

Explaining Adolescent Delinquency in Albania A Theoretical Approach to the Phenomenon

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Abstract: *These last fifteen years, Albania is experiencing one of the most challenging phenomena of the post-communist period: juvenile delinquency. Is it a social context issue or does it depend on micro-factors such as family, school or neighborhood? The understanding of the causes and criminal patterns of juvenile delinquency is essential to determine the right treatment of the offender, as well as the prevention process and must be based on an understanding of the causal mechanisms of the phenomenon. The purpose of this article is to explain causes of adolescent delinquency in Albania by reviewing and exploring theories of juvenile delinquency. Comparisons will be drawn between theories to better understand the phenomenon and its trends. Changes in Albanian society still in transition, and relevant other factors are taken into consideration to describe theories and explain recent findings in the Albanian context. The article tries to answer the question: “what causes delinquency among adolescents?” by analyzing patterns of offending in adolescence years. It is based on the assumption that factors such as association with delinquent peer groups, school dropout, absent or authoritative parenting, previous involvement in the juvenile justice system, become the most distinguished during this period of age. The findings suggest that the contributing factors that make an adolescent delinquent are numerous and varied and often complexly interwoven in a single case. One single theory cannot explain the complex of conditions and circumstances producing delinquency.*

Key words: *adolescent delinquency in Albania, causes and criminal patterns, theories of delinquency, explain contributing factors.*

Introduction

For most of the young Albanian people today, traditional patterns regulating the relationships and transitions between family, school and work are being challenged. Social relations and structures that ensure a smooth process of socialization are collapsing; lifestyle trajectories are becoming more varied and less predictable. The instable and most cases informal, labor market, the extension of the maturity gap (the period of dependence of young adults on the family) and the more limited opportunities to become an independent adult, are all changes influencing relationships with family and co-aged, educational opportunities and choices, labor market participation, leisure activities and lifestyles. The ongoing internal movements, the unavailability of housing and support services, poverty, unemployment and underemployment among youth, the decline in the authority of local communities, the lack of cohesion and support in the overcrowding poor urban or suburban areas, the disintegration of the traditional family, and ineffective Albanian educational system are some of the pressures young people are dealing with today.

In these years of economical and cultural transition, Albanian youth are being subjected to individual risks, but are also being presented with new individual opportunities, some beneficial and some potentially harmful. Quite often, advantage is being taken of illegal opportunities as young people commit various offences, become addicted to drugs, and use violence against their peers.

During the last years, crimes are being reported where very often adolescents were either victims or offenders. Data from Albanian Ministry of Justice¹ show an increment of minors involved in offensive crimes and contraventions, 407 in 2008 compared to 211 during 2007. According to the Head of the Training Sector in Albanian Justice System², the number of adolescents involved in criminal acts in 2010 was 255 and among them 150 were on probation. In the mean time, as statistical data related to this issue is being discussed, very less is being done toward analyzing what are the specific, context related roots and causes of juvenile crime in Albania.

As this paper discusses further on, researchers worldwide, do not fully agree on the causes of adolescent delinquent³ behavior; nevertheless they all accord in the fact that these behaviours are far more common among minors, that in every

¹ Annual Statistical Report, Albanian Ministry of Justice, (Tiranë, 2008).

² Juvenile Justice Report, Femi Sufaj. Training Centre in Prisons, Albania, 2010.

³ It refers to the antisocial or criminal activity of the child below 18 years of age and which violates the law. The same activity would have been a crime if it was committed by an adult. *Crime and Disorder Act*. 1998.

other age group. Offences, such as drug abuse, theft, assault or murder, increase in frequency during adolescence and high school years.

Exploring different classical and recent theories of delinquency, this article considers whether there is an 'Albanian delinquency' case with its own characteristics and trends by responding to the following questions: What are the implications of adolescent delinquency in Albania? Is such behavior a matter of individual choice? To what extent do environmental factors influence juvenile deviance? What is causing adolescent antisocial and criminal behaviour in our country?

