Adolescents' Beliefs About Why Young People Commit Crime

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The aim of the study was to obtain adolescents' perspectives about why young people offend. Twenty-four Australian male and female offenders and non-offenders offered insights about what, according to them, motivates young people to become involved in crime. Without the use of sophisticated language, participants offered explanations that were well-aligned with the 'big three' theories suggested by Cullen and Agnew (2003) as major criminological theories — namely, control, differential association, and strain theories. Participants also provided explanations that corroborated Carroll, Houghton, Durkin, and Hattie's (2009) reputation enhancing goals theory. Participants' explanations were consistent with empirically supported criminological theories, suggesting that young people involved in crime, or associated with known offenders, have insights about the causes of crime. An extrapolation of this notion would suggest that they might also have some insight into what measures could be taken to reduce or prevent offending. Notwithstanding further research, it is proposed that young people should be given more voice in criminal justice matters.

■ **Keywords:** adolescent offenders, crime theories, child perspective, child voice, causes of crime

Statistical data shows that about one in six adolescent youth living in South Australia will be apprehended at least once by police before they turn 18 years of age (Skrzypiec & Wundersitz, 2005) while across Australia the rate of offending for juveniles aged 15–19 is three times that of all other offenders (Fuller, 2013). So, what motivates young people to offend? This question has been a focus of social scientists and researchers for centuries. Since Cesare Beccaria first laid the foundation for the field of criminology during the Enlightenment in 1764 in his book *An Essay on Crimes and Punishments*, a multitude of criminological theories have been advanced by scholars around the world. The theories aim to explain why some people become involved in crime while others do not, or what structures/processes increase the risk of involvement in crime (Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). Open any criminology text book (e.g., Cullen & Agnew, 2003; Akers & Sellers, 2004; Tibbetts & Hemmens, 2010) and a long list of criminological

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theories appear. Furthermore, the list of theories continues to grow, with at least one more emerging each year. According to Hay (2001), a minimum of 25 new theories about the causes of crime emerged between 1985 and 2001 — an average of three theories every 2 years. In offering theoretical explanations, these theories assist our understanding of why some people become offenders.

The term 'offender', which has its basis in legislation, is defined as 'a person who commits an offence', where an 'offence' is 'a wrong prohibited by the criminal law' (*Young Offenders Act 1993*). This 'wrong', however, is only an 'alleged' offence 'until proven', so the term 'offender' is a label used only for people who have either admitted the offence or have been found guilty of the offence. In this study, the term 'offender' is used loosely to refer to young people who break the law and engage in criminal acts, irrespective of whether or not they have been caught and found guilty of an offence.

The general conclusion reached by criminologists investigating the causes of crime is that there is 'no single factor or set of factors which causes an individual to become involved in crime' (Weatherburn, 2001, p. 8); rather, there are a number of factors that increase the likelihood of committing crime (Bernard & Snipes, 1996; Farrington & Welsh, 2007). After 25 years of research in the area, Agnew (2005) concluded that he was 'unable to provide a good answer' (p. 2) to the question of 'Why do criminals offend?', proffering only that he could identify 'those factors that should be included in any explanation of crime' (p. 2).

To date, attempts by researchers 'to develop high-powered, closely reasoned, carefully stated, and empirically buttressed theories about the causes of crime and criminality', according to Leavitt (1999), 'have not been all that impressive' (p. 390). Theories in criminology vary in the perspective taken to explain why some people commit offences, but generally offer little towards any single theory of the causes of crime (Vold et al., 2002). Rather, criminology advances theories that provide a variety of 'possibilities' that stem from a variety of fields of study, ranging from Marxist theories (Bohm, 1992; Milovanovic, 1992), feminist theories (Chesney-Lind, 1989; Heimer & De Coster, 1999), and biological theories (Reiss, Neiderhiser, Hetheringtom, & Plomin, 2000), to control theories (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) and psychologically based learning theories (Akers, 1998).

