



## 7 Social Learning Theory

Do Individuals Learn to Be Delinquent from Others?

**Social learning theory** says that juveniles learn to engage in delinquency from others. These others reinforce juveniles for delinquency, teach them beliefs that are favorable to delinquency, and expose them to delinquent models. As a consequence, the juveniles come to view delinquency as something that is desirable or at least justifiable in certain situations.

Consider the words of the following gang member, describing how he first became attracted to gang life:

“[In elementary school] I was really into my studies, and I didn’t get involved in any stuff that the gang was doing. But then I began to see that they had the girls, that people listened to them, and stuff like that. I never expected to become one of them... [but] I kind of admired what they stood for and the way people used to like them.” (Padilla, 1992:60–90)

Consistent with social learning theory, this quote suggests that exposure to delinquent peers eventually led the boy to view gang life as something desirable or rewarding. Presumably, this view contributed to the boy’s future gang involvement. He went on to describe how he was later recruited into a gang:

“[O]ne day I met this [older] guy...he had been in the gang all his life....After a while he started teaching me the tricks, how to burn people, how to deal, how to do this, and I made him lots of money. He started turning me on to the gangs, the colors, the hand signals, and everything—how it was done, how you shook someone’s hand when you were on the street, and who to eye for.” (Padilla, 1992: 60–90)

The primary version of social learning theory in criminology is that of Akers, and the description that follows draws heavily on his work (Akers, 1985, 1998; Akers and Jensen, 2003; Akers and Sellers, 2010; also see Bandura, 1973, 1986; Patterson et al., 1992). Akers’ theory, in turn, represents a reformulation and elaboration of Sutherland’s differential association theory (see Matsueda, 1988; Sutherland et al., 1992).

Edwin H. Sutherland was a pioneer in the field of criminology. The influence of his “differential association” theory of crime, presented in its final form in 1947, is still felt today. In his theory, Sutherland emphasized the role of socialization in the development of criminal behavior as opposed to mental defects or genetic influences. Specifically, he argued that criminal behavior is learned through communication and interaction with others. Further, Sutherland asserted that offenders learn the techniques of committing crime as well as the attitudes and rationalizations that promote criminality. He did not specify exactly how such things are learned, however.

Drawing on subsequent developments in behavioral psychology, Burgess and Akers (1966) elaborated on differential association theory by identifying the specific mechanisms by which individuals learn criminal and delinquent behavior. For example, they argued that much learning takes place via “operant conditioning”: individuals tend to repeat behaviors that are rewarded and avoid behaviors that are punished. This elaborated version of differential association theory is known as Akers’ social learning theory and is currently a leading theory of crime and delinquency. In this chapter, we describe the theory in some detail, along with the various learning mechanisms that Akers and his colleagues helped to identify.

## JUVENILES LEARN TO ENGAGE IN DELINQUENCY FROM OTHERS

According to social learning theory, juveniles learn to engage in delinquent behavior in the same way they learn to engage in conforming behavior: through association with or exposure to others. Primary or intimate groups like the family and peer group have an especially large impact on what juveniles learn. This is not surprising, since juveniles usually spend a lot of time with family members and friends and are quite close to them. Juveniles also learn how to behave from people in their school, religious community, neighborhood, and other settings. Further, juveniles do not have to be in direct contact with others to learn from them; for example, they may learn from observing people in the media or interacting with others over the Internet.

**Whether juveniles learn to conform or engage in delinquency depends primarily on the nature of the people they associate with.** If they associate with others who engage in delinquency/crime and hold beliefs favorable to delinquency, they are likely to learn to engage in delinquency. In this area, data indicate that juveniles are much more likely to engage in delinquency if intimate others like their friends, parents, and siblings engage in delinquency/crime. In fact, having delinquent friends is perhaps the strongest predictor of subsequent delinquency, other than prior delinquency (see Chapter 16 for a fuller discussion).<sup>1</sup>

The fact that associating with delinquent others increases the likelihood of delinquency provides strong support for social learning theory, but it does not prove that the theory is correct. Associating with delinquent others may increase delinquency for reasons related to strain or other theories (see Agnew, 1995a; Warr, 2002). For example, juveniles who associate with delinquent peers may be more likely to engage in delinquency because they are higher in strain; delinquent peers are more likely to abuse one another and get into conflicts with outsiders (see Colvin, 2000:72–81; Chapter 16). In order to prove that social learning theory is correct, we must demonstrate that juveniles **learn** to engage in delinquency from delinquent others.

