emerge. More specifically, the influence of parents, peers, and community on youth behavior and learning.
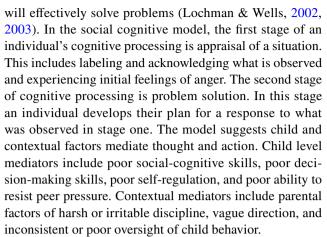
Social Cognitive Theory

From the ecological framework, social cognitive theory narrows the scope of services provided to adjudicated youth. Albert Bandura described social learning as the result of direct experience, or through observation of others (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Learning through observation allows individuals to acquire knowledge of large and interconnected patterns of behavior without direct experience or trial and error. From observing the behavior of others, individuals can glean strategies for social interactions. Bandura noted four mediational processes that occur prior to imitating behavior. These are central to social cognitive theory and distinguish this theory from behavioral theories. The four mediational processes are attention to the observed behavior, retention of the observed behavior, reproduction or the ability to replicate the behavior, and motivation to imitate the observed behavior. Prosocial learning is predicated by the observation of role models and social experiences, and is influenced by role models who share similar characteristics with the youth.

Services that derive from this theory are more tailored to youth needs and include components of individual and family counseling, mentoring, peer programs in which peers are in a prosocial role, skills training programs, tutoring or GED programs, and vocational counseling or training (Lipsey, 2009). Social cognitive theory incorporates service components from the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem including family factors, peer influence, neighborhood and classroom influence, and the interconnections between these. Family factors include addressing poverty and parent related issues such as inconsistent parenting and parent criminality (Derzon, 2010), whereas peer factors include addressing peer rejection of youth with externalizing disturbances of aggressive behavior or conduct problems (Dodge et al., 2003). Neighborhood factors include addressing exposure to violence, while classroom factors include addressing the interplay between youth who display aggressive behaviors with peers who are also aggressive and the impact on social development (Park et al., 2008). From social learning theory, we begin to understand the significance of modeling prosocial behavior with services at the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem level intended to address mediators between thought and action. The social cognitive model narrows the focus of these mediators, and posits specific assumptions that are applied to services for youth who offend.

Social Cognitive Model

The social cognitive model (Lochman & Wells, 2002, 2003) posits distorted cognitions interfere with an individual's ability to accurately assess how to manage a social situation, thus maladaptive behaviors arise with an unrealistic expectation that externalizing and aggressive behaviors will effectively solve problems (Lochman & Wells, 2002, 2003). In the social cognitive model, the first stage of an individual's cognitive processing is appraisal of a situation. This includes labeling and acknowledging what is observed and experiencing initial feelings of anger. The second stage of cognitive processing is problem solution. In this stage an individual develops their plan for a response to what was observed in stage one. The model suggests child and contextual factors mediate thought and action. Child level mediators include poor social-cognitive skills, poor decision-making skills, poor self-regulation, and poor ability to resist peer pressure. Contextual mediators include parental factors of harsh or irritable discipline, vague direction, and inconsistent or poor oversight of child behavior.

As with social learning theory, service components extracted from the social cognitive model include family factors, peer influence, neighborhood and classroom influence. However, the application of services from the social cognitive model is more narrow and incorporates services that address distorted cognitions. Microsystem level services include individual, family, and group therapy with a cognitive behavioral treatment application to address cognitive distortions (Lipsey, 2009). Mesosystem level services include academic programs that incorporate a behavioral component, job training programs that include a coach, and challenge programs that provide opportunities for experiential learning through mastery of tasks (Lipsey, 2009). Services at the exosystem level include those that have a restorative component in which the aim is to repair the harm caused through the delinquent act by requiring compensation or victim reparations via community service (Lipsey, 2009).

Synthesis

A foundational principle of social work is understanding the person in the context of their environment. By exploring theory that posit risk factors leading to delinquency we begin to see a picture of how an individual is influenced by biology, their family, peers, and environment. Individual level risk factors are derived from trait theories and include intellectual challenges, and impulsive and aggressive behavior, whereas the continuum of control theories explains family level risk factors of poor parental supervision, inconsistent or harsh parenting, parental conflict, and parents who engage in criminal activity. Social learning theory posit peer level risk factors such as associations with others who engage in offending behavior and poor integration into the social environment, while strain theory provides the connection between the individual and their environment and posits poverty, and lack of appropriate neighborhood resources are risk factors for delinquency. Services for youth who offend are geared to address these risk factors and are encased in the

broad ecological system framework. Within this framework, we see the importance of offering services that address the interconnectedness between an individual, their family, and community. We also begin to see the importance of role models who influence prosocial behavior. As such, the broad ecological framework that encases all services is narrowed to a theory that explains social cognitive behavior. The theory suggests four mediational processes occur prior to imitating behavior including attention, retention, replication, and motivation. By offering services that model prosocial behaviors and social experiences, youth may begin to imitate these behaviors. Services include counseling, mentoring, skills training programs, tutoring or GED programs, and vocational counseling or training. Theory is narrowed further to a model that explicates youth and parent mediators between thought and action. These mediators include youth factors such as cognitive distortions, poor decision-making skills, poor self-regulation, poor ability to resist peer pressure. Parent level factors include harsh or irritable discipline, vague direction, and inconsistent or poor oversight of child behavior. Services may target these mediators and include counseling with a cognitive behavioral focus, academic programs with a specific behavioral component, and restorative programs that allow for victim compensation through community service. In sum, a theoretical framework for delinquency risk factors gives us context as to why youth may offend and offers a road map to service providers, while a theoretical framework for services extends the interconnectedness between youth and their environment, and the significance of social learning.

