



# Correlates of Delinquent Identity: Testing Interactionist, Labeling, and Control Theory

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## Abstract

*In this paper, we analyze factors which may affect individual identity, a concept that is incorporated in many criminological theories, including symbolic interactionist theory, labeling theory, and control theory. Besides measures of self-control, we assess the effects of “reflected appraisals” on individual identity. The effects of labeling or having a record of police contact on self-concept or identity are also examined. We test for interaction effects of social class and race with official delinquency on identity. We also test for differences among male and female respondents in terms of the impact of reflected appraisals on delinquent self-concept.*

Key Words: symbolic interactionist theory; reflected appraisals; self-concept; self-control theory

## Introduction

Over the years a host of theorists have asserted that delinquent identity or self-concept has implications for delinquent behaviour. The principle of acquiring a delinquent identity is rooted in Cooley’s (1916) concept of the “looking glass self” and Mead’s “self as social object.” Both principles embody the notion that identities are created by intimate groups in face-to-face associations. Since these writings, the construction and transformation of delinquent identity has been central to postulates advanced by both control theorists (Reiss, 1951; Reckless, 1967; Briar and Piliavin, 1965) and labeling theorists (Lemert, 1951). In early versions of social control theory (e.g., Reckless, 1967), a positive self-concept or self-esteem was emphasized as a factor that insulates or protects children from involvement in delinquency. Labeling theorists have emphasized the importance of deviant identity for many years, dating back to Lemert’s (1951) description of “secondary deviance.”

In this paper, we will consider how factors specified by interactionist, labeling, and control theorists may influence the development of a delinquent identity. After a review

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of each of the theories regarding identity, we will assess bivariate correlations between delinquent self-concept and measures of self-control, labeling, and appraisals of others. We then conduct a multivariate analysis to assess the relative importance of these theoretical measures. We also assess interactions of official delinquency or arrest with race and social class, as well as hypothesized interactions involving appraisals by others and gender.

### **The Role of Identity in Interactionist, Labeling, and Control Theories**

The notion that adolescent identity can be transformed by official labels is rooted in the processes advocated by labeling theorists. In the “handling” process adolescents are surmised to take on the identity thrust on them by powerful juvenile justice authorities, although early tests of this assumption produced mixed findings. Hepburn (1977) found that official intervention had no effect on self-concept controlling for self-reported delinquency and other variables. However, Hepburn analysed two purposive samples which were disproportionately weighted with officially labeled delinquents; such a sampling strategy could artificially inflate the correlation between official and self-reported delinquency. Jensen (1980) examined whether official delinquency was associated with delinquent identity independent of self-reported delinquency using data from a stratified random sample. His findings show that both officially labeled delinquency and self-reported delinquency are significantly correlated with a delinquent self-concept.

In addition to forging a deviant identity as a result of official contact, Matsueda (1992) has reminded us that adolescents’ identities can be tailored through the process of “reflected appraisals” or perceptions of others’ attitudes toward the individual. Cooley’s “looking glass self” and Mead’s “self as object” consist of actual appraisals, reflected appraisals, and self appraisals. Reflected appraisals may be thought of as causing self appraisals and both of these appraisals are affected by actual appraisals made by others (Matsueda, 1992).

Labeling theorists surmise that the process of acquiring a deviant identity is believed to affect people dissimilarly based on status membership. Thus, empirical assessments of deviant identity have focused on the disadvantage of membership in certain groups (e.g., being poor or black). For example, “cumulative disadvantage” theorists (Sampson and Laub, 1997) argue that a delinquent status has more adverse effect on poor or disadvantaged children. In contrast, “disadvantage-saturation” theorists (McNulty, 2001) hypothesize that delinquency status has less impact on the lives of disadvantaged youth given that these children already must cope with a myriad of other constraints or lack of opportunity. In an analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Hannon (2003) finds that frequency of arrest had a slightly more adverse effect on the educational attainment of non-poor than poor youth. Hannon concludes that formal punishment has a stigmatizing effect on middle and upper class youth, but not on poor youth as many labeling theorists might predict.