**Much of social learning theory involves a description of the mechanisms by which juveniles learn to engage in delinquency from others.** According to the theory, juveniles learn to engage in delinquency when others (1) differentially reinforce their delinquent behavior, (2) teach them beliefs favorable to delinquency, and (3) provide delinquent models for them to imitate. We describe each of these learning mechanisms next and examine what the research says about their role in fostering delinquency.

## THE DIFFERENTIAL REINFORCEMENT OF DELINQUENCY

Other individuals may teach us to engage in delinquency through the reinforcements and punishments they provide for our behavior. **We are more likely to engage in delinquency when others have reinforced our delinquency in the past and we anticipate that they will continue to reinforce our delinquency.** Let us illustrate this point with a simple example. When Jody Miller (2001) asked certain of the female gang members in her study why they sometimes sell drugs, they told her that they do it for the money (a major reinforcer). In the words of one gang member:

“They just sell it [drugs] to get them some money ‘cause they need some. Whatever they need they’ll make the money and then probably won’t sell drugs no more until they need something else. And then they’ll just go buy them some drugs and sell it and that’s it.” (Miller, 2001:145)

So these gang members sell drugs because doing so has been reinforced in the past with money and they anticipate that drug selling will continue to be reinforced with money. Social learning theory, however, has taken this simple idea—that we are more likely to engage in delinquency when it is rewarded or reinforced—and elaborated on it in several important ways.

### **The Frequency, Amount, and Relative Probability of Reinforcement**

Social learning theory argues that reinforcement is not an all-or-nothing matter. In particular, if we want to best predict delinquency, we need to examine the *frequency* with which it is reinforced, the *amount* of reinforcement received or expected, and the *relative probability of reinforcement*. Delinquent behavior is more likely to occur when it (1) is frequently reinforced and infrequently punished; (2) results or is expected to result in large amounts of reinforcement (e.g., a lot of money, social approval, or pleasure) and little punishment; and (3) is more likely to be reinforced than alternative behaviors.

These three factors—the frequency, amount, and relative probability of reinforcement/punishment—are easy to understand if you think of a concrete example. Let’s begin with the frequency of reinforcement and punishment. This simply means that juveniles are more likely to commit a delinquent act like fighting if they are frequently reinforced and seldom punished for fighting. Juveniles who win most of their fights and receive praise from their friends are more likely to fight than juveniles who lose most of their fights and are ridiculed. We tend to repeat behaviors that are reinforced and avoid those that are punished. As for the amount of reinforcement and punishment, juveniles who receive or expect to receive a lot of reinforcement and little punishment for fighting are more likely to fight than juveniles who receive little reinforcement and much punishment. The relative probability of reinforcement refers to the likelihood that delinquent acts will be reinforced relative to other behaviors. For example, juveniles who get into conflicts with others might resolve these conflicts through fighting or through negotiation. They are more likely to choose fighting if fighting is more likely to result in reinforcement than negotiation. The term *differential reinforcement* means simply that different behaviors have different probabilities of being reinforced. We are more likely to engage in behaviors with the highest probabilities of reinforcement. I encourage you to think of additional examples involving the frequency, amount, and relative probability of reinforcement/punishment.

