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## **Synthesizing Structure and Agency: A Developmental Framework of Bourdieu's Constructivist Structuralism Theory**

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### **Abstract**

Criminological theory is central to understanding correlates and causation of crime yet is often fragmented and incomplete. Several scholars have integrated micro and macro approaches to understanding crime in hopes of building a comprehensive theory, however, these theories are often too cumbersome for widespread acceptance. Illustrating the complex relationship between structure and agency as they pertain to offender motivation, this paper attempts to overcome theoretical limitations by proposing a developmental framework that draws from Bourdieu's theory of constructivist structuralism. This theoretical model suggests that delinquent subcultures and street culture participation can lead offenders to perceive themselves as destined to be criminal, thereby facilitating delinquent behavior. Implications for research and criminological theory are discussed.

*Keywords:* structure, agency, identity, offender motivation, Bourdieu

### **Introduction**

To better understand crime commission and its policy implications, many researchers have turned their attention to the process of offender decision making. Offender decision making studies are predominantly conducted with active property offenders (see e.g., Brezina, Tekin, & Topalli, 2009; Copes, 2003; Jacobs & Wright,

1999; Miller, 1998; Topalli, 2005; Wright & Decker, 1994). This area of research indicates that the decision to commit property offenses is primarily driven by a “life is party” attitude where motivation to engage in crime is a situational inducement fueled by the desperate need for quick cash in an attempt to maintain indulgent lifestyles and continue street culture participation. While this research addresses that offender decision making doesn’t occur in a vacuum, there has been debate between the relative importance of background and foreground factors (LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008:132).

In an attempt to merge these approaches within offender decision making, Groves and Lynch define causality as the “Holy Grail” of criminology (1990:360). Jacobs and Wright take this notion further by acknowledging research aimed at identifying the causal nature of crime. In doing so they argue that while background factors may predispose individuals to crime, they do not explain why all individuals with similar risk factors do not offend equivalently (1999:150). It is for this reason that many researchers find subjective foreground conditions of particular importance (Katz, 1988). Using this model to interpret offender decision making has allowed researchers to suggest that external and internal pressures influence risk taking both objectively and subjectively.

Despite current studies’ attempts to suggest the importance of considering both objective and subjective factors in the decision-making process, existing theoretical approaches limit researchers from doing so sufficiently. Most of the studies in this field are guided by various rational choice perspectives, which suggest that an assessment of the costs and benefits associated with crime guide the decision to engage in criminal behavior (Becker, 1963; Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Copes, 2003). This perspective was expanded to incorporate the notion that the cost-benefit analysis can be bounded by individuals’ lifestyles and/or backgrounds (Copes & Vieraitus, 2009; Shover & Honiker, 1992).

Rational choice theory has been met with criticism (Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Cullen, Pratt, Miceli, & Moon, 2002; Garland, 2001; Tittle, 1995), and although it is a dominant theory used to interpret offender decision making, it fails to highlight the interaction between agency and structure as they contribute to the individual practice of deciding to offend (Clark, 2011; Groves & Lynch, 1990; LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008:138). The limitations accompanying this theoretical lens is often acknowledged, however, little work has been done to introduce a theory that can account for the variety of influences that guide offenders in their decision-making process (Burnett & Maruna, 2004:400). Sampson refers to micro-macro theoretical integration as the “ultimate goal” of criminology (Wikstrom & Sampson, 2006:32), and thus remains an important question to be answered: is there a theoretical approach that can describe the complex relationship between structure and agency?

Finding an answer to this question is important for numerous reasons. First, knowledge of an additional framework is necessary to overcome the current theoretical limitations of offender decision making research. The bulk of this research suggests that offender motivation is based on the notion that criminals are

rational actors who make lucid decisions to offend. Although noting that rationality is often bounded, these studies fail to describe how such factors actually impact the decision to commit a crime. Second, supplementing this line of research with an alternative theoretical framework may aid in the discovery of additional motivations to offend—in particular, as they are perceived by the offender. Although previous qualitative research conceptualizes the nature of perception through the offenders' accounts of their criminal involvement, it fails to address perception in its entirety. This may have important policy implications for crime control.