Basic Assumptions of Delinquent Behaviour

It is impossible determining the suitable prevention and intervention process without trying previously to understand the reasons behind adolescent involvement in criminal activity. Different approaches are used in scientific and practical literature on juvenile crime and violence to define and explain delinquent behaviour by young people. To Albanian criminologists and law, juvenile delinquency encompasses all public and penal wrongs committed by young people between the ages of 14 and 18. Most of the theoretical approaches the article will discuss through, are based on the Positive School of criminology initiated in the late nineteenth century (Radzinowicz, 1966) which can be applied to any theory that analyzing causes of delinquency, assumes that personal, social or environmental causes determine criminal behavior. The so called Neoclassical School theories point out the personal choice and responsibility of the young individual toward his own actions, with a special consideration that minors do not have the same capacity to make rational choices as do mature adults (Shoemaker, 2000).

Understanding delinquency from this point of view and analyzing its roots, encompasses a variety of disciplines, such as biology, psychology and sociology, together with considering social and economical context of our country, both past and present.

Biological Theories

Biological theories refer to the effect of inherited physical traits on human behavior. They present strongly deterministic explanations of delinquency and criminality, and hold the opinion that some people are "naturally born criminals" with physical qualities that govern their deviant tendencies (Curran & Renzetti, 1994). These qualities include genetic, biological, and biochemical profiles that theoretically cause, or have a strong effect upon, one's inclination for deviant behavior. Several biological theories of delinquency focus on physiological determinants such as face features-'honest face' or 'evil face'; head shapes and proportions; primitive physical abnormalities as indicators of criminal predisposition; heredity or inherited tendencies for criminal inclination; hormonal imbalances or dysfunction; body features and mesomorphy (Marsh & Katz, 1985).

The biological arguments to crime and delinquency are inaccurate and subjective, they are not supported empirically and do not explain the role and correlations between physical traits and environmental factors such as family dysfunction, underclass cultural role, and why some adolescents seem to be predisposed to engage in deviant behavior norms, and antisocial group dynamics.

Psychological Theories

Psychological theories ascribe deviant behaviors to cognitive and personality disorders brought on by one's environment, brain chemistry, or some other psychological condition. Such theories are not as rigorously deterministic as other approaches to causation, because they allow for some degree of free will, albeit a disordered free will.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Early theorists of psychoanalysis, such as Carl Jung (Campbell, 1976) and Sigmund Freud (Gay, 1989), attempted to construct systematic models to explain human personality. The personality systems they designed created classifications to explain correlations between one's personality and behavior. Healthy development of the personality components occurs early in life, so these early experiences are critical for future adult behavior. Troubling or traumatizing events during childhood can become catalysts for delinquency and criminality. Juvenile delinquents are, according to psychoanalytic theory, persons without sufficiently developed egos and superegos. If the moralistic superego is weak, a person can easily act out on his or her primal urges without remorse and mislabel deviance as acceptable behavior. Such

behavior, if illegal, forces society to define the individuals as delinquents, and to deal with them accordingly. Thus, people who have poorly developed or overdeveloped superegos and egos are incapable of acting outside of their own interests and are roughly analogous to *psychopaths* in the modern era, unable to empathize with other people's feelings or well-being.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, or observational learning focuses on behavior modeling, in which the child observes and then imitates the behavior of adults or other children around him or her through a continuous reciprocal interaction of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1977).

In his research on social learning theory, Bandura studied how violence portrayed in mass media can have a tremendously negative impact on the behavior of certain types of children watching violent television shows and then imitate the behavior of the characters. From these observations, we can conclude that juvenile delinquency is the result of imitation of aggressive actions. Bandura determined that certain types of children learn to perform violent and aggressive actions by observing and then modeling their behavior after what they have seen (Wiesner, Capaldi, Patterson, 2003). Therefore, social learning theory states that learning can occur through the simple process of observing and then imitating others' activities.