### **Positive and Negative Reinforcement**

Reinforcement may be positive or negative. In *positive reinforcement*, the behavior results in something good—some positive consequence. This consequence may be in the form of money, the pleasurable feelings associated with drug use, attention from parents, approval from friends, or an increase in social status. For example, suppose you shoplift a video game with your friends. Your friends congratulate you for the theft and you

spend the afternoon playing the game with them. The approval of your friends and the pleasure you get from playing the game function as positive reinforcers for your shoplifting. In *negative reinforcement*, a behavior results in the removal of something bad—a **punisher is removed or avoided**. For example, suppose your friends have been calling you a coward because you refuse to use drugs with them. You eventually take drugs with them, after which time they stop calling you a coward. Your drug use has been negatively reinforced.

## Punishment

Reinforcement increases the likelihood that a behavior will be repeated, and **punishment reduces the likelihood that a behavior will be repeated**. Like reinforcement, punishment may be either positive or negative. *Positive punishment* involves the **presentation of something bad**. For example, you engage in a delinquent act and your parents spank you or verbally reprimand you. *Negative punishment* involves the **removal of something good**. For example, your parents punish your delinquency by reducing your allowance or prohibiting you from watching your favorite TV show.

## The Sources of Reinforcement and Punishment

Our behavior is reinforced and punished primarily by family members, friends, teachers, neighborhood residents, and others, although family members and friends are the major sources of reinforcement and punishment for juveniles. The key role that **other people** play in reinforcing and punishing our behavior is the major reason that social learning theory is called “social learning” theory.

Social learning theory, however, also recognizes that individuals may engage in *self-reinforcement and punishment*. Individuals usually adopt or internalize standards for their behavior from others—parents, for example. They may then evaluate their own behavior using these standards, praising themselves when they meet these standards and criticizing themselves when they do not (see Akers, 1998: 72–75; Bandura, 1973:207–221, 1986:335–389).

Finally, social learning theory recognizes that some delinquent acts may be *intrinsically reinforcing or punishing*. Perhaps the best example is drug use; individuals sometimes experience a “high” or pleasurable feeling from drug use that is intrinsically reinforcing (or reinforcing in and of itself, independent of the reactions of others). There is also evidence that some individuals experience a range of delinquent acts as intrinsically reinforcing. This is said to be especially true of “sensation seekers,” who often receive a “rush” or “thrill” from the delinquent acts they commit. For example, P. Wood et al. (1997) asked a sample of prison inmates about “the types of feelings a person may get when committing different crimes,” and they found that many of the inmates said that such feelings included positive emotions like being “on a high or rush,” “pumped up,” “on top of the world,” and “happy/excited” (college undergraduates were much less likely than the inmates to list such positive emotions). These intrinsic reinforcers are sometimes referred to as **nonsocial** reinforcers, since it is assumed that they are not derived from others. It is still possible, however, that social factors—including the beliefs and attitudes that one learns from others—may influence the extent to which individuals experience delinquent acts as “intrinsically reinforcing” (see Box 7.1).

### Box 7.1 Hooked on Delinquency

Drawing on social learning theory, criminologist John D. Baldwin (1990) argues that some young people can “get hooked” on crime and delinquency, similar to the way that some individuals get hooked on drugs or alcohol. According to Baldwin, the activities of childhood typically lose the ability to arouse or excite individuals as they grow older. As children move into adolescence they usually seek out new experiences and new sources of sensory stimulation. Some adolescents may find delinquency to be a significant source of stimulation. For example, they may experience “sneaky thrills,” excitement, or an adrenalin rush during the commission of a delinquent act. As the following quotes suggest, some young people get hooked on these emotional rewards:

“It’s like an addiction [shoplifting]. I like the feeling I get when I might get caught. . . . It’s a buzz. An adrenaline buzz. I love that feeling. . . . [In the store] I’m really scared, but once I get away, I’m exhilarated.” (Cromwell et al., 1999:65)

“[Stealing a car is] a thrilling thing to me. To be able to get away with it. I mean, it would just give me goose pimples.” (Copes, 2003:324)

Other criminologists observe that such behaviors can activate a dopamine-dependent reward process in the brain, leading to an intrinsically pleasurable “neurophysiologic high” (Gove and Wilmoth, 1990). Of course, not all individuals find crime or delinquency to be rewarding or addictive. Some studies indicate that individuals with strong moral beliefs are less likely to experience delinquency as rewarding, perhaps because they end up feeling more shame or guilt than pleasure (in other words, these individuals exercise self-punishment; Brezina, 2009; Brezina and Piquero, 2003; also see Wood et al. 1997). But for some individuals, delinquency appears to be reinforced by the emotional (nonsocial) rewards they reap from such behavior.

