Explaining the Gender Gap in Delinquency: Peer Influence and Moral Evaluations of Behavior

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Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 1998 35: 251
DOI: 10.1177/0022427898035003001

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Gender is one of the strongest correlates of delinquent behavior, but gender differences in delinquency have proven difficult to explain. Some analysts have called for gender-specific theories of delinquency, whereas others argue that males and females are differentially exposed to or differentially affected by the same criminogenic conditions. Building on the latter approach, this article draws on Sutherland's theory of differential association and Gilligan's theory of moral development to argue that males and females are differentially affected by exposure to delinquent peers. Analysis of data from the National Youth Survey supports the hypothesis that moral evaluations act as a barrier to reduce or counteract the influence of delinquent peers among females, thereby producing large observed sex differences in delinquent behavior.

Gender is one of the strongest and most frequently documented correlates of delinquent behavior. Males commit more offenses than females at every age, within all racial or ethnic groups examined to date, and for all but a handful of offense types that are peculiarly female (Steffensmeier and Allan 1995; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985). Unlike some putative features of delinquency that are method-dependent (e.g., social class differences), sex differences in delinquency are independently corroborated by self-report, victimization, and police data, and they appear to hold cross-culturally as well as historically (Hindelang 1979; Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis 1979; Steffensmeier and Allan 1995; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985). So tenacious are sex differences in delinquency, in fact, that it is difficult to argue with Wilson and Herrnstein's (1985)

The authors express their thanks to Christopher G. Ellison, Jack P. Gibbs, Arthur Sakamoto, Mark C. Stafford, Daniel A. Powers, and Thomas W. Pullum for their comments and suggestions. Direct correspondence to Daniel Mears at the Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712-1088.

JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN CRIME AND DELINQUENCY, Vol. 35 No. 3, August 1998 251-266

conclusion that "gender demands attention in the search for the origins of crime" (p. 104).

Explanations for gender differences in offending have been promulgated at least since the time of Lombroso, who opined that the female criminal is "of less typical aspect than the male because she is less essentially criminal" (Lombroso and Ferrero [1895] 1958:111). Lombroso's observations notwithstanding, efforts to explain the gender/crime relation have not fared well, and some sharp philosophical and methodological differences have arisen as to how investigators ought to proceed. Some analysts argue that conventional theories of delinquency were largely designed to explain male delinquency and that separate theories are required to account for male and female delinquency. Smith and Paternoster (1987), however, strongly warn against premature rejection of existing theories: "Since most empirical tests of deviance theories have been conducted with male samples, the applicability of these theories to females is largely unknown. Moreover, the fact that most theories of deviance were constructed to account for male deviance does not mean that they *cannot* account for female deviance" (p. 142).

Rather than postulating separate etiological theories for males and females, Smith and Paternoster (1987) join a number of investigators (cf. Simons, Miller, and Aigner 1980) in suggesting that males and females differ in their rates of delinquency because they are *differentially exposed* to the *same* criminogenic conditions. In a close variant of this position, other investigators (e.g., Johnson 1979) have suggested that males and females are *differentially affected* by exposure to the same criminogenic conditions. If such arguments are correct, then it is pointless to construct entirely separate theories to explain the delinquent behavior of males and females.

One traditional theory of delinquency that holds promise for a unified explanation of gender differences in offending is Sutherland's (1947) theory of differential association. In this classic sociological theory, Sutherland argued that delinquency is learned behavior and that it is learned in intimate social groups through face-to-face interaction. When individuals are selectively or differentially exposed to delinquent companions, Sutherland (1947:7) argued, they are likely to acquire "an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law" and consequently engage in delinquent conduct. Sutherland's theory was subsequently recast in modern social learning terms (Burgess and Akers 1966) and enjoys considerable empirical support today (Akers 1994). Although Sutherland did not limit his theory to peer influence, tests of the theory have generally concentrated on peers, and association with delinquent peers remains the single strongest predictor of delinquent behavior known today (Empey and Stafford 1991; Warr 1993).

