Discussion Questions

1. How is Cohen's use of strain theory similar to and different from Merton's version of strain theory?
2. Describe the conditions necessary for a deviant subculture to emerge.
3. Describe the major "problem of adjustment" faced by working-class boys.
4. How does the delinquent subculture solve the problem of adjustment described above? ✦

Cloward, Ohlin (1960). Delinquency and Opportunity

This book is about delinquent gangs, or subcultures, as they are typically found among adolescent males in lower-class areas of large urban centers. It is devoted to an exposition of how delinquent subcultures arise, develop various law-violating ways of life, and persist or change. In particular, it is about three more or less distinctive kinds of delinquent subculture. One is what we call the "criminal subculture"—a type of gang which is devoted to theft, extortion, and

other illegal means of securing income. A second is the "conflict subculture"—a type of gang in which the manipulation of violence predominates as a way of winning status. The third is the "retreatist subculture"—a type of gang in which the consumption of drugs is stressed. . . .

The Criminal Pattern

The most extensive documentation in the sociological literature of delinquent behavior patterns in lower-class culture describes a tradition which integrates youthful delinquency with adult criminality. In the central value orientation of youths participating in this tradition, delinquent and criminal behavior is accepted as a means of achieving success-goals. The dominant criteria of in-group evaluation stress achievement, the use of skill and knowledge to get results. In this culture, prestige is allocated to those who achieve material gain and power through avenues defined as illegitimate by the larger society. From the very young to the very old, the successful "haul"—which quickly transforms the penniless into a man of means—is an ever-present vision of the possible and desirable. Although one may also achieve material success through the routine practice of theft or fraud, the "big score" remains the symbolic image of quick success.

The Conflict Pattern

The role-model in the conflict pattern of lower-class culture is the "bopper" who swaggers with his gang, fights with weapons to win a wary respect from other gangs, and compels a fearful deference from the conventional adult world by his unpredictable and destructive assaults on persons and property. To other gang members, however, the key qualities of the bopper are those of the successful warrior. His performance must reveal a willingness to defend his personal integrity and the honor of the gang. He must do this with great courage and displays of fearlessness in the face of personal danger.

The immediate aim in the world of fighting gangs is to acquire a reputation for toughness and destructive violence. A "rep" assures not only respectful behavior from peers and threatened adults but also admiration for the physical strength and masculinity which it symbolizes. It represents a way of securing access to the scarce resources for adolescent pleasure and opportunity in underprivileged areas. . . .

The Retreatist Pattern

The dominant feature of the retreatist subculture of the "cat" lies in the continuous pursuit of the "kick." Every cat has a kick—alcohol, marijuana, addicting drugs, unusual sexual experiences, hot jazz, cool jazz, or any combination of these. Whatever its content, the kick is a search for ecstatic experiences. The retreatist strives for an intense awareness of living and a sense of pleasure that is "out of this world." In extreme form, he seeks an almost spiritual and mystical knowledge that is experienced when one comes to know "it" at the height of one's kick. The past and the future recede in the time perspective of the cat, since complete awareness in present experience is the essence of the kick.

The successful cat has a lucrative "hustle" which contrasts sharply with the routine and discipline required in the ordinary occupational tasks of conventional society. The many varieties of the hustle are characterized by a rejection of violence or force and a preference for manipulating, persuading, outwitting, or "conning" others to obtain resources for experiencing the kick. The cat begs, borrows, steals, or engages in some petty con-game. He caters to the illegitimate cravings of others by peddling drugs or working as a pimp. . . .

The Distribution and Evaluation of Delinquent Subcultures

Deviance ordinarily represents a search for solutions to problems of adjustment. . . .

Participation in a delinquent subculture ordinarily entails rather weighty personal and social costs. For an individual to shoulder these costs, he must be faced with a problem of adjustment that threatens activities and investments which are significant in his psychological and social economy. It is not enough, therefore, to show that the delinquent individual experiences a given problem of adjustment; we must also show that the problem has great significance for him.

A problem of adjustment may be more crucial if it is relatively permanent rather than transitory, and if it is so perceived by the actor. If the problem can be resolved by enduring adverse circumstances for a short time, it is probably not so likely to result in a delinquent solution. On the other hand, a problem to which there appears to be no legitimate solution may generate acute pressures for the emergence of a delinquent one. . . .