In this paper I attempt to resolve the puzzle of causality as it pertains to offender motivation by introducing a reconceptualized version of the constructivist structuralism framework. In doing this I will (1) provide justification for the need of an additional theoretical approach in offender decision making research, (2) discuss the nature of constructivist structuralism theory, and (3) propose the reconceptualized model, explaining how it can be applied to the field of criminology. First, however, I review the literature in greater detail.

### **Background**

Much offender decision making research assumes that offender motivation is guided primarily by the pursuit of a party lifestyle and good times (see e.g., Akerstrom, 2003; Bennett & Wright, 1984; Fleisher, 1995; Jacobs, 2000; Jacobs & Wright, 1999; Shover, 1996; Shover & Honaker, 1992; Topalli, Wright, & Fornango, 2002; Wright & Decker, 2011). Predominantly utilizing rational choice perspectives, these studies contend that offenders enter a cycle of vicious self-indulgence and criminality where they perceive limited available alternatives to crime. While few researchers view offenders as purely rational calculators, several studies have implied that offenders are free to make decisions as they choose (Farrall & Bowling, 1999:258). More recently, researchers have instead interpreted offender decision-making as being orchestrated within a sociocultural context (Copes and Vieraitis, 2009:242). Termed bounded rationality, Shover and Honaker write:

...while utilities and risk assessment may be properties of individuals, they are also shaped by the social and personal contexts in which decisions are made. Whether their pursuit of life as party is interpreted theoretically as the product of structural strain, choice, or even happenstance is of limited importance...what is important is that their lifestyle places them in situations that can transform severely the utilities of prospective actions (1992:21-22).

This theoretical approach lends well to the idea that offender motivation is a consequence of pursuing unattainable, indulgent lifestyles, however, it fails to explain the complexity of the decision making process. Researchers are constantly trying to unpack the "black box" of offender decision making, and although they acknowledge that decision making doesn't occur in a vacuum (Jacobs & Wright, 1999:150), disentangling the differential impacts of external and internal factors has proven a methodological challenge (LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008:131).

## **Street Culture and Social Location**

Crime is often associated with urbanity (Morrison, 2014:237), and numerous studies have shown a positive relationship between urbanism and delinquency (D'Alessio & Stolzenberg, 2010:717). The residual relationship between cities and crime has been explored by theorists and policy makers alike, however explanations of the causal mechanisms are often fragmented, rendering crime policy largely ineffective (Braithwaite, 2013; Scheingold, 2010). Jacobs and Wright posit that street culture is an intervening variable between background and foreground conditions in the context of criminal motivation (1999:150). More generally, street culture has been interpreted as a dominant feature in the analysis of delinquent subcultures.

Early criminological research conducted by Merton (1938) and Shaw and McKay (1942) suggested that subcultural delinquency is the product of structurally induced strain (Akers & Sellers, 2013:175). Shaw and McKay supplemented this notion by arguing that delinquents and non-delinquents had few differences in regards to individual traits (Bohm & Vogel, 2010:95). These subcultures are described as being characterized by poverty, where social structure provokes pressures to engage in criminal behavior (Blau & Blau, 1982), which is reinforced by various opportunities to engage in illegitimate behavior (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960).

Throughout this literature, a common theme has emerged: the desire for economic success. Cohen (1955) emphasized the impact of economic inequality on crime, suggesting that delinquent subcultures are adopted by groups of low-class individuals as a response to conventional status deprivation. Cohen furthers his argument by suggesting that class-based status discontent fosters the formation of subcultural norms and values which support delinquency and become embraced (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2015:73). Following a similar approach, Miller (1958) contended that low-class subcultures assume a reality of their own where delinquent behavior is interpreted as a shared cultural value that is promoted and used to achieve acceptance within the collective whole (Akers & Sellers, 2013:179).