Several studies suggest that differential association may be a critical factor in explaining gender differences in delinquency. Using self-report data from a sample of Iowa teenagers, Simons et al. (1980) found that males and females experienced substantially different levels of exposure to delinquent peer attitudes in their everyday lives. "Males were much more likely than females to have friends who were supportive of delinquent behavior" (p. 51). But although these investigators were able to establish sex-linked differences in exposure to delinquent friends, they did not isolate and quantify the effect of such exposure on sex-specific rates of delinquency.

Other studies illustrate the variant approach described earlier. Johnson (1979) tested an integrated model of delinquency containing family, school, socioeconomic, deterrence, and peer variables. Among both sexes, the effect of delinquent associates outweighed all other variables in the model. But the effect of delinquent peers on self-reported delinquency was substantially stronger among males than females. Smith and Paternoster (1987) examined the ability of strain theory, differential association, control theory, and deterrence theory to explain sex differences in adolescent marijuana use. They, too, found that association with deviant peers had the largest effect on marijuana use among both males and females, but the effect was once again stronger for males than females. Despite the strikingly similar findings of these two studies, not all investigators have obtained similar results (see Smith and Paternoster 1987). Most, however, have failed to employ appropriate interaction terms or tests of significance in making gender comparisons, or have used widely divergent measures of peer influence.

This article draws on Sutherland's theory of differential association with a view to explaining gender differences in delinquency. Following the logic of Sutherland's theory, the analysis is organized around three general questions: Do male and female adolescents differ in their exposure to peers, and, more specifically, in their exposure to delinquent peers? Are males and females who are exposed to delinquent peers differentially affected by those peers? And if males and females are affected differently by exposure to delinquent peers, why is this true?

The third question is the most fundamental, and it requires elaboration. Some analysts have speculated that same-sex friendships among male and female adolescents are qualitatively different, with male culture placing greater emphasis on daring or risk-taking (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Pugh 1986; Johnson 1979). Without denying that possibility, the present analysis stems from a rather different premise. That is, we suspect that females ordinarily possess something that acts as a barrier to inhibit or block the influence of delinquent peers.

What might that barrier be? One possible answer lies with moral evaluations of conduct. The notion that individuals refrain from conduct because they morally disapprove of it has a long history in criminology, but it appears in a wide variety of theoretical guises (e.g., subcultural theory, religiosity and crime, deterrence theory), and research on the issue, although promising, is not systematic, comparable, or cumulative (Burkett and Ward 1993; Erickson, Gibbs, and Jensen 1977; Grasmick and Bursik 1990; Hindelang 1974; Tittle 1980; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985).

Nevertheless, if moral evaluations do affect conduct, how does that bear on gender differences in offending? Gilligan (1982) has suggested that females are socialized in such a way that they are more constrained by moral evaluations of behavior than are males. In her influential book, Gilligan argued that moral development in females is guided by the primacy of human relationships and by an overriding obligation to care for and to avoid harming others. This other-oriented quality of female moral development, she added, contrasts sharply with the moral socialization of males. If the moral imperative of women is "an injunction to care" (p. 100), Gilligan argued, men tend to construe morality in more utilitarian terms, that is, as a set of mutually acknowledged rights that protect them from *interference* from others. Thus, the driving principle of male morality is not responsibility to others, but the freedom to pursue self-interest. These gender-linked differences in socialization described by Gilligan imply that females will be more reluctant than males to engage in conduct that harms others, including criminal conduct.

Gilligan did not present direct empirical evidence for her thesis, but research on moral development in children and adolescents provides support for her argument. Although males and females evidently do not differ in the complexity of moral reasoning (Cohn 1991; Walker 1984), there appear to be qualitative differences in such reasoning. In longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of children and adolescents, Eisenberg, Fabes, and Shea (1989) have observed that from the age of about 11 or 12, girls "are more other-oriented in their prosocial moral reasoning than are boys" (p. 139). Similarly, Gibbs, Arnold, and Burkhart (1984) report that moral judgments among females rely on a greater degree of "empathic role-taking" (p. 1042), and Bebeau and Brabek (1989) found that females display a higher degree of "ethical sensitivity" to others than do males.