Several researchers have examined whether labeling has a racial specific effect on self-concept. Ageton and Elliott, (1974) found that police contact increased the likelihood of having a delinquent self-concept, but only among white adolescents. Jensen (1972) similarly found that white youths were more likely than black youths to define themselves as delinquents following arrest. One interpretation of these findings is that the degradation

ceremonies conducted among arrestees are generally administered by whites, making the denouncer's accusations more stigmatizing to whites than blacks.

The question of whether one's gender can channel various expressions of deviance (e.g., delinquency versus depression) has also received attention (Koita and Triplett, 1998). DeCoster (2003) has argued that role-taking is a process that varies by gender, with females and males seeing themselves differently from the perspective of others. Thus, gender has been conceived as a status that may either channel various expressions of deviance or may allow for the deflection of labels. DeCoster argues that males may be more vulnerable to denunciations of deviance because reflected appraisals of self as a rule violator are more common among males. Bartusch and Matsueda (1996) examined the effects of reflected appraisals by gender and found that parental appraisals affected reflected appraisals, which in turn predicted delinquent behaviour. These effects may be stronger for males since males are also more likely to be falsely accused or appraised as rule violators by parents than are females. Koita and Triplett (1998) found that being male had a stronger effect on the reflected appraisal process than being female, supporting the assumption that stereotypes of males as offenders may generate a stronger affect on reflected appraisals.

While recent versions of control theory (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) do not emphasize self-concept as much as earlier versions, elements of deviant identity are clearly embedded in the description of self-control. For example, the idea of whether the individual perceives him or herself as a risk-taker, a physical or verbal person, or someone who is sensitive to others can be found in *A General Theory of Crime* (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Further, control theorists continue to emphasize the role of the primary group in the formation of self.

Earlier control theorists such as Reckless (1967) postulated that a delinquent self-concept can presage delinquency and therefore self-concept fostered the capacity to "contain" delinquency. His containment theory assumes that a negative self-concept contributes to delinquency while a positive self-concept insulates children from delinquent conduct. This is similar to the premise held by Cooley and Mead in which a deviant identity can increase deviant conduct.

The containment theory of Reckless is very similar to Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) based their self-control theory on earlier versions of social control theory, including elements of Hirschi's (1969) version as well as versions of social control theory advanced by Reiss (1951), Toby (1957), and Reckless (1967), among others. Identity or self-concept is a common theme throughout various versions of social control theory.

Self-control is defined by characteristics such as ability to defer gratification, exercise judgment, have strong relationships with others, and being adventuresome. The construct of self-concept or identity is incorporated in contemporary versions and tests of control theory. For example, Piquero et al (2004) measure self-control by creating an index that includes self-conceptions of being impulsive or unwilling to defer gratification, risk-taking, being unable to tolerate frustration, and preferring physical rather than intellectual pursuits. Wiebe (2003) creates an index of self-control that includes measures such as impulsivity, diligence, frustration, and insensitivity.

Giordano et al (2002) observe that interactionist theory is essentially compatible with social control theory, but that there are important differences between the two perspectives. For example, control theorists largely assume that the motivation to deviate

is a constant, but that the extent of external and internal restraints may vary significantly across individuals. Control theorists tend to describe factors external to the individual that affect the likelihood of deviance, such as the quality of parental supervision and care. Interactionist theorists believe that the motivation to deviate can change over time as there are changes in identity and in the meaning and desirability of deviant behaviour. Control theorists emphasize the deterrent value of primary group attachments, while interactionist theorists emphasize the impact of the primary group on formation of the self-concept.

