Delinquency and the Question of Values

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ONE of the more recurrent themes in the criminological literature is that the values held by delinquents must be important to understanding their behaviour. The most common context in which explanation by values has been invoked is in attempting to explain why lower class youth exhibit higher rates of officially recorded delinquency than middle class youth. This article seeks to review the adequacy of various attempts to explain delinquency by values.

The Theories

Delinquent Prescriptive Values

The most influential values theorist in criminology has been Walter Miller (1958). From his observations of lower class gang behaviour, Miller identified "trouble", "toughness", "smartness", "excitement", "fate", and "autonomy" as the key focal concerns of lower class culture. The primary motivation of gang delinquency is the attempt to act out these lower class focal concerns.

In its empirical grounding, Miller's approach is circular. He inferred the lower class focal concerns from observations of lower class behaviour, and then proceeded to explain that same behaviour by using the focal concerns. Most values theorists have been guilty of such circularity in varying degrees. To the extent the circularity is present, explanation of delinquency by values becomes a non-explanation. Miller assumes that class differences in officially recorded delinquency can be explained by the existence of one monolithic set of middle class values, and another monolithic but separate consensus about values among the lower class. Matza and Sykes (1961) point out that many of Miller's lower class focal concerns are almost identical to respectable middle class goals. Courage, easy money and adventure are values which are equivalent to Miller's "toughness", "smartness", and "excitement". "Toughness" can save lives or it can kill people, as Sutherland and Cressey (1966: 82) argued.

> Though criminal behaviour is an expression of general needs and values it is not explained by those general needs and values, since non-criminal behaviour is an expression of the same needs and values.

Conventional Prescriptive Values

Sutherland and Cressey's criticism is equally applicable to theorists such as Schur (1969) and Barron (1974) who explain law-breaking by reference to conventional (middle class?) values. Schur suggests that materialism, impersonality, individualism, and "acceptance of

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quasi-criminal exploitation" are examples of conventional values which may have significance in the causation of crime. A commitment to materialism might be just as likely to be explanatory of success in business as of delinquency.

The pre-eminent theorist who takes a commitment to conventional prescriptive values as the starting point for his explanation of deviance is Merton (1957). Merton says that in any society there are cultural goals (values) which provide a frame of aspirational reference. The most important of these goals in American society is material success. In addition to cultural goals which are held up as "worth striving for", there are defined legitimate institutionalised means for achieving these cultural goals. The legitimate means for achieving the cultural goal of material success are a good education, a good job, investment, and so on.

Merton asserts that when an individual has internalised a certain goal, and when legitimate means for achieving that goal are blocked, the individual is under pressure to resort to illegitimate means to achieve the goal. The lower class child learns that he should strive for the cultural goal of material success, but legitimate means for achieving that goal are closed to him because he cannot do well at school, he does not have the "connections" or the "polish" to swing a good job, and he has no capital for investment. He is, therefore, in the market for an illegitimate means for achieving the cultural goal.

The evidence makes it difficult to question the empirical grounding of Merton's theory on the proposition that lower class people in American society have a considerable commitment to material success values (see Braithwaite, 1979). Nevertheless, researchers such as Mizruchi (1967) and Winslow (1967) have pointed to their findings that the aspirations of lower class youth are lower than those of middle class youth, as if this were disconfirmation of Merton's assumption that lower class people share material success goals. Merton's theory depends only on the assumption that lower class people aspire to greater material success, and it does not deny the possibility that the intensity of these aspirations may be greater for the middle class. Indeed as Merton (1957: 171) himself has rebutted: "It is sufficient . . . that a *sizeable minority* of the lower strata assimilate this goal for them to be differentially subject to this pressure as a result of their relatively smaller opportunities to achieve monetary success."

Merton's theory, therefore, is hardly an explanation based on values at all. It is a social structural explanation of lower class delinquency premised upon what is almost a truism about the commitment of lower class people to material success values.

Albert Cohen (1955), like Merton, prefaces his theory of delinquency with the assumption that both lower class and middle

class boys begin their school careers with a commitment to traditional success goals. But because lower class socialisation equips lower class boys less adequately than their middle class counterparts for success at school, more of the lower class boys become failures in the status system of the school. This failure initially engenders shame and guilt, and perhaps some resentment and bitterness as well.