If moral evaluations of conduct do function as a barrier to peer influence, and if that barrier is higher for females than for males, then we ought to observe a strong difference in the effect of delinquent peers on males and females, a difference that is itself conditioned by sex-linked differences in moral evaluations. Putting the matter more formally, we would expect to find a significant three-way interaction between gender, moral evaluations, and the number of

delinquent friends an adolescent has. The model to be estimated can thus be stated as

$$\hat{D} = a + b_1 S + b_2 F + b_3 M + b_4 (S \times F) + b_5 (S \times M) + b_6 (F \times M) + b_7 (S \times F \times M),$$

where D = the incidence of delinquent behavior, S = sex, F = number of delinquent friends, and M = moral evaluations. The model permits the effect of delinquent peers to vary according to both gender and moral evaluations and thereby provides a direct test of the hypothesis that moral evaluations have a greater restraining effect on peer influence among females than among males. We turn now to a discussion of the data and measures used to estimate the model.

DATA AND MEASURES

Data for this study come from the National Youth Survey (NYS), a continuing longitudinal study of delinquent behavior among a national probability sample of 1,725 persons aged 11 to 17 in 1976. The NYS sample was obtained through a multistage probability sampling of households in the continental United States (Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton 1985). In each wave of the study, respondents were asked a series of questions about events and behavior that occurred during the preceding year. Although the first wave of interviews was conducted in 1976, data for the present analysis come from Wave III of the NYS (N = 1,626), which captured respondents during the period of adolescence (ages 13 to 19).

The NYS collects self-report data on a wide range of delinquent behaviors, using the general question, "How many times in the last year have you [act]?" In addition to their own behavior, respondents are asked questions about the friends who they "ran around with," friends who they are asked to identify by name and who they are requested to think of whenever answering questions about peers. For our purposes, the crucial variable of interest is the number of delinquent friends reported by the respondent, measured by the question, "Think of your friends. During the last year how many of them have [act]?" (1 = *none of them*, 2 = *very few of them*, 3 = *some of them*, 4 = *most of them*, 5 = *all of them*). Respondents' moral evaluations of each act were measured by responses to the following question: "How wrong do you think it is for someone your age to [act]?" (1 = *not wrong at all*, 2 = *a little bit wrong*, 3 = *wrong*, 4 = *very wrong*).

Although the NYS collects data on a large number of offenses, questions concerning peer delinquency, respondents' delinquency, and moral

TABLE 1: Percentage of Males and Females Reporting Delinquent Acts

	Males		Females			
Offense	*Percentage*	N	*Percentage*	N	*Ratio*	*Difference*
Alcohol use	69.2	481	61.3	450	1.1	7.9*
Burglary	4.2	863	.5	763	8.4	3.7***
Cheating	42.6	863	40.8	763	1.0	1.8
Destroying property	32.8	862	14.4	763	2.3	18.4***
Drunkenness	31.9	862	20.6	763	1.5	11.3***
Hitting someone	48.3	863	21.4	763	2.3	26.9***
Marijuana use	38.4	862	33.0	763	1.2	5.4*
Prescription drug use	10.1	863	6.2	763	1.6	3.9**
Selling hard drugs	2.4	863	.5	763	4.8	1.9**
Theft over $50	4.2	863	.8	762	5.3	3.4***
Theft under $5	18.9	862	9.6	762	2.0	9.3***

*$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$ (two-tailed tests).

evaluations are asked about different sets of offenses, sets that only partially overlap. Precisely comparable data on all three of these dimensions are available for only a small number of offenses. Three of these—marijuana use, alcohol use, and cheating—exhibit only minimal sex differences (the smallest, in fact, of any offenses measured in the NYS). Another three—burglary, grand theft, and selling hard drugs—are among the most highly sex-differentiated offenses, but they are so rare among females that virtually none of the females in the sample committed the offenses. Fortunately, there is one offense—theft of property worth less than $5—that exhibits a large sex difference (a male/female ratio of 2.0) and is sufficiently common among both sexes to afford statistical analysis. The analysis will therefore concentrate on this offense, but we have taken care to include data on other offenses in the analysis whenever possible.