Despite the emphasis on self-concept or identity in a variety of criminological theories, there has been little analysis of the determinants of identity. Most prior research has emphasized the impact of identity on delinquent behaviour, while a few studies (e.g., Jensen, 1980; Matsueda, 1992) have analyzed the effect of official labeling on delinquent identity. This paper specifies how control, labeling, and interactionist theory principles can be applied to explain delinquent self-concept. We further attempt to clarify the conditions under which official delinquency and delinquent self-concept are correlated. We test these theoretical ideas using latent class models.

As noted previously, prior empirical research has focused primarily on how delinquent identity affects involvement in crime and delinquency, but not on how such an identity is created. Our analysis will emphasize the determinants of delinquent identity, based on the perspectives of labeling, interactionist, and control theories; prior analyses have emphasized labeling processes and have not considered the predictions and conceptualizations of interactionist theory and social control theory. As noted before, there is still debate (seen Hannon, 2003; McNulty, 2001) about the labeling effects of officially sanctioned delinquency. Very little research has assessed how the effects of self-control and reflected appraisals (a key interactionist theory concept) have affected delinquent identity.

### **Research Hypotheses**

Based on our review of theory and research on interactionist, labeling, and social control theory, we will test the following hypotheses:

- (1) Those with a high level of self-control (including restraint, goal orientation, attachment, and being adverse to risk-taking) will be less likely to have a delinquent self-concept.
- (2) Those who have been officially labelled as a delinquent will be more likely to have a delinquent self-concept.
  - (2a) Official delinquency will have a more adverse effect on the self-concept of upper status adolescents.
  - (2b) Official delinquency will have a more adverse effect on the self-concept of white adolescents.
- (3) Reflected appraisals of parents and peers will be significantly correlated with delinquent self-concept.
  - (3a) Parental and peer reflected appraisals will have a greater effect on the self-concept of males.

### **Methods**

In this paper, we analyze data taken from a 2001 study of high school students in a large metropolitan community in Canada. More than five hundred (N=543) students

completed questionnaires. Based on data provided by local school boards, the age and gender composition of the sample was very similar to the age and gender composition of the school population. For example, just over half (52.1%) of the sample was female, and about the same percentage (51.9%) of the sample was male. More detail on data collection procedures is described in Brownfield (2006). Consent from parents and subjects was obtained by distributing form letters of consent the week prior to administration of the survey; signed forms had to be returned for subjects to participate in the survey. All material on the surveys has been treated within strict confidentiality requirements of the institutional ethics review board.

### **Measures**

Our measure of delinquent self-concept has been used before in several studies (Matsueda, 1992; Levy, 1999; Stiles et al, 2000). Respondents were asked, “Do you think of yourself as a delinquent?” Response categories included “never,” “sometimes,” and “often.”

Self-reported delinquency was measured using a scale developed by Hirschi (1969), including theft, vandalism, and assault. This index of self-reported delinquency has a range of 0 to 6, a mean of 1.51, and a standard error of .09. Official delinquency status was measured by responses to the following item: “Have you ever been picked up by the police?”

### **Analysis**

We first attempted to construct indices of self-control and reflected appraisals. Using latent class analysis (McCutcheon, 1987), we fit models to create a scale of “self-control” based on the following items: (1) “I like to take chances”; (2) “Most things which get people in trouble with the law don’t really hurt anyone”; (3) “I get bored very easily”; (4) “I like to do things that are exciting and even dangerous”; and, (5) “My teachers agree I am often upset.” These items seem to measure characteristics of impulsivity, risk-taking, insensitivity, and inability to tolerate frustration that have been used in prior studies (Piquero et al, 2004; Wiebe, 2003) to measure self-control. We find that a latent variable model fits ( $L^2 = 21.37$ ,  $df = 25$ ,  $p > .10$ ) these observed items.

Hirschi (2004) suggests that behavioural measures of impulsive, risk-taking acts would be a preferable measure of self-control rather than attitudinal items. (However, this could create the tautology problem identified by Akers (1991) in measuring self-control in terms of crimes committed.) Hirschi also proposes measures of inhibitions to determine levels of self-control, similar to the measures of risk-taking and impulsivity used here and in prior studies, including Piquero et al (2004).