To make sense of the large array of theories, and to inform our understanding of what produces criminal behaviour, Cullen and Agnew's (2003) book on criminological theories divides the discipline into 12 major theoretical groups, each described as a school of thought, the 'big three' of which are singled out as 'control', 'differential association', and 'strain' theories. According to these editors, other sociological theories have developed from these three 'significant and long-standing theories in criminology' (Cullen & Agnew, 2003, p. 10). Indeed, these theories have 'shown remarkable durability ... and central to their continued validity ... has been their capacity to be *evolving paradigms*' (authors' emphasis; Cullen, Wright & Blevins, 2009, p. 5). According to Cullen et al. (2009), differential association theory formed the basis of 'social learning theory' (Akers, 1998), control theory evolved to become 'self-control theory' (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), while strain theory was reformulated by Agnew (1992) into 'general strain theory'. While these theories have been articulated differently and have been described using specific

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terminology, they are referring to the same phenomenon of offending, so there is some overlap between them (Agnew, 1995).

Self-Control Theory

Postulated by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), self-control theory states that there is a relationship between self-control and criminal behaviour, so that persons with low self-control are more prone to making choices that involve criminal activity and which provide an immediate gratification of desires (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Lack of self-control is described as 'an enduring criminal predisposition' (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1994, p. 47) that is developed as a result of poor socialisation and attachment and ineffective parenting techniques early in childhood, which stabilises and then remains constant after about the age of 8. It is primarily through parental action, posit Gottfredson and Hirschi (2003), that self-control is generated in early childhood, as parents who care about their child's behaviour recognise and penalise any deviant activity. In this way, the child develops self-control, as illegitimate uses of force and fraud are punished. In situations in which this does not happen, the child misses this training and self-control remains relatively low, resulting in an indulgence of behaviours that provide an instant fulfilment of the child's desires. The concept of self-control is explained by Hirschi and Gottfredson (1994):

> *Criminal acts are a subset of acts in which the actor ignores the long-term negative consequences that flow from the act itself (e.g., the health consequences of drug use), from the social or familial environment (e.g., a spouse's reaction to infidelity), or from the state (e.g., the criminal justice response to robbery). All acts that share this feature, including criminal acts, are therefore likely to be engaged in by individuals unusually sensitive to immediate pleasure and insensitive to long-term consequences. The immediacy of the benefits of crime implies that they are obvious to the actor, that no special skill or learning is required. The property of individuals that explains variation in the likelihood of engaging in such acts we call 'self-control'. (pp. 1–2)*

People with low self-control are characterised by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) as having specific characteristics or *traits* which merge to form a stable construct:

- 'Criminal acts provide immediate gratification of desires … [P]eople with low self-control … therefore … have a concrete "here and now" orientation.' (p. 89)
- 'Criminal acts are exciting, risky, or thrilling … People lacking self-control therefore tend to be adventuresome, active, and physical.' (p. 89)
- '… In sum, people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short sighted, and nonverbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts.' (p. 90)

Self-control theory is one of the most popular theories of crime in sociology, being considered by most criminologists as the most viable in a list of possible theories (Ellis & Walsh, 1999). A meta-analysis of existing empirical research of self-control theory by Pratt and Cullen (2000) found an effect size for low self-control that exceeded 0.20. They concluded that self-control was, hence, one of the 'strongest

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known correlates of crime' (Pratt & Cullen, 2000, p. 952), and the tenets of self-control theory have been difficult to disprove (Akers, 1998).

Differential Association/Social Learning Theory

Differential association theory, first suggested by Edwin Sutherland in 1939 and finally completed in 1947, is another criminological theory described by Cullen and Agnew (2003) as one of the 'big three'. Classified as a 'micro-level learning theory', Cullen and Agnew (2003) have pointed out that this theory has abstracted the idea that crime occurs through the transmission of criminal values from Shaw and McKay (1942), and they credit it with providing the basis for initiating a variety of learning theories. According to Gaylord and Galliher (1988), Sutherland rejected the notion that physical attributes, pathologies, poverty, and broken families were sufficient causes of crime. He believed that criminal behaviour was learned through associating with criminal 'definitions' (motives, drives, rationalisations, attitudes), a process which occurred as individuals interacted with others, the most influential of whom were family and intimate friends. Through such associations, favourable and unfavourable 'definitions' about the law and crime, as well as techniques of committing crimes, were learned (Cullen & Agnew, 2003).

Like Sutherland, Akers (1985) argued that criminal behaviour is learned through exposure to and the acceptance of definitions that favour crime, but added that it may also be learned through imitation and differential reinforcement. Akers' (1985) social learning theory is a broader extension of Sutherland's differential association theory and it retains all nine processes described in that theory, 'albeit clarified and somewhat modified' (Akers, 2003, p. 142). Despite some criticisms of social learning theory (Hirschi, 1969; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1993), almost all research testing social learning theory has found evidence that supports a link between the social learning variables and criminal, delinquent, and deviant behaviour (Akers, 2003).