FINDINGS

The first aim of the analysis is to describe sex differences in delinquent behavior using data from the NYS. Table 1 reports the percentage of males and females who committed each of 11 NYS offenses during the year preceding the survey.[1] The patterns evident in these data are consistent with those reported by previous investigators (e.g., Wilson and Herrnstein 1985). Gender differences in delinquency are quite pervasive, but they vary a good deal from one offense to the next. The largest differences are found among the most serious offenses,

TABLE 2: Mean Time Spent with Friends by Sex

	Males		Females		
Time	*Mean*	N	*Mean*	N	t
Weekday afternoons[a]	2.76	788	2.50	722	3.04**
Weekday evenings[b]	2.42	788	2.03	722	4.69***
Weekends[c]	3.64	786	3.64	720	.02

a. "On the average, how many afternoons during the school week, from the end of school or work to dinner, have you spent with your friends?" (0-5).
b. "On the average, how many evenings during the school week, from dinnertime to bedtime, have you spent with your friends?" (0-5).
c. "On the weekends, how much time have you generally spent with your friends?" (1 = *very little*, 2 = *not too much*, 3 = *some*, 4 = *quite a bit*, 5 = *a great deal*).
**$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$ (two-tailed tests).

where the ratio of male to female offenders exceeds 5:1 (grand theft) and even 8:1 (burglary). By contrast, drug offenses (alcohol and marijuana use), as noted earlier, exhibit little or no sex difference in prevalence, as does cheating on school tests. These patterns are evident regardless of whether one considers the prevalence of offenders (as in Table 1) or the mean incidence of offending (not shown).

The next three tables all bear on the first research question: Are males and females differentially exposed to delinquent peers? The data presented in Table 2 show that, compared to females, males spend more time on average with their friends (delinquent or not) on weekday afternoons and evenings, but not on weekends. The differences are not large, however, amounting to less than half an afternoon or evening per week. A much more stark contrast between the sexes, however, is evident in Table 3. That table displays the percentage of male and female respondents who reported that at least some of their friends had committed each offense. The differences are once again minimal for cheating and for drug and alcohol use. Among the remaining offenses, however, the proportion of males who have delinquent friends exceeds that of females by factors of approximately 1.5 to 2.5, or by differences in the range of about 10 to 25 percent. The most general or inclusive item, simply "break the law," has a male/female ratio of roughly 2:1.

Males, it seems, are substantially more likely than females to be exposed to delinquent friends. Table 4 provides evidence on the effect of this differential exposure. The table presents three OLS (ordinary least-squared) regression models for petty theft, with self-reported incidence the dependent variable in each model.[2] The first model incorporates a dummy variable representing respondent's sex (1 = male, 0 = female), and the second model includes both sex and the proportion of delinquent friends reported by the respondent. If sex

TABLE 3: Percentage of Males and Females with Delinquent Peers

	Males		Females			
Offense	*Percentage*	N	*Percentage*	N	*Ratio*	*Difference*
Alcohol use	77.7	860	72.7	759	1.1	5.0*
Burglary	18.5	856	7.3	757	2.5	11.2***
Cheating	85.2	838	79.9	746	1.1	5.3**
Destroying property	52.3	857	27.3	757	1.9	25.0***
Drunkenness	76.2	858	72.3	759	1.1	3.9
Give or sell alcohol	39.3	854	28.5	758	1.4	10.8***
Hitting someone	54.5	857	32.0	757	1.7	22.5***
Marijuana use	58.5	857	54.7	759	1.1	3.8
Prescription drug use	22.8	855	15.6	754	1.5	7.2***
Selling hard drugs	12.2	860	8.6	758	1.4	3.6*
Suggest you break the law	38.0	860	20.4	759	1.9	17.6***
Theft over $50	14.9	854	7.9	758	1.9	7.0***
Theft under $5	57.4	848	37.8	751	1.5	19.6***

*$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$ (two-tailed tests).

differences in delinquency are in fact attributable to differential exposure to delinquent friends, then the coefficient for sex in model 1, which is highly significant, should be substantially reduced or eliminated in model 2.