Having failed in the status system of the school, the student has a status problem and is in the market for a solution. He solves it collectively with other students who have been similarly rejected by the school. The outcasts band together and set up their own status system with values which are the exact inverse of those of the school —contempt for property and authority instead of respect for property and authority, immediate impulse gratification instead of impulse control, apathy instead of ambition, toughness instead of control of aggression. The delinquent's conduct is right by the standards of his subculture precisely because it is wrong by the standards of the school. By participating in this subculture, the poor academic performer can enhance his self-image by rejecting his rejectors. The boy's status problem is solved by the collective creation of a new status system in which he is guaranteed of some success.

Cohen's theory therefore involves an initial commitment to conventional prescriptive values which is reactively inverted into a commitment to delinquent prescriptive values. Downes (1966), however, has concluded from his study of delinquents in Stepney and Poplar that the typical response to failure is not Cohen's "reaction formation" but "dissociation". Rather than rebelliously turning the values of the shool upside down, it is more typical for the delinquent to simply withdraw interest in the work world of the school. It is possible, of course, that while Cohen's theory is true of American delinquent subcultures, dissociation is more applicable to English subcultures. Another British criminologist, Box (1971: 107-108), also suggests that there is no "reaction formation" because the lower class boys do not internalise the status criteria of the school in the first place; it is simply that the boys "can't be indifferent to" the status criteria of the school.

Conventional Proscriptive Values

The Downes dissociation hypothesis is one example of a number of theories which focus upon failure in a status system causing a weakening of commitment to the conventional *pro*scriptive values of that status system. Hirschi's (1969: 26) work also emphasises the weakening of commitment to conventional proscriptive values, though for Hirschi failure in a status system is not necessarily a precondition for such "anomie". "Delinquency is not caused by beliefs that require delinquency but rather is made possible by the absence of (effective) beliefs that forbid delinquency."

For Matza (1964) the intervening process between failure in a status system and delinquency is "drift". The delinquent belongs to a subculture characterised by values which *allow* delinquency but *do not demand it*. "The delinquent is neither compelled nor committed to deeds nor freely choosing them; neither different in any simple or fundamental sense from the law abiding, nor the same . . . He is committed to neither delinquent nor conventional enterprise . . . The delinquent transiently exists in a limbo between convention and crime, responding in turn to demands of each, flirting now with one, now the other, but postponing commitment, evading decision. Thus he drifts between criminal and conventional action" (p. 28). Failure in the status system of the wider society fosters this drift. Powerlessness is the most important dimension of this failure: "Being pushed around puts the delinquent in a mood of fatalism. He experiences himself as effect. In that condition he is rendered irresponsible" (p. 89). Powerlessness is particularly critical when the youth is "pushed around" in a way which he perceives as unjust or oppressive, because a sense of injustice can abrogate the moral bind of law. "The subculture of delinquency is, among other things, a memory file that collects injustices" (p. 102).

Sykes and Matza (1957) have suggested that the main mechanisms which make drift possible are what they call techniques of neutralisation. The five major techniques are (1) *denial of responsibility*, e.g. "I was drunk" (2) *denial of injury*, e.g. "they can afford it" (3) *denial of victim*, e.g. "we weren't hurting anyone" (4) *condemnation of the condemners*, e.g. "they're crooks themselves" (5) *appeal to higher loyalties*, e.g. "I had to stick by my mates". Sykes and Matza thereby generate an elaborate system of explanation which enables them to strongly disavow any theory which explains law violation in terms of delinquent prescriptive values.

