

Social psychology - delinquency



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A multitude of theories exist in sociology and psychology to explain crime and delinquent acts. "Where as a crime is an act that breaks criminal which is created by society though written law, delinquency and deviance can be acts that merely break 'cultural law' or norms." (Zappen, 1998). However, by looking at three specific delinquent acts, it becomes possible to see that theories in sociology and psychology aptly explain both simultaneously.

Consider for a moment the delinquent act of shoplifting. Some researchers would argue that individuals who engage in this act have found that the risk of getting caught is worth the acquisition of the possessions gained in the act. The decision to shoplift is driven from within by the thought processes of the individual, placing it squarely in the realm of psychology as part of the social exchange theory (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2005). Along a similar line it is possible that the individual engaged in shoplifting in order to gain items that would create the perception of financial success so prized in our society. The pressure to act came from outside the individual and is an example of the structural-functional theory of sociology (Zappen, 1998).

What if an equal emphasis comes from outside the individual Perhaps the shoplifter has many friends, peers, and role models that shoplift. The saying birds of a feather would point to the sad fact that the individual would eventually be labeled as a shoplifter by association. So if people expect the individual to shoplift he will be more likely to do so. Or so the labeling theory would have us believe (Sociological theory, 2008). It could also be argued that shoplifters learn the behavior from their peers as explained by the social learning theory of psychology. When an individual repeatedly sees a behavior being done it becomes the norm for him and engaging in it is not seen by the individual as deviant, delinquent or criminal.

A similar method can be used to discuss the theories behind the delinquent act of breaking and entering. Perhaps the individual in question covets the financial means and standing to be able to live in the house. The strain theory of sociology suggests that the act was committed in an effort to alleviate the pain felt by not being able to attain this goal (Sociological theory, 2008). It is also possible that the action was taken to increase the power of the individual in regard to property ownership which would fit within the sociological conflict theory (Zappen, 1998). But what if the individual wanted to compare himself to the person who lived in the house. Then the action is explained by psychology's social comparison theory (Brehm, Kassin, and Fein, 2005) in which an individual engages in an action to gain some information about himself by comparing himself to a relevant other.

One final delinquent act - car jacking - can be reviewed through various theories. Sociology theorizes that symbolic interactionism and structural-functionalism both explain how just such an action comes to be and for almost the same reason (Sociological theory, 2008). A car is a status symbol; what you drive or don't drive says a lot about who you are. By stealing such a vehicle, an individual increases his status not only in his eyes (symbolic interactionism) but in the eyes of all those who see him in the car (structural-functionalism). Psychology, on the other hand, would suggest that stealing the car would provide some form of internal or personal reinforcement (List of social psychology theories, 2007). If the individual feels he belongs to a better class of people, then stealing the car will allow him to have that association with the better class of people (social image theory). Stealing the car also ensures that the individual is seen in it. This not only reinforces the

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individual's belief about himself as a better class of person but it also allows others to see that same thing (self verification theory). This final example makes it should be clear how sociology and psychology must work together to understand social events such as crime and delinquent acts.

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