A comparison of models 1 and 2 in Table 4 shows that the coefficient for sex does indeed diminish once delinquent friends is held constant. In fact, the coefficient drops to less than one half of its initial value. Despite this reduction, however, the coefficient for sex remains statistically significant. Differential exposure to delinquent peers, therefore, does seem to partially account for sex differences in delinquency, but it is clearly not a sufficient explanation.

Now recall the second major question: Are males and females *affected* differently by delinquent friends? Evidence bearing on that question is presented in model 3 of Table 4. In that model, an interaction term (sex × delinquent friends) has been included to allow for differences in slopes for males and females. Examination of the model shows that the interaction term is positive and highly significant, indicating that the effect of delinquent peers is in fact greater among males than among females.

The evidence from Table 4 points to an initial conclusion: males are more strongly affected by delinquent friends than are females. Why is this true? As we postulated earlier, the answer may lie in the constraining effect of moral evaluations. Before turning to a direct test of that hypothesis, let us first consider some preliminary evidence. Table 5 shows the percentage of male and female respondents who rated each offense in the NYS as "very wrong." The

TABLE 4: OLS Coefficients for the Regression of Self-Reported Theft on Sex and Delinquent Peers

	Sex	*Delinquent Peers*	*Sex* × DP	*Intercept*	R^2	N
Model 1	.275***			.206***	.02	1,624
	(.051)			(.037)		
Model 2	.117*	.522***		−.619***	.23	1,598
	(.047)	(.025)		(.051)		
Model 3	−.189	.419***	.178***	−.455***	.24	1,598
	(.097)	(.038)	(.050)	(.069)		

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. OLS = ordinary least squares.
*$p \leq .05$, ***$p \leq .001$ (two-tailed tests).

TABLE 5: Percentage of Males and Females Who Perceive Each Act as "Very Wrong"

	Males		Females			
Offense	*Percentage*	N	*Percentage*	N	*Ratio*	*Difference*
Alcohol use	22.4	863	28.3	763	.8	−5.9**
Burglary	58.9	861	76.9	763	.8	−18.0***
Cheating	25.1	862	30.8	763	.8	−5.7**
Destroying property	56.1	863	73.0	763	.8	−16.9***
Drunkenness	19.1	863	25.7	763	.7	−6.6**
Giving or selling alcohol	40.5	861	56.0	763	.7	−15.5***
Hitting someone	33.5	863	50.6	763	.7	−17.1***
Marijuana use	38.4	863	45.5	763	.8	−7.1**
Prescription drug use	55.5	863	70.1	763	.8	−14.6***
Selling hard drugs	70.6	863	80.3	763	.9	−9.7***
Theft over $50	63.4	863	78.6	763	.8	−15.2***
Theft under $5	30.9	863	41.7	763	.7	−10.8***

**$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$ (two-tailed tests).

difference between the sexes in these ratings is statistically significant in every case, with females more apt than males to rate the offenses as very wrong. But consistent though these differences may be, models 1 and 2 in Table 6 show that sex differences in moral evaluations are not in themselves sufficient to explain sex differences in delinquency. The sex effect in model 1 remains strong and statistically significant even after controlling for differences in moral evaluations of the offense (model 2).

Much more critical is the role of moral evaluations in regulating or conditioning the effect of delinquent peers. Model 3 in Table 6 includes an

TABLE 6: OLS Coefficients for the Regression of Self-Reported Theft on Sex, Delinquent Peers, Moral Evaluations, and All Interactions

	Sex	*DP*	*ME*	*DP*	*Sex* × *ME*	*Sex* × *ME*	*DP* × *DP* × *ME*	*Sex* × *Intercept*	R^2	N
Model 1	.275***							.206***	.02	1,624
	(.051)							(.037)		
Model 2	.191***		−.469***					1.758***	.11	1,624
	(.049)		(.035)					(.123)		
Model 3		1.282***	.295***			−.277***		−1.352***	.29	1,598
		(.094)	(.068)			(.031)		(.229)		
Model 4	.434	1.184***	.487***	−.196	−.257	−.396***	.159*	−1.419***	.29	1,598
	(.346)	(.118)	(.106)	(.150)	(.145)	(.054)	(.070)	(.254)		