> *It is by learning these techniques that the juveniles become delinquent, rather than by learning moral imperatives, values or attitudes standing in direct contradiction to those of the dominant society (p. 668).*

Differentiating the Theories

In summary, there exist widely quoted and respected theories of delinquency which encompass almost every possible kind of connection between values and delinquency (see Figure 1). There are theories which explain delinquency by delinquent prescriptive values (Miller, Cohen), by conventional prescriptive values (Schur, Barron), by reaction against conventional prescriptive values (Cohen), by the blockage of access to conventional prescriptive values (Merton), and by "dissociation", "anomie" and "drift" from conventional proscriptive values (Downes, Hirschi, Matza). The amazing thing is that these hopelessly conflicting formulations are so regularly quoted in
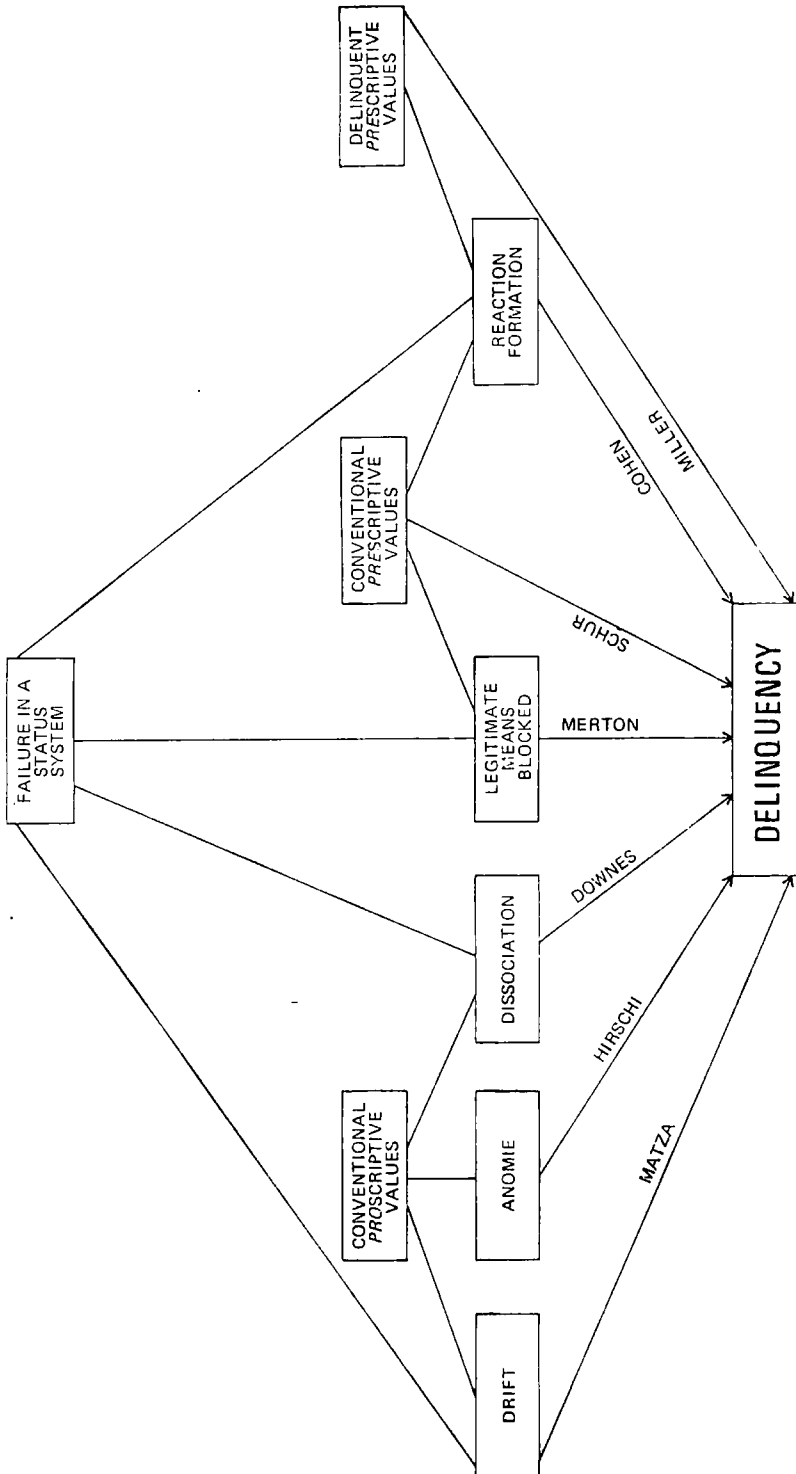
FIGURE 1 Schematic Representation of theories of values and delinquency