Behavioral Theory

Behavioral theory describes the outcomes of the consequences of a certain behavior on occurrence of such behavior in the future. In other words, we learn from lifetime events and base our decisions, perceptions, and conduct on these events. These experiences, underlie socially acceptable behavior, as well as delinquency and criminality. Behaviorists concluded that human criminals and delinquents could be conditioned to continue their behavior in a manner similar to Pavlov's dogs (Pavlov, 2001).

The likelihood of behavior is increased or decreased by the use of reinforcement or punishment. Negative and positive reinforcements and extinction strengthen certain kinds of behavior of individuals (Skinner, 1953). Punishment is a big form of operant conditioning used all over the world. When people are punished, it is to decrease that certain behavior produced by the individual. Therefore, behavioral theory refers to conditioning which leads to different behavioral pattern of juvenile offenders. Antisocial and delinquent behaviours of adolescents are either socially reinforced by certain individuals or groups within family, neighbourhood or among peers to commit such offences, or not properly punished when exhibiting them the first times.

Psychopathology Theory

The psychopathic personality theory describes criminals who behave cruelly and seemingly with no empathy for their victims. It appears that some young criminals, referred as psychopaths or sociopaths are unable to appreciate the feelings of their victims, are considered to be people who have no conscience, in Freudian terms, no superego (Cleckley, 1976). They are severely dysfunctional in their relationships with other people, and are fundamentally selfish, unpredictable, untruthful, and unstable. The term is sometimes used to describe very aggressive delinquents and criminals, who act out spontaneously without an observable motive. This aggressiveness and impulsiveness are typical manifestations of the psychopathic personality, which is why many adolescents become lawbreakers.

Sociological Approaches to Juvenile Delinquency

Sociological theorists look at how groups and society influence people. The sociological perspective stresses that people's social experiences, the groups to which they belong, their experiences within these groups, influence their behavior and the reasons for the differences in crime rates in the social environment (Adler, Mueller, & Laufer, 2004).

In an attempt to explain the theoretical underpinnings of delinquency, sociologists associate the specifics of youth behaviour with the home, family, neighbourhood, peers and many other variables that together or separately influence the formation of young people's social environment. Juveniles may commit crime due to poor socialization, poverty and deprivation, or class conflict and inequality. Unstable homes and social environments increase the risks for these juveniles. Family, socioeconomic status, and educational experiences also contribute to the obstacles faced as adolescents attempt to grow up toward adulthood.

According to Schmallegger (2006), there are three main sociological approaches to crime causation: social structure theories, social process and social development theories, and conflict theories. These three perspectives have in common the assumption that social groups, social institutions, the arrangement of society, and social roles all provide the proper focus adolescent delinquency study. Group organization, group dynamics, and subgroup relationships form the causal connection from which crime develops. The structure of society and its relative degree of organization or disorganization are important factors contributing to the prevalence of criminal behavior.

Social Structure Theory

According to Sampson (2008), this theory believes that a person's position in the social structure controls behavior and motivation to reach life objectives and plays a role in crime causation. This perspective focuses on the social and economic conditions of life, including poverty, personal frustration, alienation, weak social control, relative deprivation, social disorganization, differential opportunity, alternative means to success, and deviant subcultures and sub cultural values that conflict with conventional values.

This theory is used to explain not only why individual adolescents become delinquents, but also why some classes are characterized by more delinquency than others. Since members of the lower- or underclass are assumed to be most affected by the disparity between their goals (reaching monetary success or status) and the means of attaining success (such as education or attaining a profession), this class is expected to have a higher rate of delinquent behavior. In our capitalist society success goals are widely shared and encouraged, while the means of or opportunities for attaining them are not.