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. DP = delinquent peers; ME = moral evaluations.
*$p \leq .05$, ***$p \leq .001$ (two-tailed tests).

interaction between moral evaluations and delinquent friends, and Figure 1 shows a plot of the model. Inspection of model 3 shows that the interaction term is highly significant, and a close look at the plot in Figure 1 reveals that the effect of delinquent peers diminishes very rapidly as moral disapproval increases. Moral evaluations, then, do appear to mitigate or counteract the influence of delinquent peers.

Having laid the necessary foundation, we may now turn to the central hypothesis of this study: Do moral evaluations of conduct provide a stronger barrier to peer influence among females than among males? As noted earlier, the hypothesis implies a three-way interaction between sex, moral evaluations, and delinquent peers. Because such higher order interactions spread the data rather thinly (2 sexes × 5 categories of peers × 4 levels of moral evaluation), the moral evaluation scale was collapsed to produce a scale scored as 1 = *not wrong at all/a little bit wrong*, 2 = *wrong*, and 3 = *very wrong*. The fitted three-way interaction model (including the implied lower order terms) is given as model 4 in Table 6.

It is immediately evident from the table that the three-way interaction term is statistically significant. Because three-way interactions are difficult to visualize, Figure 2 displays a plot of model 4. The plot contains six regression lines, three for males who report strong, moderate, and little or no disapproval of the offense, and three for females in those same categories. Looking at the regression lines, observe that several features stand out. Among both males and females, moral evaluations act to regulate or restrain the effect of delinquent peers (compare the regression lines within each sex). But the impact of those evaluations is different for the two sexes. Among males and females who show little or no disapproval of the act (the uppermost two lines), the effect of delinquent peers is very similar; both groups exhibit strong sensitivity to peers. As