Two separate indices of parental and peer reflected appraisals were constructed. Similar to Matsueda’s (1992) measures of reflected appraisals, these indices include dimensions of sociability, success, and tendency to rule violation as individuals perceive how others evaluate them. Reflected appraisals by peers were measured based on responses to the following five items: (1) “My friends agree I am well liked”; (2) “My friends agree I get along well with others”; (3) “My friends agree I have a lot of personal problems”; (4) “My friends agree I am likely to succeed”; and (5) “My friends agree I get into trouble.” Parental reflected appraisals were measured by responses to five parallel items (substituting “parents” for “friends” in each item). All of these items had Likert response categories, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.”

To create latent variables such as self-control and reflected appraisals, latent class models are recommended by McCutcheon (1987) for categorical variables that are often skewed in distribution; latent class models are analogous to factor analytic models for continuous level measures, although the indices of good fitting models differ. For latent class models, McCutcheon recommends the likelihood ratio chi-square test (rather than factor loadings or alpha reliability scores, as in factor analysis). The number of classes is stipulated by the model. The BIC fit statistic may be used for large sample sizes; for our moderate survey sample of fewer than six hundred, McCutcheon recommends the likelihood ratio chi-square test. The software program MLLSA was used to estimate the latent class models; it is the most widely used program for estimating such models. (We also replicated results using the Latent Gold program.)

Latent class models were fit for both the parental and peer reflected appraisal items. For the index of parental reflected appraisals, a latent class model provided a good fit ( $L^2 = 15.26$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $p > .10$ ). We also find that a latent class model for the peer reflected appraisals items provided a good fit ( $L^2 = 14.71$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $p > .10$ ), indicating that a single latent variable can describe these observed measures.

## Results

In Table 1, we present a correlation matrix for the measure of delinquent identity and the measures based on interactionist, labeling, and control theories. First, we find that both self-reported delinquency ( $r = .28$ ) and official delinquency ( $r = .27$ ) are significantly correlated with having a delinquent self-concept. The significant correlation between official delinquency and self-concept supports our second hypothesis, based on labeling theory. Consistent with interactionist theory, we find that both parental ( $r = .25$ ) and peer reflected appraisals ( $r = .27$ ) are significantly correlated with official delinquency. In support of our third hypothesis, these measures of reflected appraisals are about as strongly linked to self-concept as official labeling and self-reported delinquent behaviour.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Self-Concept, Interactionist, Labeling, and Control Theory Measures.

	Self-Concept	Official Delinquency	Self-Reported Delinquency	Self-Control	Parental Appraisals	Peer Appraisals
Self-Concept	1.00	.27	.28	-.22	.25	.27
Official Delinquency	.27	1.00	.21	-.17	.19	.23
Self-Reported Delinquency	.28	.21	1.00	-.20	.37	.43
Self-Control	-.22	-.17	-.20	1.00	-.19	-.18
Parental Appraisals	.25	.19	.37	-.19	1.00	.61
Peer Appraisals	.27	.23	.43	-.18	.61	1.00

Our results are also consistent with our first hypothesis based on control theory. The index of self-control is ( $r = -.22$ ) a significant, negative correlate of having a delinquent self-concept. As expected, official and self-reported delinquency are significantly



correlated ( $r = .21$ ). We also find that parental ( $r = .37$ ) and peer ( $r = .43$ ) reflected appraisals are strongly associated with self-reported delinquency.

In Table 2, we present the results of our multivariate regression analysis. We have included controls for gender, social class, and race in this analysis. (Social class is measured by a composite index of father’s occupation and education.) Females are less likely to have a delinquent self-concept than are male respondents ( $B = -.13$ ). Neither social class nor race has a significant effect on delinquent self-concept. (Regarding the lack of a racial difference, it should be noted that Canada has a policy of “multiculturalism,” which encourages ethnic tolerance and diversity; this policy seems to have gone beyond merely political rhetoric. Several of Canada’s largest urban areas – including the city that is the site of our sample – are composed of a majority of people who are visible minorities.)