the same breath by criminologists who seek to invoke values to explain class differences in delinquency rates. Hyman Rodman (1963) has provided an enterprising rationalisation to explain how all conflicting theories about values and delinquency can be valid at the same time. Rodman tells us that the interesting thing about lower class values is that they "stretch". Lower class people accept a wider range of values and pragmatically allow their values to stretch to fit different circumstances. Presumably lower class people stretch their values up to middle class levels often enough for Merton's and Cohen's theories to be corect; they stretch down to lower class values often enough for Miller's theory to be correct; and while they're halfway across stretching between the two extremes they manage to validate Downes', Hirschi's and Matza's "dissociation", "anomie", and "drift" theories. Sadly for such a comfortable resolution, Della Fave's (1977) work shows that lower class adolescents do not have more "stretched" values than middle class adolescents.

The Evidence

All of the theorists discussed in the last section can present us with a wealth of case study evidence to demonstrate why their conception of the effect of values is right and the others quite mistaken. Rarely, however, does the evidence transcend the selectively anecdotal. The following review is an attempt to answer two questions: (1) are there consistently supported associations between certain types of values and delinquency, and (2) do such associations help provide an explanation for the theoretically central relationship between social class and delinquency.

Interest in values as a cause of delinquency has come in bursts throughout the history of criminology. Barron (1951) summarised the results of a spate of studies from the 1930s on value differences between delinquents and non-delinquents as follows.

> *For the most part these revealed either insignificant or contradictory evidence of value differences between the compared groups.*

The most rigorous test of Miller's theory has been by Sherwin (1968). Sherwin tested whether each of Miller's focal concerns was endorsed by the majority of lower class boys; more often endorsed by lower class than middle class boys; and more often endorsed by delinquents than non-delinquents. The average percentage endorsement for Miller's focal concern was:

Lower class delinquents	**48%**
Middle class delinquents	**41%**
Middle class non-delinquents	31%
Lower class non-delinquents	31%

The prediction from Miller's theory that lower class delinquents would show the strongest commitment to the focal concerns was confirmed. However, even among this group, it can be seen that the majority did not endorse most of the focal concerns. More damaging is the finding that middle class delinquents are more committed to lower class focal concerns than are lower class non-delinquents, and that there are no differences between the two social class groups among the non-delinquents. As Sherwin says:

> Since Miller does tend to maximise cultural contrasts between the middle and lower class, the fact that a group of middle-class youths have provided a heavier endorsement of lower-class values than another group of lower-class youths, irrespective of which group is delinquent and which non-delinquent, seems to undermine the autonomy which he ascribes to lower-class culture (p. 209).

In summary, while there is a difference in commitment to the focal concerns between delinquents and non-delinquents, there is no evidence to suggest that this difference is related to class in any way. This should hardly be surprising, since Miller's conclusions about *lower class culture* were induced from observation of *lower class delinquents*.

Sherwin also measured endorsement of middle class values, operationalised from the descriptions of middle class values provided in the writings of Albert Cohen. He found that the vast majority of all types of respondents—middle class or lower class, delinquent or non-delinquent—endorsed these values. While it was the middle class non-delinquents who were most likely to endorse the middle class values, lower class non-delinquents reported a stronger commitment to them than middle class delinquents. Overall, the Sherwin study showed that lower class delinquents were less likely to endorse Millers lower class focal concerns than they were to endorse Cohen's middle class values.

The Sherwin findings have been confirmed even more strongly by Kratcoski and Kratcoski (1978) who found no class differences on either Miller's lower class focal concerns or Cohen's middle class standards. Landis, Dinitz and Reckless (1963), after discovering minimal class differences in values, concluded from their study that:

> The differences in values and awareness perceptions between lower and middle class children, even when treated as poles on socio-economic continuum are, in all probability slight at the present time in American urban society and should be expected to decrease even further with time. A levelling effect, brought about by mass communication and other factors is at work in our society, narrowing and eradicating the attitudinal gulf between the social classes (p. 145).