#### Questions for discussion

1. Criminologists often describe delinquent behavior as “highly resistant to change.” Most anyone who has worked with troubled youth would probably agree with this description. How would social learning theorists explain this fact? Why is it so difficult to change the behavior of delinquent offenders?
2. If it is true that delinquency represents an important source of sensory stimulation for some individuals, what delinquency control or prevention strategies might follow from this observation? Can you think of any alternative, legal sources of stimulation that delinquent offenders could be encouraged to pursue? Can you think of any ways to reduce the reinforcement potential of delinquency?

In any event, social learning theory argues that the major sources of reinforcement and punishment for us are other people, especially intimate others like family members and friends.

#### Some Individuals Are More Likely to Be Reinforced for Delinquency than Others

According to social learning theory, some individuals are more likely to be reinforced for delinquency than others. **Sometimes this reinforcement is deliberate.** For example, the parents of aggressive children often deliberately encourage and reinforce aggressive behavior outside the home (E. Anderson, 1994; Bandura, 1973). E. Anderson (1994:86)

states that some families in inner-city communities tell their children that they should respond to provocations with aggression. Furthermore,

Many parents actually impose sanctions if a child is not sufficiently aggressive. For example, if a child loses a fight and comes home upset, the parent might respond, "Don't you come in here crying that somebody beat you up; you better get back out there and whup his ass. I didn't raise no punks! Get back out there and whup his ass. If you don't whup his ass, I'll whup your ass when you come home." Thus the child obtains reinforcement for being tough and showing nerve.

**At other times, the reinforcement for delinquency is less deliberate** (see Patterson et al., 1989; Patterson et al., 1992). Two common scenarios will illustrate what we mean. First, a mother repeatedly asks her son to clean up his room. The son ignores her. The mother eventually starts to yell at and threaten her son. The son yells back at his mother and then slams the door to his room and locks it. The mother, exasperated with her son's behavior, leaves. Without intending to do so, the mother has just negatively reinforced her son's belligerent behavior (the son has learned that, if he remains defiant, his "nagging" mother will eventually go away). Second, a father takes his daughter to the supermarket. The daughter says she wants a candy bar at the checkout line, but the father refuses. The daughter repeatedly asks for the candy bar, but the father continues to refuse. Eventually, the daughter is screaming for the candy bar and attempting to hit her father. Everyone is now watching and the embarrassed father gives his daughter the candy bar. The daughter stops screaming and eats the bar. In this instance, the father has positively reinforced his daughter's screaming and hitting by giving her a candy bar. Also, the daughter has negatively reinforced the father for giving in to her demand (she stopped screaming after she got the candy bar).

Not only are some individuals **more likely** to be reinforced for delinquency, but some are also **less likely to be reinforced for conventional behavior**. Many parents, for example, often ignore or otherwise fail to reinforce the conventional behavior of their children (Patterson et al., 1989; Patterson et al., 1992). For example, they ignore a child who brings home good grades or displays good manners at a social function, rather than praising him or her. **In some cases, conventional behaviors may even be punished**. For example, behaviors like studying or cooperating with teachers are punished in certain peer groups. And "inmates" in juvenile institutions often reinforce behaviors like fighting and punish behaviors like cooperating with the staff.

According to social learning theory, individuals in these types of environments—where delinquency is more likely to be reinforced and conventional behavior is more likely to be ignored or punished—should be higher in delinquency. Again, we tend to repeat behaviors that are reinforced and avoid those that are punished.