## **Delinquent Subcultures and Identity Formation**

Street culture participation goes beyond the need for monetary gain, though. Anderson posits that by culturally isolating people from conventional society, inner cities assume a "code of the streets" that celebrates delinquent behavior (1999:94). Anderson argues that although this code is embedded, individuals are not bound to their oppositional culture—their allegiance to the subculture is not exclusive, and though the code of the streets is a powerful determinant, it is not indicative of criminal behavior (Topalli, 2005:823-825). Anderson's explanation of street culture contends that delinquent behavior is reinforced by the code of the streets in individuals' pursuits of building street culture reputation (Silverman, 2004:761). Several studies support this notion, suggesting that maintaining a street culture

reputation demands the adoption of a delinquent persona (Emler & Reicher, 1995; Jacobs & Wright, 1999; Landolt, 2013).

Empirical literature investigating individuals' ability to embrace a delinquent persona without first engaging in criminal behavior is sparse. Symbolic interactionists allude to this by postulating that identity formation is a reflection of others' perceptions, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as one assumes the role of the other (Becker, 1963; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Merton, 1957). Hirschfield interprets this interaction as an, "...indeterminate relationship between social and self-perceptions" (2008:594). Studies involving youth contend that identity formation is likely manipulated by social networks where the individual espouses the norms and value system of the group (Boeck, Fleming & Kemshall, 2006:8-9). This explains why association with delinquent peers and/or family members could lead one to view themselves as criminal by proxy (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010:1472; Arditti, 2005).

The relationship between self-identity and delinquency is not reduced to perceived fatalism, however. In their examination of identity formation and crime, Heimer and Matsueda characterize delinquency as resulting largely from the process of role-taking, where motivations arise in the context of structural location and commitment to social roles (1994:382-384). In this view, choice is seen as a role-related behavior, reflecting the social-structural constraints on any given identity (Serpe, 1987:46). It is important to note that identities are not static and that identity formation is a constant process involving self-reflection, interaction, and evaluation (Akers & Sellers, 2013:139).

### **Existing Integrated Theories**

An overabundance of factors has been identified as being correlated with offending, suggesting that "everything" seems to matter, thus leaving criminological theories in constant disagreement, fragmented, and overwhelmed (Cullen, Wright, & Blevins, 2011:2; Farrington, 1992:75; Matza, 1964:23-24). Which correlates have causal efficacy? How do causal mechanisms interact? Answering such questions requires successful theoretical integration. Recently, several scholars have attempted to overcome these theoretical limitations by synthesizing the roles of structure and agency (see e.g. Bottoms & Wiles, 2002; Bunge, 2006; Cote, 1996; Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Giddens, 1984; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Groves & Lynch, 1990; Henry & Milovanovic, 1996; Sampson & Laub, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996; Thornberry, 1987; Wikstrom, Oberwittler, Treiber, & Hardie, 2011).

Some scholars suggest that in order to unravel the complex web of causality that researchers should focus primarily on the foreground of crime, rather than the background factors (e.g. Katz, 1988). This research emphasizes the importance of studying how offenders perceive their lives as criminals, and in doing so highlight the role of human agency (Burnett & Maruna, 2004:393). For example, Maruna's theory of redemption scripts suggests that recidivating offenders view

themselves as being “condemned” to a life of crime due to circumstances beyond their control (2001:73). Similarly, Laub and Sampson (2003) suggest that offenders possess a subjective reality in which motivation to offend is a situational outcome produced by the individual. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) also argue that human agency is central to desistance, not only to identify opportunities to change, but also to perceive, evaluate, and transform criminal identity.

Thornberry also postulates that there is developmental collaboration between the environment and the individual; however, his interactional theory differs from the aforementioned ones, suggesting that delinquency is the result of a dynamic and interactive process where reciprocal causal influences are embedded in social structure, roles, and interaction (1987:864). Wikstrom’s situational action theory is similar to Thornberry’s theory, maintaining that criminal behavior is the consequence of subjective and structural interaction (2004:4). Having suggested that it is imperative to identify specific causal mechanisms that link environmental and individual factors to the decision to commit a crime, Wikstrom et al. view the decision to offend as a perception-choice process, being either habitual or rationally deliberated (Wikstrom, Oberwittler, Treiber, & Hardie, 2011:19). This theory is similar to the theory of bounded rationality, suggesting that human agency is employed in the decision to offend but is ultimately constrained by the individual’s perceived alternatives to crime (2011:20).