Short and Strodtbeck (1965) found no significant differences between members of delinquent gangs and non-members, and between middle class and lower class boys, on endorsement of middle class prescriptive norms. However, on middle class proscriptive norms, gang boys were more tolerant of infractions than non-gang boys, and lower class boys were more tolerant of infractions than middle class boys.

Specifically on the value of "toughness", Fannin and Clinard (1965) found that lower class boys had a conception of self which was tougher, more powerful, fierce, fearless, and dangerous, when compared with middle class boys. But Erlanger (1974), on the basis of his own data and findings from previous studies, concludes that there is more evidence inconsistent with the hypothesis that lower class people have values which are more favourable to the use of violence than there is evidence consistent with it.

Recent studies using the Rokeach Value Survey also provide discouraging results for the class-values-crime formulation. Feather (1975) found that of the 36 values measured, only 6 were significantly related to delinquency. Delinquents ranked "an exciting life", "national security", and being "clean" more highly than did boys in the control group; and "happiness", "wisdom", and being "responsible" were ranked as relatively less important by delinquents when compared with controls. Cochrane (1974) found none of these values to be related to male delinquency in another study using the Rokeach Value Survey. Moreover, in two separate surveys, Feather (1975) found that of the six values only "clean" was significantly related to income in both surveys, with lower income groups ranking being "clean" as more important. Findings which were supported in one of the surveys but not the other were no more encouraging. "National security" was ranked as more important by lower income earners, and "an exciting life" was ranked as *less* important by the lowest income group.

Yet another study using the Rokeach Value Survey by Ball-Rokeach (1973) found virtually no relationship between values and interpersonal violence and violent crime. Moreover, not one of those few individual values which were weakly related to violent behavior was significantly associated with social class. A replication by Poland (1978) confirmed the Ball-Rokeach findings. Using a more qualitative measure of values, Deitz (1972) also found minimal value differences between delinquents and non-delinquents, and these differences were unrelated to the weak class differences in values which emerged from the study.

Cernkovich (1978) has published a study which does show that subjects who evidenced a weak commitment to "conventional values" and a strong commitment to "subterranean values" were somewhat more likely to self-report heavy involvement in delin-

quency. Unfortunately, "conventional" and "subterranean" are ill-defined and there is no evidence that Cerkovich has used any multivariate scaling technique in developing indices of such questionable unidimensionality. The findings are interesting, however, because controlling for socio-economic status did not reduce the strength of the relationship between conventional value orientation and delinquency involvement, and partialling out the effect of socio-economic status actually *increased* the correlation between subterranean value orientation and delinquency. If values did have an effect on delinquency then, it was certainly not because of class factors. Identical results to the Cernkovich study on both the conventional-subterranean and class questions, but using the totally different methodology of the repertory grid tehnique, have been produed by Heather (1979).

Using a semantic differential, Siegal, Rathus and Ruppert (1973) found that in a delinquent subculture many middle-class conventional values were still upheld; but that delinquents had somewhat less positive attitudes than non-delinquents to "police", "law", "saving money", and "education"; and more positive attitudes to "crime" and "work". Similarly Chapman (1966) found that the "person who is in trouble with the law" was more positively evaluated by delinquents than by non-delinquents, and Stafford (1979) found that delinquents were more likely to argue that "it's okay to break the law if you can get away with it".

In two studies in which Hindelang (1969, 1974) set out to test Matza's theory of drift the data were not consistent with drift, but with decidedly greater commitment to delinquent prescriptive values among delinquents when compared with non-delinquents. Regoli and Poole (1978), however, failed to replicate the Hindelang findings. In a qualitative study of 40 delinquents, without a control group, Velarde (1978) also claims that his interview data do point to the partial validity of drift. Certainly Ball (1968) has shown that when specific situations of delinquency are described to adolescents, both officially recorded and self-reported delinquents are more likely than non-delinquents to agree to techniques of neutralisation as acceptable defences for the behaviour.