In post communist Albania, there is a striking contrast between the lifestyles of the rich and the poor. Within the past decade, the gap between the richest and the poorest Albanians has grown wider and the number of families living in poverty in certain poor and isolated areas of mountainous Albania has tripled (INSTAT, 2010). Adolescents who live in poverty have a greater tendency to drop out of elementary or high school in attempt to help support their family by getting a job, but their prospects for finding a job are low. Due to their lack of economic resources, lower-class families, who originally lived in small industrial or rural areas, were obliged to move permanently toward richer and urban areas. Unfortunately, these cities weren't prepared to offer them the job and life opportunities they had dreamt of, many of the 'newcomers' still live in economically and infrastructural depressed areas of their suburban community. Most of these migrant communities have poor educational and employment opportunities, lack businesses that offer general goods and services, and usually have inadequate health care facilities. These indicators of despair and neighborhood disorder are high predictors of crime (Taylor, 2001). Most poor communities are largely composed of ethnic minorities, such as Roma or Egyptians, with income levels that are significantly lower than 'whites' and unemployment rates that are almost triple as high. The crushing lifestyles in slum areas produce a culture of poverty and marginalization, passed from one generation to the next. This culture is marked by apathy, cynicism, social conflicts, feelings of isolation and helplessness and a broad mistrust of social institutions, such as schools, government agencies, and the police (Lewis, 1966). As a result of the social and economical disability suffered by the lower class, many juveniles turn to crime and gangs as means of support and protection. Criminal acts and drug dealing provide means of survival in an otherwise bleak existence (Siegel & Senna, 2004).

Subculture Theory

Subculture theory is a subtype theory of social structure theory. A subculture is a subdivision within the dominant culture that has its own norms, beliefs, and values (Adler, Mueller, & Laufer, 2004). Subcultures develop when people in similar circumstances find themselves isolated from the mainstream and they band together for mutual support. The lifestyles of members of a subculture are significantly different from those individuals in the dominant culture. Subculture theorists believe that teenage gangs emerge in poorer communities in response to special problems that members outside of the poor communities do not face. In these poor communities, gang members are engaged in violent criminal activity as one of the few means of attaining status, power, and economic resources (Adler, Mueller, & Laufer, 2004). Cohen (1955) suggests that children of the underclass, and potential members of a delinquent subculture, first experience a failure to achieve when they enter school. When assessed against a "middle-class measuring rod," these children are often found lacking. A result is a growing sense of "status frustration." Underclass children are simply not prepared by their earliest experiences to satisfy middle-class expectations. The delinquent subculture therefore emerges as an alternative set of criteria or values that underclass adolescents can meet.

Social Process & Social Development Theories

Sampson and Morenoff (2006) noted that the social process and social development theories believe that criminality is the end product of various social processes, especially inappropriate socialization and social learning. This perspective stresses the role of interpersonal relationships, the strength of social bonds, a lack of self-control, and the personal and group consequences of societal reactions to deviance as they contribute to crime.

Not all criminologists believe that living in poverty creates juvenile delinquents. Some theorists believe that adolescents commit crimes as a result of the experiences they have while they are being socialized by various organizations, institutions, and processes of society. Social process theorists believe juveniles are most strongly influenced toward criminal behavior by poor family relationships, destructive peer-group relations, educational failure, and labeling by officials of the justice system (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2001). Although lower-class citizens have the added burdens of poverty and strain, even juveniles who do not live in poverty may turn to crime if their socialization is poor or destructive.

Social process theorists have linked family problems to juvenile delinquency as evidence that socialization, rather than social structure, is the key to understanding the onset of juvenile criminality. Family problems linked to juvenile delinquency include inconsistent discipline, poor supervision, and the lack of a warm, loving supportive parent-child relationship (Rankin & Wells, 1990). Parents who effectively control their children in a non-coercive manner and who are supportive are more likely to raise children who refrain from delinquency (Wright & Cullen, 2001). In contrast, the likelihood of juvenile delinquency is increased if parents are unable to provide the type of family structure that gives adolescents the ability to assert their individuality and regulate their own behavior (Hay, 2001).