Like Wikstrom, various other criminologists have turned to structuration theory when attempting to integrate individual and environmental factors (Boeck, Fleming, & Kemshall, 2006; Bottoms & Wiles, 1992; Clark, 2011; Farrall & Bowling, 1999). Structuration theory is an integrated sociological theory which views society and individuals as codependent (Giddens, 1984). In this theory, Giddens insists that action and structure exist within the ongoing process of human existence, during which individuals are free to “choose” a lifestyle. Giddens’ intends for lifestyle to imply recursive behaviors, habits, and orientations by which identities are constructed (1991:82). Structuration theory posits that decisions and actions are conscious, reflexive projections of self and are influenced by location within social structure (Giddens, 1991:36-37).

Groves and Lynch consider subjective/objective orientation to be a matter of preference (1990:364), however others consider identifying a causal sequence impossible due to the dynamic and interactive nature of agency and structure (LaBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008:153). Henry and Milovanovic (1996) respond to this by focusing their theoretical attention on “coproduction” rather than causality. Partially influenced by Giddens’ structuration theory (Henry & Milovanovic, 2000), the theory of constitutive criminology suggests that individuals socially construct their own realities, simultaneously shaping their identities. This process of coproduction contains elements of social interaction where reality is a shared, albeit changeable, belief that recursively constructs the social structure by which individuals in the society interact (2000:276). This approach views “individual” and “society” holistically and interprets behavior and interaction as being bounded by shared social constructions (2000:272).

In constitutive criminology, interaction upholds the shared belief in reality through the construction of categories. The discursive categories of order and reality assist in the coproduction of human agency and relations within society's structure and culture (2000:271). This theoretical perspective contends that crime cannot be separated from the power structure in which it is produced, viewing criminality as an "ongoing creation of social identities through discourse" (2000:273). Constitutive criminology does not necessarily reject the concept causation; however, it views crime as a coproduced, socially constructed phenomenon (2000:283).

The aforementioned scholars contend that while background factors may predispose individuals to crime, they cannot explain why similarly situated people differ in regards to criminal activity (Jacobs & Wright, 1999:150; Katz, 1988:4; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001).

### **Synthesizing Structure and Agency**

This model employs a modified approach to structuration theory, as it provides a useful basis for synthesizing structure and agency within the field of criminology. While several scholars have been influenced by Giddens' concept of structuration theory, this framework instead reconceptualizes Bourdieu's design.

### **Constructivist Structuralism Theory**

Constructivist structuralism theory is a sociological theory used primarily to explain the development of cultural tastes and relationships. This theory was developed by Peter Bourdieu in an attempt to reconcile subjectivism and objectivism through the "logic of practice" (Ritzer, 2010:181-183). Practice is defined by Bourdieu (1984) as the relation between structure and agency and views it as neither objectively determined or as a product of free will. In the formation of practice, he identifies the roles of habitus and field.

The concept of habitus is often misunderstood in academic literature (Swartz, 1997:96). Bourdieu defines habitus as:

...a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (1990:53).

More generally, this term can be defined as the mental or cognitive structure by which individuals view the social world. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that habitus results from primary socialization and considers it to be a subconscious, internalized

social structure that shapes perception, understanding, evaluation, and decision-making. He claims that, because habitus is an internalized structure, it can constrain thought and choice of action, but does not determine them (1984:175). Habitus, then, provides principles by which people make choices within the social world.

Bourdieu largely rejects rational choice, stating that most people will act reasonably according to their social position, but that this action is not fully rational (Brown & Szeman, 2000:29). Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that people typically gravitate toward “futures” perceived to be most likely for them (Bourdieu, 1984:170). Habitus is developed through a process of conditioning; therefore, existing opportunity structures mold an individual’s habitus and impact individual action as a consequence. By engendering self-fulfilling prophecies according to class structure and opportunities, habitus perpetuates cultural differences by constructing individuals’ aspirations and expectations in relation to socialized structuring properties (Swartz, 1997:103-105).