Table 2. Regression of Self-Concept on Interactionist, Labeling, and Control Theory Measures.

	b	SE	BETA	p
Self-Control	-.11	.04	-.15	.03
Official Delinquency	.40	.13	.18	.01
Self-Reported Delinquency	.38	.15	.15	.01
Parental Appraisals	.18	.17	.08	.21
Peer Appraisals	.22	.05	.21	.01
Sex	-.20	.03	-.13	.01
Race	.06	.09	.04	.19
Social Class	-.07	.06	.07	.25
(Constant)	.08	.07		.85

$$R^2 = .26, F = 27.25, p < .01$$

In support of labeling theory, we find that official delinquency ( $B = .18$ ) remains a significant correlate of delinquent self-concept in our multivariate analysis. Self-reported delinquency ( $B = .15$ ) is nearly as strongly correlated with delinquent self-concept as official delinquency. Consistent with control theory, our measure of self-control ( $B = -.15$ ) also remains a significant negative correlate of delinquent self-concept, holding constant the interactionist and labeling theory measures.

Regarding the symbolic interactionist measures of reflected appraisals, we find that parental reflected appraisals are not significantly correlated with delinquent self-concept in the multivariate analysis. We were not surprised by this finding, given the high level of intercorrelation ( $r = .61$ ) between the measures of parental and peer reflected appraisals. In contrast, we find that peer reflected appraisals ( $B = .21$ ) is the strongest correlate of delinquent self-concept. Given the group nature of delinquency, it is not surprising that peer appraisals would be so highly correlated with delinquent self-concept.

In Table 3, we present the analysis of interaction terms based on our predictions or hypotheses derived from prior theory and research. Hypotheses 2(a) and 2(b) based on labeling theory and prior research, test predictions that labeling or having a record of

official delinquency will have more adverse effects for upper status and white adolescents. However, we find that neither predicted interaction effects for social class or race are significant. We note that our measure of class was based on father's education and occupational status, rather than family income, which was the measure of status used by Hannon (2003). Further, the Canadian sample (as noted before) may affect results in our analysis of race differences.

Table 3. Statistical Interaction Terms for Race, Class, and Gender.

Interaction Term	b	BETA	SE
Official Delinquency X Class	-.16	-.06	.16
Official Delinquency X Race	.12	.08	.14
Parental Appraisals X Gender	.26	.10	.18
Peer Appraisals X Gender	-.04	-.06	.31

We also reject the hypothesis (3a) based on interactionist theory that reflected appraisals by parents and peers will have a greater effect on males. In Table 3, neither the interaction of gender with parental or peer reflected appraisals is significant. This is consistent with prior research (Bartusch and Matsueda, 1996) findings that males and females are affected similarly by reflected appraisals.

### Discussion and Conclusion

We have found empirical support for interactionist, labeling, and self-control theories. Hypotheses linking measures derived from each of these theories to a delinquent self-concept are supported by our findings. A measure of self-control which included dimensions of risk-taking, insensitivity to others, and impulsivity was found to be a significant correlate of a delinquent self-concept, in both the bivariate and multivariate analyses. Our measure of labeling, or having a self-reported record of police contact, is also significantly and positively related to having a delinquent self-concept. Both of our indices (based on the interactionist theory) of reflected appraisals are also significantly related to having a delinquent self-concept. Parental and peer reflected appraisals are correlated at the bivariate level with delinquent self-concept as strongly as is our measure of official delinquency. In the multivariate analysis, peer reflected appraisals is the strongest correlate of delinquent self-concept.

None of our hypotheses predicting statistical interactions were supported. For example, neither social class nor race has significant interaction effects with official delinquency as predicted by labeling theory. Consistent with prior research, we find that males and females are similarly affected by reflected appraisals in terms of delinquent self-concept.

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