Albanian family is undergoing important changes in its structure, economic factors, birth rates, marriages, divorces, lifestyle and the fulfillment of its functions have marked new tendencies. It is threatened not only by traditional factors, like death, illness, physical disability, poverty etc., but also by the "nontraditional" as deviant behaviors, various internal and external conflicts, violence, alcoholism, abusive use of drugs, marital unfaithfulness, neglect, sexually transmitted diseases, prostitution etc (Beqja & Sokoli, 2000). The increase of divorces number, actually two time bigger than in 1985, the poverty of a great number of Albanian families, the emigration of at least one parent and the internal movements, families with parents having serious individual psycho-social problems, have all caused a great risk for the wellbeing of the members, especially children and adolescents and communication and support among members (UNICEF, 2008).

Educational experiences play a significant role in behavioral choices, in predicting crime and juvenile delinquency (Maguin & Loeber, 1996). Adolescents who are failing at school are more likely to commit small offences within the education system, or even drop out. Juveniles that drop out are more likely to be attracted in being members of adolescent gangs and engage in delinquent behavior. Juveniles who fail in school have been found to offend more frequently than those who are successful in school. Failing juveniles commit more serious and violent crimes and continue their criminal activity into adulthood (Maguin & Loeber, 1996).

The present system of education in Albania is suffering the "drop out" of students at the elementary and middle classes. Nowadays, a lot of Albanian adolescents both in suburban of big cities and in rural areas do not have the possibility to reach fulfillment through education. Poverty, lack of transport, lack of dorms, lack of security etc. undermine completely such a prospect (CRCA, 2007). On the other hand, school curriculum is not practically based. Children do not attain essential knowledge, which might change their lives. Teachers and educators are often unmotivated to identify and help resolve problems with which their students are confronted. No interest and lack of motivation put students in a risky situation when it comes to criminal involvement. Scarce resources can be responsible for the lack of discipline in the classroom and a limited number of teachers means a higher number of students in each class. As a result, the lack of supervision increases probabilities for children and adolescents to develop antisocial behaviors. Under these conditions, it is often easier for them to drop out of school and get involved in activities that contribute to the family income. In this context they are more likely to get involved in criminal activities.

Differential Association Theory

Socialization also plays a significant role in influencing behavior choices. One of the earliest social learning theories, differential association, was proposed by Edwin Sutherland (1939). Sutherland believed that criminality was learned through a process of differential association with others who communicate criminal values and who associate the commission of crimes. Juveniles who maintain ties with a deviant peer group are more likely to be involved in criminal activity (Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2002).

Social Control Theory

Social control theory believes that every juvenile has the potential to become delinquent, but that most juveniles are controlled by their bond to society (Hirschi, 1969). Social control theorists trace the origin of delinquency to a lack of proper socialization, of attachment, involvement, belief and commitment to traditional lines of behavior; this may lead to delinquency or flawed social control machinery. The influences of family, school and community, religious beliefs, moral values, friends, and beliefs about justice and the government regulate their behavior (Wiatrowski, Griswold & Roberts, 1981). These positive influences lead juveniles to conform to society's rules and laws. According to social control theory, juvenile delinquency occurs when the forces that bind people to society institutions are weakened or broken (Wiatrowski, Griswold, & Roberts, 1981).

Labeling Theory

This theory explains juvenile delinquency in terms of the process by which a juvenile acquires a negative identity, such as "delinquent", and is forced to suffer the consequences of outcast status (Chambliss, 1969). Since youths are relatively powerless in society, they are predisposed to different forms of labels and tags placed on them by adults and other authority figures that exert immense levels of control and reaction (Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1991). When adolescents are labeled delinquents, they take on like characteristics and accept that label as a personal identity. However, some youths do not accept their delinquent labels, and other labels involving stereotyping and disintegrative shaming. On the other hand, some labeling theorists believe that society should be less concerned with children in terms of delinquent attitudes.