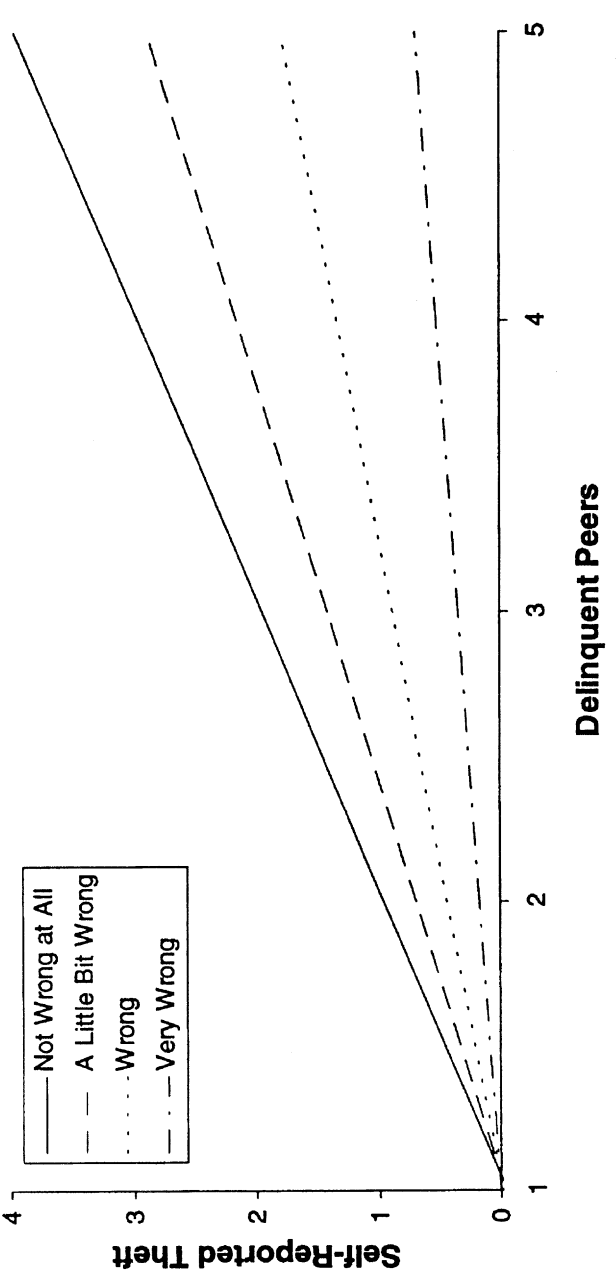

Figure 1: Plotted Equation from Table 6 (Model 3)

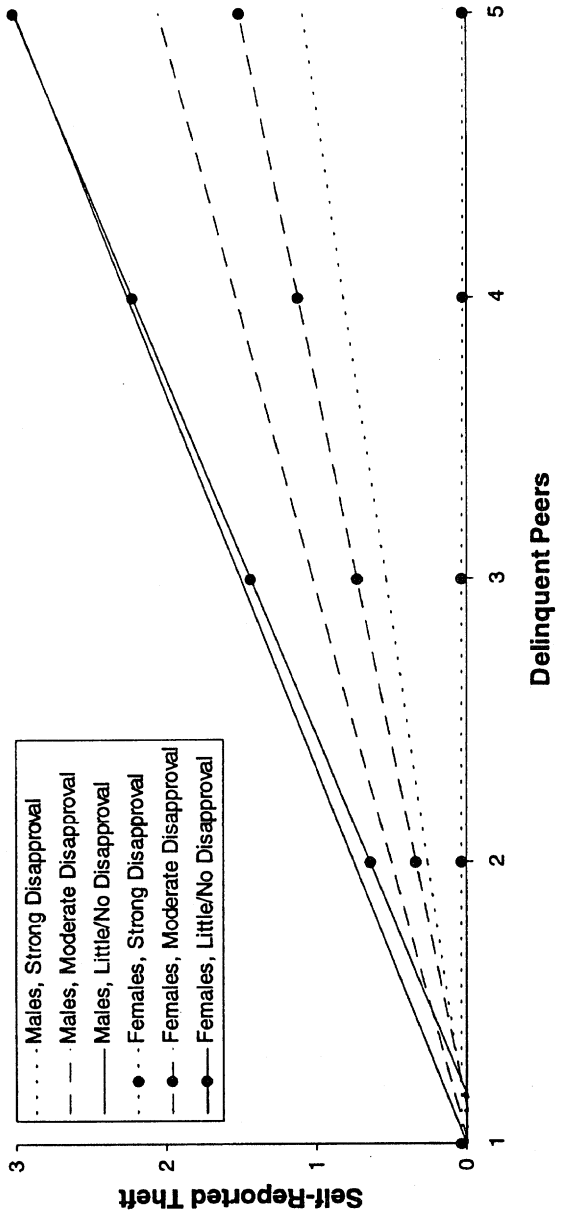

Figure 2: Plotted Equation from Table 6 (Model 4)

moral disapproval increases, however, males and females diverge from one another, with females showing less susceptibility than males to peer influence. In fact, among females who strongly disapprove of the offense (the lowermost line), the effect of delinquent friends is effectively *eliminated* (i.e., the slope is not significantly different from zero), meaning that females in this category are essentially immune to peer influence. But the same cannot be said of males, for whom peers continue to have a statistically significant effect even when moral disapproval is strong.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study point to several tentative conclusions. Males and females differ in exposure to delinquent peers, with males substantially more likely than females to have delinquent friends. This differential exposure contributes to sex differences in delinquency, but it is not the sole source of those differences. Quite aside from differences in exposure to peers, males appear to be more strongly affected by delinquent peers than are females. This fact, in turn, evidently reflects the greater effect of moral evaluations in counteracting peer influence among females. Although the number of delinquent peers an adolescent has is the strongest known predictor of delinquent behavior, the moral judgments of females are apparently sufficient to reduce and even eliminate the impact of delinquent peers.