Strain Theory

Classical strain theories are based on the notion that strain or pressure is experienced by individuals who cannot achieve goals deemed to be measures of success (e.g., money, status), and as a response to this strain, they (may) engage in criminal behaviour (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Merton, 1938). Thus, individuals are 'pressured' into crime when they are prevented from achieving these goals in legitimate ways (Cullen & Agnew, 2003). Not all individuals who experience strain or frustration, however, respond with criminal activity, and strain theorists aim to identify the factors that determine whether strain leads to crime.

According to Cullen and Agnew (2003), classical strain theory no longer dominates criminology, particularly since a number of studies have failed to find empirical support for the theory (Hirschi, 1969; Kornhauser, 1978; Jensen, 1995). However, a revision of the theory with an emphasis on other sources of strain has been developed by Agnew (1992) in the form of 'general strain theory'. Agnew (1992) suggests that strain is created when individuals experience negative relationships with others, in 'relationships in which others are not treating the individual as he or she would like to be treated' (p. 50). Furthermore, the blockage

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of economic successes, argues Agnew (1992), is only one possible source of strain, frustration, or anger, and he lists three other possible sources, each of which refers to a different type of negative relationship. These are presented by Agnew (2003) as 'ideal' categories of strain, advanced to facilitate the consideration of a broad range of sources when negative events are investigated in empirical research. They include instances in which an individual is prevented from achieving positively valued goals; has positively valued stimuli that they possess removed; or is presented or is threatened to be presented with noxious or negatively valued stimuli. Agnew (1992) has argued that 'strained' relationships experienced by adolescents creates pressure for them to take corrective action, and such negative affects could 'lead adolescents to (1) make use of illegitimate channels of goal achievement, (2) attack or escape from the source of their adversity, and/or (3) manage their negative affect through the use of illicit drugs' (p. 48).

Agnew (1992) has provided a long list of research with evidence that links delinquency/aggression with noxious stimuli such as child abuse and criminal victimisation, physical punishment, negative relations with parents, adverse or negative school experiences, and a wide range of stressful life events. Although some theorists have found support for general strain theory (Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000; Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994), more research is required to determine which types of strain are closely related to the commissioning of criminal behaviour. While strain theories no longer dominate criminology, the resurgence of interest places them 'among the more influential theories of crime' (Cullen & Agnew, 2003, p. 175).

Reputation Enhancement

In addition to the 'big three' criminological theories, Carroll et al. (2009) have proposed a reputation enhancing goals theory, which while not generally acknowledged within sociologically based criminology, is worthy of consideration. Carroll et al. (2009) have proposed an integrated model derived from elements of reputation enhancement theory (Emler & Reicher, 1995) and goal-setting theory (Elliott & Dweck, 1988) to explain the motivational and social determinants of adolescent offending behaviour. Adolescents, they suggest, make a deliberate choice about how they wish to be viewed by others, and they choose either conforming or non-conforming social goals on which to base their reputations. Delinquency, they argue, 'is a deliberate choice, selected in order to achieve and maintain standing within a peer culture that values antiestablishment and tough behaviour' (Carroll et al., 2009, p. 33). Contrary to traditional depictions of offending youth, they suggest that rather than being aimless and undirected, delinquents do have goals (socially, non-conforming ones) to which they are highly committed, particularly with regard to their desire to attain a delinquent reputation. In earlier research, Carroll et al. (2009) found that delinquent youth not only viewed themselves as non-conforming, in terms of breaking rules and having anti-social tendencies, but they also wished to be viewed by others in this way.

Integrated Criminological Theories

In addition to traditional crime theories, several integrated theories of crime have emerged in the literature, proposed by criminology theorists in an effort to bring

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together theories which do not contradict each other 'but instead focus on different aspects of the same phenomenon about which they make different predictions' (Vold et al., 2002, p. 301). Such integrated theories include Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming (Braithwaite, 1989), Title's control balance theory (Title, 1995), and Farrington's (2003) integrated cognitive anti-social potential (ICAP) theory.