Implications

Social workers in practice settings are tasked with assessing clients to determine risk factors, develop treatment goals, and link with specialized services. Theory, as outlined here, can act as a guide for assessment, and service assignment. Theory that posit risk factors for delinquency can act as a guide for social workers and agencies when developing assessment tools. For example, risk factors from trait theories include youth level factors of low intelligence, internalized behaviors of hyperactivity and impulsiveness, and externalizing behaviors of aggression. Risk factors from the continuum of control theory include family level factors of poor parental supervision, inconsistent and harsh discipline, parental conflict, and parental criminal behavior, while risk factors from strain theory include neighborhood factors such as lack of resources. As such, agencies can incorporate assessment components to evaluate youth, family, peer, and community level risk factors. From a service assignment perspective, theory is intended to explicate the value of multi-modal services to intervene at a youth, family, and

community level. For example, the broad ecological framework shows the value and necessity to address the interconnectedness of youth and their environment, while the social cognitive theory and model explain the role of social behavior and the need for services that provide prosocial supports, while addressing mediators between thoughts and actions.

The overarching implication is that social workers and agencies should develop assessments and services that are theory driven, and incorporate youth, family, peer, and community components. These components are intended to be integrated, rather than mutually exclusive. Agencies and systems that do not provide an integrated model of treatment are inevitably setting youth who offend up for a continued criminal trajectory, in part, because youth will be exposed to the same role models, peer associations, and community structures that initially led to the criminal behavior in the first place. Developing and implementing services that address community risk factors with the intent of building a supportive and prosocial environment will require social workers and agencies to facilitate connections with neighborhood partners and requires a commitment to change on a broader scale.

Limitations

Theories, as described here, do not take into account racial disproportionality in evaluating risk factors and service assignment. Research and juvenile justice policy efforts recognize the overrepresentation of minority youth in the juvenile justice system with a number of studies suggesting ethnic differences in how services are assigned for juvenile justice-involved youth (Abram, Teplin, McClelland, & Dulcan, 2003; Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002). For youth where individualized risk factors such as externalizing behaviors are seen through a behavioral health lens, therapeutic services are often offered. However, some youth who exhibit these same symptoms are seen through a criminological lens and may not be deemed eligible for services. This disproportionality can influence a youth's criminal trajectory by way of bypassing services offered, and creating a direct path to detention and continuing to incarceration. This disproportionality can be addressed on a policy level through equity assessments, and addressing bias within the justice system. Other theories may also describe the phenomenon of risk for delinquency and subsequent service assignment. For example, the risk–need–responsivity (RNR) model integrates theory of offending behavior from personality, cognitive, and social learning approaches (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). The three main principles of risk, need, and responsivity act as guidelines for assessing the risk for reoffending, identifying services that target the risk behavior, and implementing services that are individualized

to match youth characteristics (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). The post positivist approach from Carpiano and Daley has also received criticism for being too prescriptive in the categorization of theory, instead of taking a more pluralistic or fluid approach (Dunn, 2006). This is one application of the social learning theory, and social cognitive model, and should be seen as such. The social cognitive model was developed as a guide for the coping power program aimed at targeting aggressive behaviors to prevent delinquency and substance use (Lochman & Wells, 2003, 2003). In this manuscript the model was applied to service components for youth who have already committed a delinquent act.

Conclusion

Utilizing theory to understand youth in the context of their larger environment is of vital importance when assessing youth risk, and subsequently assigning services. The advances in research have supported the ability to rigorously evaluate theory and services for youth who offend (Greenwood & Welsh, 2012; Lipsey, 2009). Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development (Mihalic & Elliott, 2015) is an example of an organization that rigorously evaluates evidenced-based services grounded in theory for justice involved youth using a variety of criteria such as a defined service delivery model, research design, ability to replicate, cost to implement, and overall effectiveness (Lipsey, 2009; Lipsey & Howell, 2012). Further research is needed to determine pathways to delinquency for youth including key decision entry points in the justice system in which services are most effective at reducing ongoing court involvement. Moreover, further research is needed to address how risk factors and services may differ by gender, race and ethnicity, age, and type of delinquent act. Using longitudinal data that will help identify developmental markers in which particular interventions may be most effective. This manuscript is intended to offer a guide to assessment and service assignment by highlighting theoretical foundations for youth who offend. Service plans should be tailored to youth and address individual, family, peer, and neighborhood components with a focus on reducing the overall risk for continued offending.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

Disclosures There are no disclosures.

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