Studies such as those of Hindelang do not tell us whether attitudes favorable to delinquency actually cause delinquency, or whether delinquency causes attitudes favorable to delinquency. Studies by Hackler (1970) and Liska (1973) have used path analysis to try to resolve this dilemma, but results from both were equivocal. In a totally different approach to the problem, Heather (1979) used the repertory grid technique. Consistent with Matza, Heather found that both middle and lower class delinquents and non-delinquents had a two-component value structure consisting of conventional and subterranean components. However, the *relative strength* of value

components was more likely to show the subterranean component dominant over the conventional component for delinquent subjects.

Considering all of the foregoing, the hypothesis that in one way or another delinquents have a greater capacity for tolerance of delinquent behaviour does enjoy a fair deal of empirical support. However, it is not possible to move from this to the common assertion that lower class people have attitudes more tolerant of delinquency, hence the higher delinquency rates evident among the lower class. The fact is that such little evidence as we have is not consistent with the latter proposition. Hackler (1970) found that low socio-economic status boys were not more inclined to endorse delinquent behaviour than boys of higher socio economic status. More surprisingly, Faust (1970) found lower class adults to be *less* tolerant of delinquent behaviour than middle class adults, and blacks to have less tolerant attitudes than whites.

The foregoing review also shows how other versions of the theory that lower class values are related to delinquency do not enjoy empirical support. This is because the values which have been inferred from *ex post facto* interpretations of the behaviour of delinquent gangs are not endorsed by a majority of either lower class people or delinquents; nor are they consistently more often endorsed by lower class than middle class people. Where values have been isolated which are supported by a larger minority of delinquents than of non-delinquents, commitment to these values is not related to class. Thus class differences in criminogenic values cannot be invoked as an explanation for the greater delinquency of lower class youth.

An Alternative

Beyond the almost trite statement that delinquents have attitudes somewhat more tolerant of delinquency, there is nothing that the evidence enables us to say with confidence about the relationship between values and delinquency. The evidence can only leave us in a state of disillusion about the general applicability of all of the theories of values and delinquency discussed in the first section of this article.

One alternative kind of explanation which we have not considered is the theory of the disturbed delinquent. Some kind of mental illness drives the adolescent's behaviour to total unpredictability. We cannot understand his behaviour from a knowledge of either his commitment to conventional prescriptive or proscriptive values, or delinquent prescriptive or proscriptive values. All we would say is that he is mad, insane, crazy: that his commitment to any and all coherent sets of values is loosened The theoretical. proposition becomes a quite simple one: madness loosens existing value commit-

ments. There is no need to specify what kind of value commitment because the unpredictability of this is the essence of the theory.

The present authors reject such an untestable theory, based on such an indefinable conduct as "madness", for the multitude of reasons that have been expressed in the writings of Szaz, Scheff and others. Retracing these arguments need not detain us here. What we would suggest is that instead of the proposition that madness loosens existing value commitments, why not consider the hypothesis that failure loosens value commitments. Engels was not far away from this position when he suggested that economic failure caused a person to become so brutalised as to be a determined creature, 'as much a thing without volition as water' (1969: 159), submitting to the disorganising social forces that surround him.

What we are trying to suggest is that if we are to have a theory of values and delinquency it must be a very general theory. The proposition that failure loosens existing value commitments at least provides some explanation for the association between class and delinquency, and because of its generality it would be hard to show that it was at odds with the evidence. The point is that if we are to take the evidence seriously we must face the fact that young people who fail (in the status system of the school, or the wider class structure) adapt to that failure with an infinity of often idiosyncratic value and attitude changes, most of which weaken internal control, but some of which might even bolster conformity (witness working class authoritarianism). Out of his attempts to fit the various theories of values and delinquency to the views of Liverpool delinquent boys Parker (1974: 114) could only conclude that "In short it is wise to assume that 'delinquent motivations run the whole gamut from total acceptance of social morality through to those cases where deviants are in total opposition to convential morality, and in large part motivated by their desire either to alter or destroy it' ". In making this kind of admission Parker is really saying that values are of little predictive use. And the problem with the proposition that failure loosens value commitments is that it is so general as to be of minimal explanatory power.