Young People's Perspective

Acknowledging the vast array of explanations for the causes of crime, this study sought to add to our understanding of why people offend, by seeking the perspective of adolescents who were associated with, or were known offenders. Current explanations of criminal involvement have been proffered by adult researchers, and lacking in the literature are explanations provided by young people, particularly those who are ensconced in offending or who lay witness to it through family, friends or acquaintances. This investigation sought to discover the insights offered by young people and so provide another dimension to our understanding of why young people commit crime and determine whether the youth perspective would differ from the 'big three' theories. It was anticipated that this would add another facet to what is already known about the causes of crime, and that this would be of interest to professionals working with young offenders.

In the past decade, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of children's perspectives and views, particularly since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified (Sommer, Pramling-Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010). Suggestions contend that young people should have more say in their lives — that they have rights — and these rights are no less for young offenders as they are for all young people. Commonly, young people are assigned a minority status and this minimises their contribution to the social order (Mayall, 2002). In the most recent years there has been an emergence of a new 'child paradigm' (Sommer et al., 2010) as researchers have sought to discover children's perspectives on various matters that involve them (Casas, 2000; Santos Pais, 1999). Sommer et al. (2010) have stated that 'seeking the perspective of the child has become an essential process in all sorts of tasks, from framing new legislation to regulating professions' (p. 151). In particular, research including child and adolescent perspectives has emerged in fields involving vulnerable children dependent on institutions such as state justice and welfare systems. For example, Aubrey and Dahl (2006) investigated the perspectives of young children aged 5–11 years of the relevance of the services they received. They showed that children had valid views of their role, as well the relationship they had with their service providers, but that their voices were often absent in decisions made about their lives. They were critical in their research of the extent to which children are controlled and they advocated for measures which increase children's autonomy and provide opportunities for them to share in decision-making processes. In the same vein, these sentiments equally apply for young offenders who generally have their behaviour judged and punished with little or no input from them about the penalty or any rehabilitation measures.

Melton and Limber (1992) have emphasised the value of including children's perspectives, not only because they differ from the adult perspective, but also to

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respect children as persons and provide information that better informs policy-makers. Many studies have since been carried out to obtain children's points of view and inform best practice. For example, research has been undertaken to include children's perspectives on wellbeing (Ben-Arieh, 2000; 2005), kinship care (Messing, 2005), childhood poverty and social exclusion (Ridge, 2002), and domestic violence (Edleson, Nguyen, & Kimball, 2011). Abrams (2006) has advocated that the perspective of youths involved in the criminal justice system may offer valuable information about issues that pertain to them and that this may be of benefit to offenders as well as criminal justice workers. Aligned with this approach, this study sought the insights of a small group of adolescents, some of whom were convicted offenders, about why young people offend. The question of why young people offend was asked of adolescent male and female participants who were interviewed as part of a larger study that aimed to investigate young people's attitudes to offending. The aim was to obtain the perspective of adolescents about why some young people continually get into trouble with the law. It was hoped that this qualitative study would obtain insightful information for professionals working with juvenile offenders such as social workers, criminal justice officers, correctional officers and policy-makers interested in understanding why young people engage in criminal activity.

Method

Participants

In order to achieve maximum variation sampling and obtain multiple perspectives, participants were a heterogeneous group of adolescents ranging in age, Indigenous background and offending status. The sampling was not intended to allow comparisons between different groups of individuals, but was merely to attain the perspectives of a variety of adolescents.

Twenty-four young Australians, whose ages ranged from 15 to 17 years (average 16.3 years), participated in an interview about why young people offend. Eleven of the participants were male, 14 were Aboriginal (eight females and six males), and 12 were known offenders. While the research was inclusive of all young people, young Aboriginal people were a special consideration in this study, because they are over-represented relative to the general population in the juvenile justice system (Skrzypiec & Wundersitz, 2005). It was important, therefore, to ensure that Aboriginal youth had a voice in this research.

Known non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal offenders were recruited through the local state government department in charge of juvenile offenders and an alternative public school for troubled youth. Young people from an Aboriginal school with non-offending students (according to the principal) were also invited to participate. Other non-offenders were from a secondary school located in area with a very low rate of adolescent crime, and while the offending history of participants from this high school was not known, it was assumed that most of the participants were non-offenders.

All of the young people were attending school and had volunteered to participate in the interviews. Participants attending the alternative school for Aboriginal youth had previously been involved in offending and were undergoing rehabilitation. Four

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of the young people were living in residential care and had been in trouble with the law at some time in their past. The majority of participants indicated that they knew other young people who had been in trouble with the law.