The pressures that lead to deviant patterns do not necessarily determine the particular pattern of deviance that results. A given problem of adjustment may result in any one of several solutions. In other words, we cannot predict the content of deviance simply from our knowledge of the problem of adjustment to which it is a response. In any situation, alternative responses are always possible. We must therefore explain each solution in its own right, identifying the new variables which arise to direct impulses toward deviance into one pattern rather than another and showing how these variables impinge upon actors in search of a solution to a problem of adjustment. Failure to recognize the need for this task is, as we have noted, a major weakness of many current theories of delinquency. All too often, a theory that explains the origin of a problem of adjustment is erroneously assumed to explain the resulting deviant adaptation as well. . . .

What pressures lead the young to form or join delinquent subcultures? To what problem of adjustment is alienation from conventional styles of life a response?

. . . It is our view that pressures toward the formation of delinquent subcultures originate in marked discrepancies between culturally induced aspirations among lower-class youth and the possibilities of achieving them by legitimate means. . . .

Our hypothesis can be summarized as follows: The disparity between what lower-class youth are led to want and what is actually available to them is the source of a major problem of adjustment. Adolescents who form delinquent subcultures, we suggest, have internalized an emphasis upon conventional goals. Faced with limitations on legitimate avenues of access to these goals, and unable to revise their aspirations downward, they experience intense frustrations; the exploration of nonconformist alternatives may be the result. . . .

The results of several studies tend to confirm the hypothesis that most Americans, whatever their social position, are dissatisfied with their income. There are, however, social-class differences in the degree of dissatisfaction. In general, the poor desire a proportionately larger increase in income than do persons in higher strata. . . .

Thus we may conclude that persons in the lower reaches of society experience a relatively greater sense of position discontent despite the fact that their absolute aspirations are less lofty. . . .

Discrepancies between aspirations and legitimate avenues thus produce intense pressures for the use of illegitimate alternatives. Many lower-class persons, in short, are the victims of a contradiction between the goals toward which they have been led to orient themselves and socially structured means of striving for these goals. Under these conditions, there is an acute pressure to depart from institutional norms and to adopt illegitimate alternatives. . . .

Delinquent subcultures, we believe, represent specialized modes of adaptation to this problem of adjustment. Two of these subcultures—the criminal and the conflict—provide illegal avenues to success-goals. The retreatist subculture consists of a loosely structured group of persons who have withdrawn from competition in the larger society, who anticipate defeat and now seek escape from the burden of failure. We turn now to a discussion of the processes by which these subcultures evolve. . . .

The Process of Alienation

To understand the growth of delinquent subcultures, we must identify more explicitly the social conditions within which this alienation from established norms and acceptance of illegitimate models of behavior occurs. It seems evident that the members of a newly emerging delinquent subculture must pass through a complex process of change in attitudes toward themselves, other persons, and the established social order before such a major shift in allegiance can take place. First, they must be freed from commitment to and belief in the legitimacy of certain aspects of the existing organization of means. They must be led to question the validity of various conventional codes of conduct as an appropriate guide for their own actions before accepting a model of behavior involving forbidden acts. Secondly, they must join with others in seeking a solution to their adjustment problems rather than attempt to solve them alone. Thirdly, they must be provided with appropriate means for handling the problems of guilt and fear which new recruits to this subculture sometimes experience as a result of engaging in acts of deviance. Finally, they must face no obstacles to the possibility of joint problem-solving. . . .

It is our view that the most significant step in the withdrawal of sentiments supporting the legitimacy of conventional norms is the attribution of the cause of failure to the social order rather than to oneself, for the way in which a person explains his failure largely determines what he will do about it. . . .

When a person ascribes his failure to injustice in the social system, he may criticize that system, bend his efforts toward reforming it, or disassociate himself from it—in other words, he may become alienated from the established set of social norms. He may even be convinced that he is justified in evading these norms in his pursuit of success-goals. The individual who locates the source of his failure in his own inadequacy, on the other hand, feels pressure to change himself rather than the system. . . .

Techniques of Defense Against Guilt

A person who places blame for failure on the unjust organization of the established social order and who finds support from others for his withdrawal of legitimacy from official norms may be induced to resort to illegitimate means for achieving success-goals as a stable form of adaptation. Having withdrawn his acceptance of officially approved norms, he is psychologically protected against the guilt feelings that would otherwise result from violation of those norms. Successful communication and sharing of discontent with others who are similarly situated furnishes social support for and lends stability to whatever pattern of deviant conduct develops.