Social Development Theory

The social development perspective believes that as toddlers, individuals develop relationships and behaviors that determine their course of life into adulthood (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Transitions in life are expected to take place and follow a certain order, like starting and completing school, entering the workforce, getting married and having a family. Some juveniles are incapable of maturing into adulthood in a reasonable amount of time because of family, environment, or personal issues (Sampson, & Laub, 2003). An adolescent female who becomes pregnant most likely will have a delay in completing school, or may drop out of school altogether. An adolescent boy, whose family has been broken apart due to immigration is obliged to support the left behind members of his family by working, though he is to follow school. Disruptions in life's major transitions can be destructive and promote juvenile delinquency (Sampson, & Laub, 2003). Juveniles who are already at risk because of socio-economic problems or family dysfunction are more vulnerable to disruptions and delays in transitioning into adulthood. The impact of these disruptions sustains delinquency into adulthood. Social development theorists believe that a career in crime is a developmental process, because juveniles are influenced by the behavior of those around them and in turn they influence others' behaviors. Because the propensity to commit crimes is a developmental process that is neither stable nor constant, life experiences during the turbulent teen years can influence this propensity. (Sampson, & Laub, 2003). As an example, a juvenile's delinquent behavior may turn some of his friends against him; their rejection solidifies and escalates his delinquent behavior. Theorists also recognize that as juveniles mature, the factors that influence their behavior change (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). During childhood, family relations may be the most influential; in later adolescence, school and peer relations predominate; in adulthood, marital relations and achievements in the workplace may be the most crucial influences.

Some individuals that were delinquent throughout their adolescence may find stable work as adults and may be able to maintain good marital relationships. These life events are stabilizing and help them refrain from committing criminal acts. In contrast, a juvenile that develops a criminal record may only obtain a low-paying job as an adult, putting them at greater risk of continued criminal activity into adulthood (Loeber & Farrington, 2000).

Conflict Theories

Becker (1963) discusses the conflict theorist perspective that delinquency is the result of class struggle. This perspective emphasizes the nature of existing power relationships between social groups, the distribution of wealth within society, the ownership of the means of production, and the economic and social structure of society as it relates to social class and social control.

Conflict theory points to the economic and political forces that are operating in society as the fundamental cause of juvenile delinquency (Becker, 1963). Conflict theorists view the criminal justice system and its laws as means for controlling the lower-class. They believe that criminal justice system helps the powerful, upper-class members of society impose their particular morality and standards of good behavior on the entire society. This system is viewed as protecting the property and physical safety of the upper-class even while infringing on the lower-class members' legal rights. Those in power control the content and direction of the laws and legal system and thereby shut out others who might challenge the authority of the elites. The focus of conflict theory is on the entire economic and political system, and the socioeconomic tensions theoretically created by this system.

Conclusion

This contribution presented an overview of theoretical approaches useful to understand and describe the incidence of adolescent delinquency in Albanian. A large number of theories have been analyzed to identify and explain the causes of juvenile and criminal deviance. Early attempts to explain deviance applied the then-accepted notion that natural and supernatural forces affect human fortunes and behavior. Modern explanation emphasize one's own responsibility and free will in committing offences. Other theories look within the society and its micro and macro factors that influence delinquency among youth.

Although many theories have been propounded to explain adolescence criminality, no single theory has been universally accepted by experts. Many theories have been designed to explain particular aspects of delinquency, but were not designed to explain all aspects of deviance. Also, every theory has adherents who focus on the strengths of the theory and critics who point out its weaknesses. It is possible that all classical and modern theories are partially correct. Some juveniles commit crimes because they are poorly socialized, some succumb to the obstacles placed in their path by lower-class life, and some are victims of class conflict. Factors commonly accounting for the deviant and delinquent behavior of Albanian adolescents include mostly poverty, family dysfunction, poor or absent educational experiences, substance abuse, low self-esteem, disadvantaged communities, and peer pressure.

Through an understanding of causes of adolescent delinquency, society may come to deal preventively with delinquency; certainly treatment of the adolescent offender needs to be based upon an understanding of the causal mechanisms that have produced it.

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