Bourdieu (1990) explains that habitus adjusts aspirations and expectations based on stratified social order. His writing incorporates the phrase “causality of the probable” to elucidate the way in which individuals decide which actions are appropriate given the successes and failures of members within their social group (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu asserts that class and culture are used as tools for navigating the social world, therefore individuals who internalize similar opportunities share a similar habitus (1977). Externalized actions, then, are the product of the internalized structure. This process is cyclical as these actions often serve to reproduce the objective structure as a result (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977:203).

Constructivist structuralism considers practice to be the result of “an unconscious relationship” between habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1993:76), therefore the “logic of practice” is incomplete without incorporating the concept of field. Bourdieu defines field as:

...a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to the other positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:97).

Alternatively, field can be defined as structured spaces that are organized according to various forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Bourdieu asserts that field is a spatial metaphor that delineates the structure of the social setting in which habitus functions (Swartz, 1997:117). Field, then, consists of positions that are occupied by individuals in that respective social space and the action within said field is bounded by the conditions (beliefs, norms, etc.) of the field (Bourdieu, 1977).



Bourdieu argues that life can only be understood in terms of trajectory through a particular social field as this social space mediates individuals' actions within specific social, economic, and cultural contexts (1984). The network of relations that exist in fields exist apart from individual consciousness and are not interactions or intersubjective ties among individuals (Bourdieu, 1984:106). Bourdieu proposes, rather, that field can be viewed as being an arena where people occupy positions and are oriented to defend their present position or improve upon it (Ritzer, 2010:186). This notion involves various types of capital, suggesting that an individual's amount of capital will influence their decision making, but that this practice is ultimately dependent upon the individual's habitus (Bourdieu, 1984:110).

Bourdieu (1984) includes four forms of capital in his analysis: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Fields vary according to the capital that is available within them. This suggests that each social field has "distinction" and implies that fields are hierarchized, both within them and between them (Bourdieu, 1984). Unequal distribution of capital is central to Bourdieu's thesis and leads him to view social fields as "fields of struggle" where individuals are either in dominant or subordinate positions based on their type and/or amount of capital (Swartz, 1997:123). Social class stratification emerges as a consequence, and class conflict becomes a fundamental dynamic of social life that it is practiced indirectly through cultural mechanisms (Bourdieu, 1984:113).

The "logic of practice" assumes that habitus and field operate simultaneously. Bourdieu's theory asserts that practice is a phenomenon that emerges as the result of habitus intersecting with contextual social fields. The subsequent action reflects the structure of the encounter (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu maintains that habitus and field construct and reconstruct the social world dialectically (1984). This approach to understanding social life has much utility and can be applied at macro, meso, and micro levels.

### **Developmental Framework**

This reconceptualized model builds off of Bourdieu's theoretical understanding of structuration in an attempt to synthesize agency and structure as they apply to the decision to offend. This model proposes that the term "field" be replaced by "social location" and be used to describe an individual's location within society. The term "habitus" will be replaced by "situational awareness" and will describe both an individual's perception of their identity as well as the cognitive structure by which they understand and evaluate their social world. As with Bourdieu's theory, this awareness operates as an internalized and mostly subconscious structure that shapes and manifests within one's formation of identity.

The hierarchized nature of social locations and unequal distribution of capital, both within and between them, creates class conflict through stratification. Albeit an unintended consequence of social life, class conflict is sustained through cultural and societal mechanisms. As a result, opportunity for conventional success

varies by social location. Existing opportunity structures shape a person's situational awareness and impacts their behavior accordingly. Situational awareness, therefore, perpetuates cultural and class differences by constructing individuals' aspirations and expectations in relation to their social location.

This framework can easily be applied within the field of criminology. For example, many criminologists suggest that delinquent subcultures perpetuate deviant norms and values. This framework postulates that a person in this social location will learn these behaviors and, in doing so, will subconsciously position themselves accordingly. If, following this process, the person perceives themselves as someone who is hopeless and destined to fall victim to their social position within the delinquent subculture, then their situational awareness will provide them with corresponding principles by which they will make their choices. It is these principles that influence motivation to offend. This process is schematically represented in Figure 1.