These steps are accompanied by the growth of a supporting structure of beliefs and values that provide advance justifications for deviant conduct. Those who regard the social order as unjust and evaluate themselves as the equal of persons who have been granted access to legitimate opportunities in effect rationalize their deviance before it occurs. Thus they take steps to preserve their sense of personal integrity as they change their allegiance from conforming to prohibited modes of conduct. The emerging deviant subculture acquires a set of beliefs and values which rationalize the shift in norms as a natural response to a trying situation. These beliefs are in the form of descriptions and evaluations of the social world of the delinquent which contradict those held by conforming persons. Armed with these new conceptions of his social situation, the delinquent is able to adhere to the norms of the delinquent subculture with less vulnerability to the invidious definitions of his actions by law-abiding persons. . . .

The Collective Problem-Solving Process

In addition to the motivation to seek support from others who feel alienated from the prevailing social norms, collective solutions require a set of conditions in which communication among alienated persons can take place. If there are serious barriers to communication among the disaffected, the chances for the development of a collective solution will be relatively slight. . . .

Given conditions favorable for the development of a delinquent subculture, there is still the problem of explaining why different types of delinquent subculture develop. We must identify a new set of variables to explain why certain beliefs, values, and prescriptions for action emerge rather than others. It is to this problem that we turn in the next chapter. . . .

Illegitimate Means and Delinquent Subcultures

Much of the criminological literature assumes, for example, that one may explain a criminal act simply by accounting for the individual's readiness to employ illegal alternatives of which his culture, through its norms, has already made him generally aware. Such explanations are quite unsatisfactory, however, for they ignore a host of questions regarding the *relative availability* of illegal alternatives to various potential criminals. The aspiration to be a physician is hardly enough to explain the fact of becoming a physician; there is much that transpires between the aspiration and the achievement. This is no less true of the person who wants to be a successful criminal. Having decided that he "can't make it legitimately," he cannot simply choose among an array of illegitimate means, all equally available to him. As we have noted earlier, it is assumed in the theory of anomie that access to conventional means is differentially distributed, that some individuals, because of their social class, enjoy certain advantages that are denied to those elsewhere in the class structure. For example, there are variations in the degree to which members of various classes are fully exposed to and thus acquire the values, knowledge, and skills that facilitate upward mobility. It should not be startling, therefore, to suggest that there are socially structured variations in the availability of illegitimate means as well. In connection with delinquent subcultures, we shall be concerned principally with differentials in access to illegitimate means within the lower class. . . .

We can now look at the individual, not simply in relation to one or the other system of means, but in relation to both legitimate and illegitimate systems. This approach permits us to ask, for example, how the relative availability of illegitimate opportunities affects the resolution of adjustment problems leading to deviant behavior. We believe that the way in which these problems are resolved may depend upon the kind of support for one or another type of illegitimate activity that is given at different points in the social structure. If, in a given social location, illegal or criminal means are not readily available, then we should not expect a criminal subculture to develop among adolescents. By the same logic, we should expect the manipulation of violence to become a primary avenue to higher status only in areas where the means of violence are not denied to the young. To give a third example, drug addiction and participation in subcultures organized around the consumption of drugs presuppose that persons can secure access to drugs and knowledge about how to use them. In some parts of the social structure, this would be very difficult; in others, very easy. In short, there are marked differences from one part of the social structure to another in the types of illegitimate adaptation that are available to persons in search of solutions to problems of adjustment arising from the restricted availability of legitimate means. In two opportunity structures—one legitimate, the other illegitimate. Given limited access to success-goals by legitimate means, the nature of the delinquent response that may result will vary according to the availability of various illegitimate means. . . .

Illegitimate Opportunities and the Social Structure of the Slum

When we say that the form of delinquency that is adopted is conditioned by the

presence or absence of appropriate illegitimate means, we are actually referring to crucial differences in the social organization of various slum areas, for our hypothesis implies that the local milieu affects the delinquent's choice of a solution to his problems of adjustment. One of the principal ways in which slum areas vary is in the extent to which they provide the young with alternative (albeit illegitimate) routes to higher status. . . .