Why are moral evaluations of behavior so effective in combating peer influence among females? Given the results of our analysis, it would be difficult to reject the argument by Gilligan and others that the primary socialization of women instills moral values that strongly discourage behavior that hurts or harms others. To be sure, our analysis is not a direct test of Gilligan's thesis, if only because it focused on the intensity rather than the quality of moral evaluations and did not examine the socialization process itself. Nevertheless, the results of this analysis clearly attest to the power of moral evaluations among females, and they demonstrate that the consequence of those evaluations is to reduce the frequency of antisocial behavior among females.

Our analysis also suggests that it is fruitless to construct utterly different theories to explain the delinquency of males and females. As we have seen, both males and females are affected—though to different degrees—by a common factor: association with delinquent friends. What differs between the sexes, it seems, are not the *generative* factors that give rise to delinquency, but rather the *inhibitory* factors that prevent or counteract it (see Gibbs 1975). Although we have focused on peer influence in this analysis, it may be the case that, among females, moral evaluations counteract a variety of criminogenic

conditions, from economic deprivation to dysfunctional family organization. If the present analysis is any indicator, there may be few, if any, generative factors that can overcome the moral constraints of most females. Viewed that way, the enormous sex ratios in offending observed in these and other data seem less startling or inexplicable.

There is at least one factor, however, that may neutralize the moral evaluations of females, one that bears directly on the phenomenon of peer influence. Several studies conducted during the past two decades suggest that, for some females, delinquency is a consequence of exposure to delinquent males. Giordano (1978), for example, reported that girls who spend time in mixed-sex groups are significantly more likely to engage in delinquency than are girls who participate in same-sex groups. Warr (1996) found that females were much more likely than males to report that the instigator in their delinquent group was of the opposite sex. Stattin and Magnusson (1990) discovered that elevated levels of delinquency among females who experience early menarche is attributable to their tendency to associate with older males, and Caspi et al. (1993) observed that New Zealand girls in all-female schools were significantly less likely to engage in delinquency than were girls in mixed-sex schools.

Despite this evidence, it remains unclear just how often males contribute to the delinquency of females, and it is equally unclear whether the relations that link male and female offenders are ordinarily romantic in nature or similar to those of same-sex offenders. Nevertheless, there remains the intriguing possibility that relations with males are one of the few generative factors capable of overcoming the strong moral objections that females commonly hold toward illegal behavior.

One final theoretical issue deserves attention. Although the conceptualization of delinquency employed here borrows heavily from Sutherland's theory of differential association, it nonetheless differs from that theory in at least one respect. According to Sutherland's theory, delinquency is a consequence of attitudes or "definitions" acquired from others, attitudes that ostensibly include moral evaluations of behavior. Individuals, in short, become delinquent by adopting the attitudes of significant others. Tests of differential association, however, consistently indicate that attitude transference among peers is not the primary mechanism by which delinquency is transmitted (Warr and Stafford 1991), implying that other, more direct, mechanisms of social learning (e.g., imitation, direct and vicarious reinforcement) may be at work (see Akers 1985). Our findings, too, cast doubt on the notion of attitude transference that undergirds Sutherland's theory. It appears from our analysis that the moral evaluations of adolescents—especially females—are frequently a

barrier that restrains peer influence rather than a conduit that transmits it. If that interpretation is correct, then Sutherland's theory may require modification.

NOTES

1. The figures for "destroying property" in Table 1 are a composite of several items (destroying property belonging to parents, other family members, a school, or other persons). The figures for "hitting someone" are a composite of three items (hitting a teacher, parent, or student). In both cases, respondents were coded as offenders if they reported committing any of the constituent offenses. The NYS collects self-report data on more than fifty offenses, including detailed information on drug use (hallucinogens, heroin, cocaine, barbiturates, amphetamines, etc.). However, only those offenses for which there were identical or analogous data on other relevant variables (i.e., peer delinquency and moral evaluations) are included in Table 1.

2. The dependent variable is coded as a simple integer count truncated at 5+ to eliminate extreme scores. Only 2.1 percent of the cases had scores exceeding 5.

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