### **Intermittent Reinforcement**

Delinquents, of course, are rarely reinforced for every delinquent act they commit. Only some of their delinquent acts are reinforced. For example, it may be the case that only every third or fourth delinquent act, on average, results in significant reinforcement. This type of schedule is referred to as an *intermittent schedule of reinforcement* (as opposed to a *continuous schedule of reinforcement*, in which every act is reinforced). Such intermittent schedules, however, are usually sufficient to maintain a behavior. (For example, witness the behavior of slot machine players: They continue to pour money into the machine

even though they are only occasionally reinforced.) In fact, behaviors that are reinforced on an intermittent schedule are more difficult to eliminate than those reinforced on a continuous schedule. As Bandura states, "Behavior that has been reinforced on a thin unpredictable schedule is exceedingly difficult to extinguish because one's efforts are sustained by the belief that the actions will eventually prove successful" (1973:186).

### **Discriminative Stimuli**

Juveniles usually find that their delinquency is more likely to be reinforced in some situations than in others. For example, smoking marijuana with your friends may result in much reinforcement, including the approval and companionship of your friends. Smoking marijuana in front of your parents, however, may result in far more punishment than reinforcement. Individuals soon learn to distinguish between situations in which delinquency is likely to be reinforced and those in which it is likely to be punished. They do so based on *discriminative stimuli*, such as the presence of friends or parents. Juveniles, of course, are most likely to commit delinquent acts in situations where the probability of reinforcement is highest.

### **Research on the Reinforcement and Punishment of Delinquency**

Numerous studies have examined the effect of reinforcement and punishment on delinquency and aggression.<sup>2</sup> **Experimental studies** have focused on the effects of reinforcing or punishing aggressive behavior. For example, children might be rewarded with praise or with marbles for hitting a toy clown. These experiments usually indicate that such reinforcement or punishment has a strong effect on subsequent aggression (which might be measured by how often the child continues to hit the toy clown). Other experimental studies have examined the punishments applied by the police and juvenile justice agencies. As discussed in Chapters 20 and 23, such punishments reduce delinquency *when they are properly applied*. That is, such punishments are effective when individuals are properly monitored and consistently sanctioned for rule violations in an appropriate manner.

**Surveys and field studies** have examined the impact of reinforcement and punishment on various types of delinquency. As indicated in Chapters 14 and 15, these studies indicate that delinquency is less likely when parents and teachers closely monitor the behavior of juveniles and consistently punish them for rule violations. And as discussed in Chapter 23, surveys indicate that individuals are less likely to engage in delinquency when they believe that the likelihood of arrest is high and the likelihood of reinforcement is low (also see Matsueda et al., 2006). Akers and his colleagues conducted one of the best surveys examining the effects of reinforcements and punishments.<sup>3</sup> They asked a sample of adolescents about the punishments and reinforcements they received (or expected to receive) from their parents and friends for using drugs. They obtained a range of responses. Some adolescents, for example, reported that their friends encouraged their drug use, while others said that their friends threatened to turn them in to the authorities. They also asked adolescents about the effects that drugs had on them (or, in the case of nonusers, the effects that they expected drugs to have). The responses ranged from mostly good effects to mostly bad effects. Akers and his colleagues found that drug use was higher among those respondents who said they were usually reinforced and seldom punished for such use.



Studies, then, suggest that reinforcements and punishments have an important effect on behavior. Further, studies suggest that reinforcements and punishments help explain why associating with delinquent others—such as delinquent friends—increases the likelihood of delinquency. Delinquent others lead us into delinquency partly because they are more likely to reinforce our delinquency and less likely to punish it. It is important to note, however, that reinforcements and punishments do not fully explain the effect of delinquent friends on delinquency (see Akers, 1999; Krohn, 1999; McGloin, 2009). Delinquent friends increase the likelihood of delinquency for other reasons as well (more on this later).

## BELIEFS FAVORABLE TO DELINQUENCY

Other individuals may not only reinforce our delinquency, they may also teach us beliefs favorable to delinquency. Most individuals, of course, are taught that delinquency is bad or wrong. They eventually accept or “internalize” this belief, and they are less likely to engage in delinquency as a result. For example, suppose we were to ask you why you do not burglarize houses or rob people. You would probably reply that burglary and robbery are wrong. This value is what you have been taught all your life—by parents, friends, and others—and you have come to believe it. Some individuals, however, learn beliefs that are favorable to delinquency, and they are more likely to engage in delinquency as a result.