The preocupation with values in criminology has really deluded us into missing the point. We set out to show how certain kinds of lower class values cause delinquency when it may be something quite different in the condition of being lower class that is predictively related to delinquency. This something might be the condition of being a failure. One of the most powerful and consistently supported predictors of delinquency is school failure (Kvaraceus, 1945; Toby and Toby, 1957; Gold, 1963: 44; Lunden, 1964; Polk, 1965; Polk and Halferty, 1966; Schafer and Polk, 1967; Rhodes and Reiss, 1969; Fisher, 1970; Lanphier and Faulkner, 1970; Burns, 1971; Empey et al., 1971; Kelly, 1971; Kelly and Balch, 1971; Farrington, 1973;

Frease, 1973; Gold and Mann, 1973; Mugishima and Matsumoto, 1973; Phillips, 1974; Offord et al., 1978). Moreover, contrary to the conclusions of many selective reviews and introductory textbooks, when all the existing empirical evidence is pulled together, it does sustain the conclusion that low socio-economic status is also a correlate of delinquency (Braithwaite, 1981; *cf.* Tittle *et al.,* 1978). This conclusion is not consistently supported, particularly by self-report studies. Yet even with self-reports, more studies show significant class differences than would be expected on the basis of chance. Furthermore, while there is a considerable literature which has failed to demonstrate consistent or important class biases in official records of delinquency (see, for example, the review by Liska and Tausig, 1979), there is a neglected literature which suggests that the self-report methodology may exaggerate the proportion of delinquency perpetrated by the middle class (Braithwaite, 1979).

In spite of this, it remains the conventional wisdom of liberal criminology that the large class differences in delinquent involvement demonstrated by official statistics are a fiction arising from class bias in the behaviour of the courts and police. Many liberal criminologists therefore direct our attention away from the criminogenic character of social and educational systems which have failure structured into them, and again onto a politically neutral pre-occupation with delinquent values.

The irony that failure might explain much middle class delinquency has not escaped a number of authors (Stinchcombe, 1964; Stark, 1979). Hirschi (1972) explains that

> *children doing well in high school and children who expect to graduate from college are much less likely to be delinquent, regardless of their father's occupation or education. Put another way, the evidence is clear on one point: the lower the social class the child will enter, the more likely he is to be delinquent, regardless of his class of origin.*

A number of studies (Stinchcombe, 1964; Kelly, 1971; Kelly and Balch, 1971; Frease, 1973; Polk *et al,.* 1974) have even supported the conclusion that middle class children who fail at school engage in more delinquent behaviour than lower class school failures. Polk (1969), however, found that academically unsuccessful lower class boys were just as delinquent as academically unsuccessful middle class boys.

What we are suggesting is that failure in a status system leads to delinquency and that this relationship may be mediated by changes in beliefs and value commitments which will vary greatly between cultures and between individuals. Moreover, an understanding of this diversity of value changes has proven to be of limited use in advancing our understanding of delinquency even within any one

culture.

Let us illustrate this argument with a key example. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) hypothesised that failure in a status system will only cause delinquency where there is an "attribution of the cause of failure to the social order rather than to oneself, for the way in which a person explains his failure largely determines what he will do about it". Belief that one is the victim of an unjust system will result in alienation from that system, and withdrawal of attributions of legitimacy from official norms. Belief that failure is the result of one's personal deficiency results in pressures to improve oneself, and leaves the legitimacy of established norms intact. The empirical evidence is conflicting and inconclusive on whether delinquents are more likely to blame the system or their personal inadequacy for their predicament (Gold, 1963: 159-160; Rosenberg and Silverstein, 1969: 130-33; Quicker, 1973; Elliott and Voss, 1974: 30-31; Picou *et al.*, 1974). Contrary to Cloward and Ohlin, it is reasonable to hypothesise that if one fails in a system, one will withdraw attributions of legitimacy to that system, *irrespective of the perceived reasons for failure.*

It is the failure itself which is predictively more dependable and it is levels of failure, rather than the supposedly associated value changes, which are directly manipulable by educational and economic policies. The search for delinquent values should join the search for somatotypes and personality defects as another unfruitful historically protracted attempt to locate (by circular logic) the cause of delinquency within the delinquent himself.

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