Ethics

This research was conducted in accordance with the Australian Research Council (ARC) and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines. Approval from four ethics committees was granted for this study and consent from a parent/guardian, as well as consent from the participant, was obtained prior to the interview. At the beginning of the interview, each participant was told that the interview was strictly confidential — that no one at the school or residential home would hear the tapes or read the transcripts.

Procedure

Participants attended a 50- to 60-minute semi-structured interview in which they discussed their attitudes and beliefs about various offences, including graffiti, dangerous (hoon) driving, assault, stealing, driving unlicensed, and taking (illicit) drugs. Discussion about these offences was initiated through short vignettes. For example, the topic of graffiti was introduced to participants through the scenario of 'A young person puts graffiti on the wall of a bus shelter'. This was followed with an open-ended question of 'What do you think about that?'. To avoid incrimination, participants were not asked any direct questions about themselves. Rather, the third person was used and respondents answered questions such as 'What do you think would happen to a person who did that?' and 'What kind of punishment do you think they should get?' The focus of this study was participants' responses to the question 'Why do you think some young people continually get into trouble with the law?'

The interviews were undertaken by one researcher, who interviewed all of the participants in a private area at the school or the residential home. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

No new insights were found in participants' explanations of why they thought some young people got into trouble with the law. What was surprising was that it was not difficult to align the reasons provided by respondents with current prevailing criminological theories. While the respondents had no knowledge of criminology theories, they provided possible reasons that did not stray from theories developed by noted criminologists on the cause of crime. However, respondents' expressions of possible reasons offered a different, humanistic perspective on these theories. The statements made by the young people who participated in this study illustrate the human experience on which the theories are based. These associations are discussed in accordance with self-control theory, differential association theory, strain theory and reputation enhancing goals theory.

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Self-Control Theory

While participants did not make any direct reference to lack of self-control as a cause of offending, other comments described poor socialisation and parenting as likely causes of criminal behaviour. Poor parenting, for example, was referred to in the first quote by an Aboriginal participant, who was the second male in this age 17 category (i.e., Aboriginal male$_2$, 17) to be interviewed. The other two quotes mentioned upbringing as a likely influence for criminal behaviour.

> *They probably would have got grown up with it [sic], so they think it's the right thing to do. (Aboriginal male$_2$, 17)*

> *It could be the way they're raised, because some parents just let their children go from when they're born; like, they grow up doing what they want, and do it whenever they want, and it just gets worse as they grow older. They do what they want, except in a bad way ... (Non-Aboriginal male$_1$, 15)*

> *I think it's got a lot to do with family and their upbringing. They may have been rejected by their family, so they've got no loving, caring role models in their life that can take them through what's wrong and what's right ... (Non-Aboriginal female$_1$, 17)*

In support of self-control theory, the thrill and immediate gratification of criminal involvement was advanced by some participants as a possible cause of offending. This is illustrated by the following quotes where terms like 'feel the speed', 'the rush', 'getting the stuff out of it', 'having fun' and overcoming boredom are used to explain some of the satisfaction participants believed was associated with offending:

> *Maybe it's just that they want to feel the speed ... they just want to experience doing doughnuts, burnouts ... being chased by police. (Aboriginal male$_3$, 17)*

> *It's just maybe, the rush or something that you get when you steal a car ... to know that it's not your car and you can thrash it out and dare drive and drive silly with it ... and if they get locked up and they get out, and they just get bored, really ... and they just go out and steal a car, just to drive around. (Aboriginal male$_1$, 16)*

> *Maybe because they like doing it ... getting the stuff out of it ... and having fun doing it. (Non-Aboriginal male$_1$, 16)*

Differential Association Theory/Social Learning Theory

In the interviews, some respondents presented reasons for offending that provided support for social learning theory. Statements made by participants referred to the effect of exposure to offending family and friends on young people's criminal involvement and recidivism, as the following quotes show:

> *A lot of black fellas do it 'cause mainly, like, all the older family members have done it, and they've heard about it or seen it done by their friends, and they just try it and then they get the rush, I suppose.... Once they learn how to steal it, they just can't stop it ... it's just hard to help. (Aboriginal male$_1$, 16)*

> *I don't really think that they care, because their parents, like, threw their lives away ... you know, their parents had a life of crime before they were born, so it's kind of just all incorporated into the whole thing. (Aboriginal male$_2$, 16)*

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They just do it, really, because they've seen all their uncles and stuff do it, so they just follow the footsteps of their Elders, I suppose. (Aboriginal male$_1$, 16)