When we speak of “beliefs favorable to delinquency,” **we do not mean that some people believe that serious delinquent acts like burglary and robbery are generally good or acceptable.** Few people, including delinquents, generally approve of serious delinquent acts.<sup>4</sup> Surveys and interviews with juveniles suggest that **beliefs favoring delinquency fall into three categories**, and data suggest that **each type of belief increases the likelihood of delinquency.**<sup>5</sup>

### Generally Approve of Minor Delinquency

Some juveniles generally approve of certain minor forms of delinquency, such as sexual intercourse between consenting adolescents; certain forms of gambling, truancy, and curfew violations; and certain forms of alcohol and “soft” drug use. For example, a nationwide survey of high school seniors in 2008 found that 29.4 percent believed that using marijuana should be “entirely legal” (see the Monitoring the Future survey at <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org>). Presumably, these seniors generally approve of marijuana use. The federal government and other organizations are trying to counter this belief in the hopes of reducing drug use. In particular, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy sponsors a National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign (see <http://www.mediacampaign.org>). The campaign, working in partnership with other organizations, produces antidrug publications and places antidrug ads in a variety of media outlets, including TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. Recent ads try to reach young people using humor and sarcasm. For example, some of the ads describe career opportunities available to marijuana users, including professional “burrito taster,” “couch security guard,” and “remote control operator.” These ads conclude by saying, “Hey, not trying to be your mom, but there aren’t many [real] jobs out there for potheads.” Other ads target parents and warn about the negative effects of marijuana on children, including shortened attention span, poor judgment, and “impaired ability to communicate and relate to others” (<http://adgallery.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov>). (See Earleywine, 2002, for a

discussion of the research on the effects of marijuana use; see Orwin et al., 2004, for an evaluation of the effectiveness of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign.)

### Conditionally Approve of Delinquency, Including Some Serious Delinquency

Some juveniles conditionally approve of, justify, or excuse certain forms of delinquency, including some serious delinquent acts. These juveniles believe that delinquency is generally wrong but that some delinquent acts are excusable, justifiable, or even desirable in certain conditions. Many juveniles, for example, will state that violence is generally wrong but that it is justified if you have been insulted or provoked in some way. This idea is at the heart of E. Anderson's (1999) work on the "code of the street." Anderson argues that many individuals in disadvantaged communities are unable to achieve respect or status through conventional channels, such as getting a good education and then a prestigious job. Some of these individuals cope by trying to achieve respect by adopting a tough demeanor and responding to disrespectful treatment with violence. Many such individuals come to believe that violence is justified or even desirable when others treat them in a disrespectful manner. One recent study (Stewart and Simons, 2006) measured the extent to which individuals have adopted the code of the street by asking them to indicate how much they agreed with statements such as the following:

When someone disrespects you, it is important that you use physical force or aggression to teach him or her not to disrespect you.

If someone uses violence against you, it is important that you use violence against him or her to get even.

People do not respect a person who is afraid to fight physically for his or her rights.

Researchers have found that many juveniles agree with such statements and that such juveniles are more likely to engage in violence.<sup>6</sup>

Sykes and Matza (1957) argue that **the excuses and justifications employed by juveniles assume five basic forms**, each of which specifies the conditions in which crime is justified/excused:

1. **Denial of responsibility:** Delinquents claim that delinquency is excusable when a person is not responsible for his or her behavior (e.g., "I was drunk and didn't know what I was doing" or "My parents abused me and I can't help myself").

2. **Denial of injury:** Delinquents claim that delinquency is excusable when no one is harmed by it (e.g., "Insurance will cover the loss" or "I was just borrowing the car").

