Interactional Theory of Delinquency: Assessed and Analyzed

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**Introduction**

An interactional theory was developed by Terence Thornberry in 1987. His theory argues limitations of previous theories, and thus adds upon the ideas of Travis Hirschi and Ronald Akers. Interactional theory thus states a continuation to Hirchi’s social control theory as well as Aker’s social learning theory (Thornberry, 1987). Similar to social control theory, Thornberry states that delinquency is caused indirectly by weakened bonds to society (Thornberry, 1987). In his paper he discussed three bonds to conventional society interrelating with three bonds to unconventional society (Thornberry, 1987). Thornberry’s purpose in his writing is to elaborate on previous research failing to discuss reciprocal causal structures, development causal structures, and social structures in the formation of delinquency.

In this paper I will discuss Thornberry’s interactional theory and give background information important to the topic. I will provide detailed conversation of core concepts within his theory, including his limitations to previous research. I will then give empirical evidence suggesting the truth to the theory. I will finally relate the empirical studies to the different bonds Thornberry discusses within his theory to a developmental and reciprocal framework.

**Origins of the Theory**

The idea of how a child becomes delinquent has been widely researched. Thornberry’s theory was developed from the same ideas as social control theory; weakened bonds to conventional society leads to delinquency (Hirschi, 1969). Thornberry does not assume a direct link between the two, instead there is assumption that the weakened bonds allows for greater delinquent activity, which in turn causes delinquency (Thornberry, 1987). The interactional theory is also based on the social learning theory. Thornberry (1987) states, that to become delinquent, a person must first learn the behaviors, act in delinquent ways, and be reinforced positively. Thornberry attempts to extend these theories before him and create a more complete causal model of delinquency (Thornberry, 1987).

**Theoretical Overview**

Interactional theory attempts to take a version of social control theory and incorporate it within the social learning theory. First it is important to define each of these theories. Hirschi (1969) argues that delinquency is presented through weakened constraints to social and cultural society. The social learning theory however argues there is no unconscious impulse toward delinquency; delinquency is learned (Akers, 1977). The model presented by Thornberry (1987) focuses on three bonds to society: attachment to parents, commitment to school, and belief in conventional values. Thornberry (1987) takes these bonds and incorporates them with three interactive situations: delinquent peers, belief in delinquent values, and participating in delinquent behavior. These variables woven together become the main idea behind the interactional theory.

Thornberry (1987) develops a causal model of the six variables above that allows for reciprocal relationships among all of them. He first describes relationships among the delinquency variables. The researcher states there are reciprocal relationships between delinquent associations (attachment to peers, peers values, delinquent behaviors, and reinforcement of behaviors) and delinquent values. He then states reciprocal relationships between delinquent values and delinquent peers (Thornberry, 1987). Finally, a reciprocal relationship between delinquent values and delinquent behavior is questioned. In summary, this portion of the theory had delinquent concepts “embedded into a causal loop, which reinforce the others over time” (Thornberry, 1987).

The theory then examines a causal loop between the three social control concepts. As stated previously, Thornberry (1987) believes when the social bonds to society are weakened, the person is no longer morally connected to society, and in turn, will engage in delinquent activity. An attachment to family is important to the moral bond to society. Individuals with a strong parental bond are more likely to have strong bonds to school and their beliefs. Reciprocated once again, the interactional theory states that if there is no commitment to school, an association with delinquent peers, and activity involving delinquency will surely weaken the bond to parents. In his theory he also addresses reciprocal relationships between beliefs and commitment to school and how they affect each other (Thornberry, 1987). In short, if any of these bonds are weakened it affects the others in some way.

Thornberry (1987) then attempts to explain a second limitation of delinquency research; the failure to explain the development of delinquent behavior over time. In his work he creates an additional model for the purpose of explaining juvenile delinquency into middle adulthood. Most importantly he states the bond between parent and child decreases overtime, therefore allowing a higher chance of delinquent behaviors later in life. Still part of the causal loop, the attachment to family decreases when the child owns beliefs and peers develop. These circumstances can further weaken the bond with parents while the child receives reinforcements from his peers. Within this limitation as well, he adds an older model of adolescence. In this period of life, interactional theory supplements school commitment and attachment to parents with new variables, more relevant with age. At this age, the adolescent is becoming part of conventional activities (work, higher education, and military) and also transitions to an attachment for their own spouse and children. Thornberry (1987) states, at this point in life if the child encounters no interruption of his delinquent behaviors, he/she will have a higher risk at remaining delinquent. It is more likely however, that adolescents committed to these new variables will reduce the likelihood of delinquency, due to new bonds or responsibilities. (Thornberry, 1987)

Interactional theory deliberates within the developmental limitation and finds initially weak bonds tend to result in high delinquency; this makes is difficult to ever reestablish a conventional bond (Thornberry, 1987). If the bond is initially strong, the child will less likely become delinquent and transition bonds later in his life, as stated previously. Thornberry (1987) thus states if the initial bond is neither strong nor weak, the outcome can be vague; behavior is predicted from different interactions through the development process.