Aboriginal male$_1$, 16, also remarked in the first quote above that 'they just can't stop it'. While this could be considered a reference to self-control theory, it was categorised here as providing support for social learning theory. As previously explained, self-control theory is associated with immediate gratification and acting on impulse, rather than delaying gratification and rewards, and is not solely about 'stopping' oneself from offending. The focus for this quote: 'Once they learn how to steal it, they just can't stop it' was on the concept of learning how to steal. Although gratification may have been implied, the participant was not referring to being unable to stop stealing because of the immediate gratification that it brought (i.e., self-control theory), rather he was linking not being able to stop stealing to having *learnt* how to steal (social learning theory).

Strain Theory

Another of the 'big three' for which there was evidence of support was strain theory. Statements provided by respondents loaned corroboration to the categories of strain. The following quotes not only referred to the 'strain' of being in foster care or a victim of abuse, but also to the need for corrective action as they suggested that emotions are released through crimnogenic activity:

They could be angry at parents for putting you in there (foster care) . . . or for dying, I guess . . . and all that sense of emotion just gets bottled up, and I guess that's a way of releasing their emotions — through anger, through bashing up other people, stealing, doing criminal acts, and to just basically run amuck. (Aboriginal female$_3$, 17)

Maybe they're just pissed off about something, and so they think they should go commit a crime. (Aboriginal male$_3$, 17)

. . . a childhood experience, say, if it was just the parents and they're drinking and someone came along and they invited someone they didn't know that well and the kid was sleeping, and something happened, and they're thinking their parents don't really care . . . happened at such a young age, like sexually abused . . . yeah . . . that's pretty much another way of letting anger out . . . I guess . . . have a rebellion against everything that your parents say, doing everything the opposite. (Aboriginal female$_3$, 17)

Agnew's (1992) general strain theory includes situations that may result in anger, frustration, and strain that are not just due to the blockage of goal achievement but that may also be due to the presentation of noxious stimuli or to the removal of valued stimuli. An association between such strain and delinquency was a popular explanation offered by participants as a possible reason for offending. This included statements of having experienced injustice and maltreatment as stated in the following quote:

Because of the way that they've been treated and dealt with by the authorities. There hasn't been that measured approach to how they're punished, or even if they should get punished. If you treat people harshly the first time around, when they get into

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trouble … I reckon that more so than not, you'll send them into that downward spiral … they'll just continually offend. (Non-Aboriginal male$_3$, 17)

The next quote, which explains that 'really bad problems' may be relieved through criminal activity so offenders can 'feel better about themselves', also alludes to the crimnogenic motivational processes described in strain theory:

I think it's because they have really bad problems and they feel really bad about themselves … because maybe it just makes them feel better about themselves … because they can get away with doing something that's wrong. (Aboriginal female$_1$, 16)

Some respondents suggested that maltreatment was so unbearable that detention became a viable alternative:

Some people, they get locked up because they're not happy where they're living, and in youth prison, it's actually sometimes better than the place they're living in, and so they actually get themselves locked up, so they can go to the youth prison. (Non-Aboriginal female$_1$, 16)

M's [youth detention centre] a bit of a holiday camp by style, 'cause you're basically getting counter meals every night … like pub counter meals … like good meals and stuff … most people just go there and then gain weight … and do weights and stuff like that, and come out bigger than when they went in. They start to feel safe in there. It's safer in there than on the streets. (Aboriginal male$_2$, 16)

Reputation Enhancement

In addition to suggestions that provided support for the 'big three' theories in criminology, another possible reason, to be 'cool' and enhance one's reputation, was advanced by respondents. To be 'cool' was suggested by some participants as an important motivator for offending, as illustrated by the following quotes:

Some people might do it [offend] … you know, to be cool (Non-Aboriginal female$_1$, 16)

… they think it's cool and they were HTC (hard to catch) … and they could think they just really cool CBF — crazy black fellas or crazy black felons … or they probably think STC — small-time criminal. (Aboriginal male$_3$, 17)

Some people when they're in X [youth detention centre] and stuff, like Y [name withheld], she's always in X, all the time … I'm pretty sure she thinks it's cool to be in X … (Aboriginal female$_1$, 16)

One young man explained how engaging in offending behaviour which was considered 'cool' by peers was related to reputation enhancement:

… because if your friends know who you are and if you do things, like, that impress your friends, then they're going to go, 'You know that guy, X, and he did this thing' … it's kind of a reputation cling-on … like a hair clip …. and if you go to jail, sometimes it's also a bigger reputation thing. (Aboriginal male$_1$, 17)

Other respondents also made reference to the association of reputation enhancement and being 'cool':

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> *. . . being bad is cool type of thing . . . they might do it and you know feel, that's quite cool . . . someone who's not afraid of the law and is getting that sort of tough attitude that goes along with it, that might impress others . . . (Non-Aboriginal male$_2$, 17)*

> *They think that if they do stuff it makes them better . . . cool better . . . so their friends will look up to them . . . (Aboriginal female$_1$, 16)*

The general comments made by several respondents in this research about offending, being 'cool' and reputation enhancement, suggests that reputation enhancing goals theory should be added to the list of significant theories of crime in addition to the 'big three'.

Integrated Criminological Theories

Although they were not aligned with any of the integrated theories previously mentioned, some young people did state that the reason for offending involved a mix of causes. The mix of reasons made reference to the 'big three' theories as well as reputation enhancing goals theory. In the following quote, for example, reasons for offending included: because offenders 'don't know any better', which may be associated with poor parenting and self-control theory; 'they feel they have to steal stuff, so that they can get by in life' relates to strain theory, where stealing may be considered a response necessary for obtaining things that can not otherwise be attained; 'they think that they're not going to get through life unless they do these things' to social learning theory, as this statement suggests that an offender has learnt to survive in this manner; while 'they have to bash other people, so that they can be cool' relates to reputation enhancing goals theory.

> *Because they either don't know any better, or they feel they have to . . . they feel they have to steal stuff, so that they can get by in life . . . or they have to bash other people, so that they can be cool . . . they feel like they have to, so that they can be accepted . . . they think that they're not going to get through life unless they do these things. (Non-Aboriginal female$_3$, 17)*

Discussion

It appears that much more research is required to address the complexity of offending. However, based on the reasons suggested by participants, different people may offend for different reasons or a mixture of reasons. That respondents' hypothesised causes of criminal behaviour were well-aligned with the 'big three' criminological theories suggests that young people with some involvement in crime, either directly or through an association with offenders, have insight about the processes underlying criminal involvement. An extrapolation of this notion would suggest that they might also have some insight into what measures could be taken to reduce or prevent offending. Further research could be undertaken to explore this supposition. It could investigate whether young offenders have insights about what is needed to assist them to desist from crime. Furthermore, future research could also investigate whether a young offender's involvement in decisions about consequences, as well as rehabilitation options, provides agency and ownership and prevents recidivism. A limitation of this study was that known adolescent offenders were not directly

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asked what they thought had caused *them* to engage in criminal activity, and this also would be worthy of further investigation.

While it is the case that responsibility for criminal behaviour always rests with the perpetrator, some of the quotes provided by participants in this research suggest that young people can't help the circumstances they are forced to deal with in their young lives and the choices they make as a consequence. It is saddening to think that for some individuals 'in youth prison, it's actually sometimes better than the place they're living in'. This raises the question of who helps children when families fail to pass on society's moral values and when they fail to socialise their children appropriately. Children can't help the families they are born into, but we as a society should be able to do more for those young people seeking prison accommodation because 'it's safer in there than on the streets'. Individuals for whom this might be true should be afforded an opportunity to voice their circumstances and be treated accordingly. As such, counsellors and social workers would be well placed to seek explanations from offenders about what they believe has caused their criminal behaviour, rather than focussing on the criminal offence that was committed. From an understanding of what has caused an individual's offending may come insights about what would be needed to assist an offender to desist from crime.

Conclusion

Theoretically, the possible reasons for crime provided by the young people in this study are nothing new, and are well aligned with current criminological theories. Their statements, however, do illustrate the human element of offending, particularly for young people. From their own words it is possible to understand how young people may become involved in crime. As such, the words of the participants may prove useful for training youth workers, social workers and other people employed in occupations that involve young offenders and troubled youth. Indirectly, respondents' statements provide a young person's perspective of some criminological theories and add another dimension to these theories, which are primarily espoused in academia and empirical research.

The findings of this investigation suggest that there should be more opportunity for young people to provide input about their offending and the punishment they might receive. The results show that they have insightful beliefs about what causes offending and as such, may also have insights about what actions they might need to take in order to desist from offending.

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