3. **Denial of the victim:** Delinquents claim that delinquency is justifiable when the victim deserves it (e.g., "The store owner is dishonest" or "She started it by insulting me"). This justification is closely related to the code of the street, which claims that violence is justified when others treat you in a disrespectful manner.

4. **Condemnation of the condemners:** Delinquents claim that delinquency is justifiable or excusable when those who condemn them also engage in questionable behavior (e.g., "All the cops and politicians are crooked" or "My parents drink and that's just as bad as using marijuana").

5. **Appeal to higher loyalties:** Delinquents claim that delinquency is justifiable when it serves some higher purpose ("I did it to help my friends" or "to protect my turf").

Other researchers have listed additional justifications and excuses.<sup>7</sup> Not all juveniles accept such justifications/excuses, but those who do are more likely to engage in delinquency.<sup>8</sup>

Many of us employ such justifications/excuses when we engage in deviant acts, minor or otherwise. Suppose, for example, you wake up one morning and do not feel like going to class. You may believe that cutting class is generally bad, but you tell yourself that in your case it is justified because you are not feeling well (a form of “denial of responsibility”). What other sorts of justifications/excuses do students employ for cutting class and for other forms of deviance like cheating on exams (see Agnew and Peters, 1985; McCabe, 1992)? Do these justifications/excuses fall into the categories described by Sykes and Matza, or are additional categories necessary?

### General Values Conducive to Delinquency

Some juveniles hold certain general values that are conducive to delinquency. These values do not explicitly approve of or justify delinquency, but they make delinquency appear a more attractive alternative than might otherwise be the case. Theorists have listed three general sets of values in this area. The first is **an attraction to “excitement,” “thrills,” or “kicks.”** The desire for excitement can be satisfied through legitimate as well as illegitimate means, but criminal activities hold a special appeal, since they have the added element of danger—of “experimenting with the forbidden.” Individuals who value excitement, then, are more likely to find crime an attractive alternative in a given situation. The second value involves **a disdain for hard work and a desire for quick, easy success.** Many delinquents, for example, are said to have “grandiose dreams of quick success.” Crime, of course, would have an obvious appeal to those who place a low value on hard work and a high value on money and pleasure. Finally, delinquents are said to place **a high value on toughness—on being “macho.”** Macho includes being physically strong, being able to defend yourself, not letting others “push you around,” and showing bravery in the face of physical threat. Such individuals will clearly view delinquent activities like fighting in a more favorable light than people without those values.

### Where Do the Beliefs Favorable to Delinquency Come From?

Juveniles learn the beliefs favorable to delinquency from others, including family members, friends, community residents, and the media. Data suggest that delinquent friends are an especially important source of such beliefs.<sup>9</sup> **Also, juveniles often come to adopt such beliefs after engaging in delinquency.**<sup>10</sup> In particular, juveniles who engage in delinquency—for whatever reason—often find it advantageous to adopt such beliefs. Such beliefs allow them to neutralize whatever guilt they might feel and to reduce the likelihood of punishment by others (which is why young children often try to convince their parents that the victims of their delinquency deserved it). Once such beliefs are adopted, however, they make further delinquency more likely, since they define delinquency in a favorable light or at least allow a juvenile to justify or excuse delinquent behavior.

These beliefs also help explain why associating with delinquent others, like delinquent friends, increases the likelihood of delinquency. Delinquent friends teach the juvenile beliefs favorable to delinquency, and these beliefs in turn increase the likelihood of delinquency. Beliefs, however, do not fully explain the effect of delinquent friends on delinquency (see Akers, 1999; Krohn, 1999). Also, it is important to note that factors other than association with delinquent peers influence the adoption of beliefs favorable

to delinquency. Most notably, the experience of certain strains appears to increase the likelihood that individuals will adopt such beliefs. As indicated, individuals who cannot achieve respect through legal channels may come to believe that violence is sometimes an acceptable method for achieving respect. Also, individuals in high-crime communities with poor police protection may come to believe that violence is justified if one is threatened or provoked (Brezina et al., 2004; Stewart and Simons, 2006). Further, researchers have argued that individuals who cannot achieve monetary success through legal channels may come to believe that theft, drug selling, and prostitution are sometimes justified (Agnew, 2006a; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960).