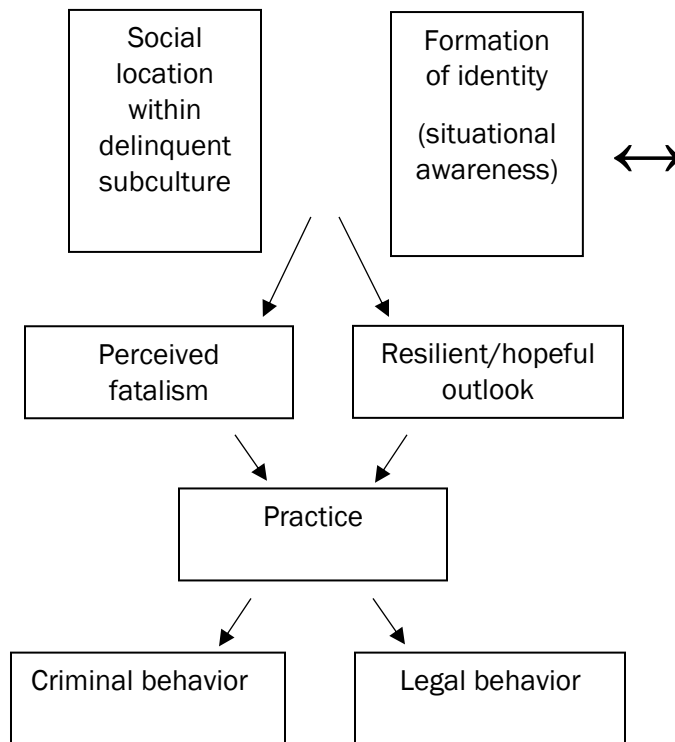


Figure 1. Theoretical Pathway of Criminal and Non-Criminal Behavior

It is important to note that situational awareness is not deterministic, albeit an individual can perceive it that way. Although it has the ability to constrain thought and choice of action, social awareness merely informs the decision-making process through one's perception of self within their respective social location, arguing that perception of self plays an important role in understanding what motivates offenders. Like constructivist structuralism, this model recognizes individuals as relatively reasonable beings that are not entirely rational.

An important question that remains unanswered is why two similarly situated individuals do not offend equally (Groves & Lynch, 1990: 365; Jacobs & Wright, 1999:150). As stated, this framework anticipates that the decision to offend is embedded in one's perception of self. If a person perceives themselves as a delinquent, then they will behave accordingly; however, a person with similar background characteristics will not offend if they respond to their situation with resiliency and hope that they can improve upon their social location. Testing this assumption is crucial to assessing the proposed theoretical model.

## **Conclusion**

Motivation to offend is understood to be a situational inducement that is embedded in structural and cultural positions (Jacobs & Wright, 1999). What is possibly more interesting, however, is how cultural and structural positions influence individuals' constructions of identity and how these perceptions of social location will impact motivation to engage in criminal behavior. This model emphasizes the inseparable relationship between structure and agency.

Linking variables such as delinquent subcultures and street culture participation to the formation of a criminal lifestyle based on perception of identity allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of how structural variables influence an individual to engage in criminal behavior. As argued by Jacobs and Wright (1999:197), rationality barely exists in this model, and the decision to offend is unconsciously embedded in one's perception of self. This suggests that street culture acceptance and participation powerfully influence offender motivation.

Utilizing the proposed developmental framework will supplement current research by expanding upon the theoretical knowledge of offender decision making. Doing so will help criminological researchers overcome current theoretical limitations by introducing an integrated framework that is testable and that allows for a deeper understanding of the process by which structure and agency work together to motivate individuals to offend. This may have important policy implications. If offender motivation is identified as being a product of self-identity and that identity is not static, then empowerment and self-esteem building within delinquent subcultures theoretically should reduce crime. As with most integrated theories, this explanation

runs the risk of being tautological. Further development of this framework may be needed to ensure explanatory power.

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