The Criminal Subculture

The criminal subculture, like the conflict and retreatist adaptations, requires a specialized environment if it is to flourish. Among the environmental supports of a criminal style of life are integration of offenders at various age-levels and close integration of the carriers of conventional and illegitimate values. . . .

Nowhere in the criminological literature is the concept of integration between different age-levels of offender made more explicit than in discussions of criminal learning. Most criminologists agree that criminal behavior presupposes patterned sets of relationships through which the requisite values and skills are communicated or transmitted from one age-level to another. . . .

Many accounts in the literature suggest that lower-class adults who have achieved success by illegitimate means not only are highly visible to young people in slum areas but often are willing to establish intimate relationships with these youth. . . .

Learning alone, as we have said, does not ensure that the individual can or will perform the role for which he has been prepared. The social structure must also support the actual performance of the role. . . .

Unless the carriers of criminal and conventional values are closely bound to one another, stable criminal roles cannot develop. The criminal, like the occupant of a conventional role, must establish relationships with other categories of persons, all of whom contribute in one way or another to the successful performance of criminal ac-

> The development of the criminal career requires and finds in the immediate environment other supporting elements in addition to the active 'criminal gangs'; to development of the criminal career requires and finds in the immediate environment other supporting elements in addition to the active 'criminal gangs'; to develop the career requires the support of middlemen. These may be junk men, fences, lawyers, bondsmen, 'backers,' as they are called.

The intricate systems of relationship between these legitimate and illegitimate persons constitute the type of environment in which the juvenile criminal subculture can come into being. . . .

The Conflict Subculture

But not all slums are integrated. Some lower-class urban neighborhoods lack unity and cohesiveness. Because the prerequisites for the emergence of stable systems of social relations are not present, a state of social disorganization prevails.

The many forces making for instability in the social organization of some slum areas include high rates of vertical and geographic mobility; massive housing projects in which "site tenants" are not accorded priority in occupancy, so that traditional residents are dispersed and "strangers" re-assembled; and changing land use, as in the case of residential areas that are encroached upon by the expansion of adjacent commercial or industrial areas. Forces of this kind keep a community off balance, for tentative efforts to develop social organization are quickly checked. Transiency and instability become the overriding features of social life.

Transiency and instability, in combination, produce powerful pressures for violent behavior among the young in these areas. First, an unorganized community cannot provide access to legitimate channels to success-goals, and thus discontent among the young with their life-chances is heightened. Secondly, access to stable criminal opportunity systems is also restricted, for disorganized neighborhoods do not develop integration of different age-levels of

nal and conventional values. The young, in short, are relatively deprived of *both* conventional and criminal opportunity. Finally, social controls are weak in such communities. These conditions, we believe, lead to the emergence of conflict subcultures. . . .

The Retreatist Subculture

We have noted that there are differentials in access both to illegitimate and to legitimate means; not all of those who seek to attain success-goals by prohibited routes are permitted to proceed. There are probably many lower-class adolescents oriented toward success in the criminal world who fail; similarly, many who would like to acquire proficiency in the use of violence also fail. We might ask, therefore, what the response would be among those faced with failure in the use of *both* legitimate and illegitimate means. We suggest that persons who experience this "double failure" are likely to move into a retreatist pattern of behavior. That is, retreatist behavior may arise as a consequence of limitations on the use of illegitimate means, whether the limitations are internalized prohibitions or socially structured barriers. . . .

Our hypothesis states that adolescents who are double failures are more vulnerable than others to retreatist behavior; it does not imply that *all* double failures will subsequently become retreatists. Some will respond to failure by adopting a law-abiding lower-class style of life—the "corner boy" adaptation. It may be that those who become retreatists are incapable of revising their aspirations downward to correspond to reality. . . .

Discussion Questions

1. How is Cloward and Ohlin's use of strain theory similar to and different from that of Merton and Cohen?
2. What do Cloward and Ohlin mean when they talk about differentials in access both to illegitimate and legitimate means? Why are both legitimate and illegitimate means important in explaining crime?
3. What conditions must be satisfied before strained individuals will form or join a delinquent subculture?
4. What types of communities are most likely to produce criminal subcultures? What types are most likely to produce violent subcultures? What types of individuals are most likely to become involved in retreatist subcultures? ✦