## THE IMITATION OF DELINQUENT MODELS

People's behavior is not only a function of their beliefs and the reinforcements and punishments they receive, but also of the behavior of those around them. In particular, people often imitate or model the behavior of others, especially when they have reason to believe that such imitation will result in reinforcement. It is perhaps for this reason that we are most likely to imitate a model when we "like or respect the model, see the model receive reinforcement, see the model give off signs of pleasure, or are in an environment where imitating the model's performance is reinforced" (Baldwin and Baldwin, 1981:187).

We should note that some people may inadvertently model delinquent or aggressive behavior for juveniles, just as they inadvertently reinforce delinquency/aggression. Parents, for example, may punish aggression in their children by spanking or beating them, or parents who smoke or drink may warn their children about the dangers of drug use. In each case, the parents are modeling the type of behavior they wish to stop in their child.<sup>11</sup>

We should also note that we do not have to be in direct contact with the models we imitate (D. Payne and Cornwell, 2007). In fact, a good deal of research has focused on the extent to which juveniles model the aggressive behavior of those in the media, especially television. The media often show glamorous characters engaging in frequent and extreme forms of violence. Such characters often receive much reinforcement and little punishment for their aggression. As Bandura (1973:101) states, "The modern child has witnessed innumerable stabbings, shootings, stompings, stranglings, muggings and less blatant but equally destructive forms of cruelty before [he/she] has reached kindergarten age." The negative impact of media violence is discussed in Chapter 17.

**Data from a wide range of studies demonstrate the importance of imitation** (see Akers, 1998; Akers and Sellers, 2010; Bandura, 1973, 1986). A large number of **experimental studies** have exposed individuals to aggressive models and then observed the impact of such exposure on the subjects' behavior. Such studies typically demonstrate an increase in aggression. Likewise, several **survey studies** have examined the effect of imitation on delinquency. One study, for example, examined the effect of imitation on "courtship violence" (the use of physical violence against dating partners; Sellers et al., 2003). Imitation was measured by asking respondents whether they had "actually seen any of the following role models use physical actions (hitting, slapping, etc.) against a spouse or partner: (1) father or stepfather, (2) mother or stepmother, (3) siblings, (4) other relatives, (5) friends, (6) actors on TV/movies, and (7) others" (Sellers et al., 2003:116). The researchers found that those who had witnessed more physical violence were more likely to engage in courtship violence themselves. Likewise, **field studies** reveal the importance of imitation.

Consider, for example, this quote from a juvenile delinquent in a public housing project in Boston:

“We were all brought up, all we seen is our older brothers and that gettin’ into trouble and goin’ to jail and all that shit. . . . We seen many fucking drugs, all the drinking. They fucking go; that group’s gone. The next group came. It’s our brothers that are a little older, y’know, twenty something years old. They started doing crime. And when you’re young, you look up to people. You have a person, everybody has a person they look up to. And he’s doing this, he’s drinking, he’s doing that, he’s doing drugs, he’s ripping off people. Y’know, he’s making good fucking money, and it looks like he’s doing good, y’know? So bang. Now it’s our turn. We’re here. What we gonna do when all we seen is fuckin’ drugs, alcohol, fighting, this and that, no one going to school?” (MacLeod, 1995:117)

Individuals who are exposed to delinquent models, then, are more likely to engage in delinquency themselves. Furthermore, imitation helps explain the effect of associating with delinquent others on delinquency, although it only explains part of the effect (see Akers, 1999; Krohn, 1999).

## SUMMARY

Social learning theory has much support. Data indicate that people in our environment have a strong impact on whether we become delinquent and that this impact is partly explained by the effect these people have on our beliefs regarding delinquency, the reinforcements and punishments we receive, and the models we are exposed to (see Figure 7.1). Social learning theory and control theory, described in Chapter 8, are the leading explanations of delinquency (Ellis and Walsh, 1999).