Finally, Thornberry (1987) introduces a final limitation; social class is woven into the interactional model. Because the lower class has weaker bonds simply from their environment, their initial bonds are weak. Some contributing factors to a weaker bond are family disruptions, poor education preparation, lower class traditional belief systems, and neighborhoods with higher crime rates. The interactional theory states the closer to lower class, the weaker bonds one will have to conventional society (Thornberry, 1987).

In summary, the limitations here are discussed by Thornberry (1987) in his theory, as he attempts to create a more complete version of the causes of crime. Previous research only talks about unidirectional models, severely restricting a complete cause of crime. Before Thornberry’s interactional theory there was no research of how the cause of crime changes developmentally. Also, research did not exist much in the manner of social structure of origin, which also affects the bonds of conventional society. His research plays upon each other interactively as he attempts to describe that people are held to society through conventional bonds.

**Empirical Tests of Thornberry’s Interactional Theory**

***Interactional Theory and Social Bonds***

Thornberry’s interactional theory argues that elements of social structure, social bonding, and social learning, are impacted by social class, race, as well as, community and neighborhood characteristics. The key argument of this theory is that social class standing puts individuals into different situations that make it more or less likely that the elements of social bond will be weakened. The theory continues, and argues that weak bonds allow youths to be in situations in which they are more likely to come into contact with delinquent peers. The delinquent peers will reinforce their delinquent actions. Further, the theory deliberates once this reinforcement and contact with delinquent action occurs, varying characteristics and interactional variables allow fluctuation, and it is not static over time. Research testing the interactional hypothesis has found support for these arguments. For example, Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, and Soon (1994) found that various factors predict whether or not a child will interact with delinquent peers, but that once that interaction occurs, it can have a reciprocal relationship on further delinquency as the number of pro-delinquency associations increases and the amount of reinforces for delinquency increase. Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, and Jang (1991) expanded upon this earlier analysis by identifying precursors to association with deviant peers and the impact of these associations on further delinquency. Specifically, the authors found that poor attachment in the family influenced commitment to education and that in turn poor commitment to education predicted likelihood of associating with delinquent peers and personal delinquency. Further, the authors found that this relationship can also work in a reverse pattern in that delinquency can reduce commitments to school and interrupt attachment to parents, thus creating the situations that are conducive to further delinquency. Jang (1999) found that effects of family on delinquency remain fairly consistent throughout developmental adolescence. He also found a developmental effect of school on delinquency earlier in adolescence. Further, the author finds youths with delinquent peers are high in early adolescents, but eventually fade off. His findings suggest interactions with school and peers lead youths to properly or improperly respond to delinquent pressures.

***Interactional Theory and Delinquency***

Thornberry’s interactional theory suggests not only that conventional bonds are the indirect cause of delinquency; it also argues that there is a direct impact of delinquency on these morals, institutions, and family connections. The controlling mechanisms of crime stated above are impacted by delinquency through moral values, institutions, and again, social bonds. Just as interactional theory argues, these mechanisms are reciprocated and play a role in delinquent development. Further research suggests is theory is primarily supported. For example, Simons, Witbeck, Conger R. D, and Conger, K. J. (1991), found a significant link between problems at school and deviant peer groups. Further, it was found that self-centered personality styles control delinquency development. The researchers also found relationships between problems at school and children’s prosocial values. Delinquency is affected by school problems, deviant friends, values, and even personality styles. Allen E. Liska and Mark D. Reed (1985) found a reciprocal causation between theft, i.e. delinquency, and school attachment. They also reported no significant impact of delinquency on parental attachment, but there was an impact of parental attachment on delinquency. The controlling mechanism here was not reciprocated but still argues with noteworthy support that the bond between parent and child is important regarding the development of delinquent habits. Matsueda (1989) found that belief of conventional values declines over time due to other social bonds becoming stronger however “engaging in delinquency has a consistent feedback effect on beliefs.”

**Conclusion**

This paper gave back information as well as a detailed overview of Thornberry’s interactional theory. It described three limitations to previous empirical research which Thornberry provided evidence in creating a stronger theory with reciprocated causal arguments of delinquency. The paper then discussed empirical evidence that provided tests of Thornberry’s research. The empirical studies laid emphasis on the importance of a multidirectional model of delinquency rather than unidirectional.

Thornberry’s theory (1987) has outstanding criticism to the social control theory and social learning theory in which he incorporates new ideas. The empirical research though valid, is not of grand volumes. Also, the theory does not represent all factors associated with delinquency. Much more attention is needed regarding social structure within Thornberry’s theory. The developmental aspects within the interactional theory only highlight certain areas of age groups and it fails to be more explicit with a child’s psychological growth (Thornberry, 1987). The basic limitations on Thornberry’s interactional theory does not keep it from accurately providing concepts that cause delinquency in a reciprocal manner as well as how they occur developmentally. The interactional theory clearly states how to improve on a causal definition of crime and make it more complete than previous theories.

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