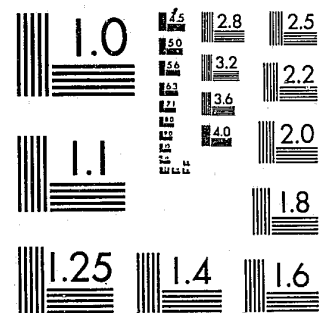


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WHY DO KIDS BECOME DELINQUENT: A COMPARISON
OF EXPLANATIONS GIVEN BY PROBATION OFFICERS,
MINORS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

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August, 1977

This research was supported by NAVF grant number B.31.23-041.

The author thanks supervisor Nancy Green and the probation officers in her unit. Robert Cramer, Cheryl Foeger, Carolyn Lundberg, William Tapogna and Scott White for their assistance in administering the questionnaires to minors. Appreciation is also extended to Chief Probation Officer Bothman and to Sheryl Cantu for permitting the study to be conducted in their department, and to all the probation officers, families and minors who participated in the study.

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Why do kids become delinquent: A comparison of explanations given by probation officers, minors and their families

Many formal theories of juvenile delinquency exist, but little is known about the causal explanations of the people who are actually involved in the juvenile justice system. This paper is an empirical application of some of the major hypotheses in attribution theory. It compares how minors, their families, and probation officers view the causes of delinquency. Empirical data on the causal perceptions of these three groups was collected in a questionnaire study.

Theory.

Attribution theory looks at the process by which people assign the causes of behavior to internal or external factors (Weider, 1958). Internal factors are causes within the individual who is behaving, such as his motivation and ability. External factors are causes outside the individual, such as his family or the society he lives in.¹ Many conditions have been found to influence the attribution process. Some of the conditions that will be examined here are the role perspective of the attributor, i.e., whether he is an actor or observer, the perception of the attributed event as success or failure, the type and seriousness of the attributed event, and important background factors of both the attributor and the person whose behavior is being perceived.

A person making a self-attribution of own behavior is called an actor, while a person making an attribution of some else's behavior is called an observer. According to Jones and Nisbett (1971) actors have a tendency to make external attributions, while observers have a tendency to make internal attributions.² This paper will examine whether minors tend to see their behavior as externally caused, while their families and probation officers see the minors' behavior as internally caused. However, although both the family and the probation officers are observers of the minor's behavior, they do have a different relationship to the actor. Thus, the family might see their child's behavior as reflecting upon their own image, and in a sense see themselves more as actors than as observers. This paper will therefore also examine whether families and probation officers differ in the type of attributions

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made. Possibly, families may be more likely to make internal attributions "excusing" the child, while probation officers may be more likely to see the minor as personally responsible for his actions.

The tendency for minors to make external attributions of their delinquent behavior may be further enhanced by the negative aspects of a delinquent act. Attribution studies have shown that actors tend to attribute successful behavior to themselves, while they tend to attribute failure to factors outside themselves (Frieze and Weiner, 1971).³ Moreover, when two persons are involved in an interactive relationship such as a minor on probation and his supervising probation officers, there is also a tendency to attribute the causes of any negative behavior to the other person, (Johnson and Feigenbaum, 1965).⁴ This is often referred to as the "autistic tendency" in attributions. (Hastorf, 1968). A minor's failure to become rehabilitated could reflect negatively both on the probation officer and the minor, and each of them may try to blame the other for the lack of success. This paper then will study whether minors who view delinquency as a negative behavior will attribute it differently from those who see it as positive behavior, and whether probation officers will blame the minor more for his delinquency the more involved he becomes with the juvenile justice system.

Attribution studies further suggest that the more serious the consequences of an act, the more likely people are to see it as being internally caused, even when other factors are held constant (Walster, 1966, Burglass, 1968).⁵ This paper will therefore examine whether the minor is considered more guilty the more serious his offense.

Finally, important background factors of the person who is making the attribution and the person being perceived, may affect the attribution outcome. In particular, the class and sex background have been found to affect the attribution process. Thibaut and Riecken (1955) found that lower status persons were seen as being more subject to environmental factors than were upper status persons.⁶ This paper will explore whether different explanations of delinquency is given for minors with different class backgrounds. Similarly, Deaux (1974) reports a series of studies where the sex of the person perceived as well as the sex-role expectations associated with the perceived event have been found to affect the attributions.⁷ This paper will therefore also study whether female and male delinquency are given different explanations.

The sex, class and educational background of the families and probation officers may importantly influence how they perceive the causes of juvenile delinquency. Among probation officers, their position, length of time as probation officers and case load may also affect their views. This paper will thus examine whether these background factors cause any systematic variations in how juvenile delinquency is explained.

Method

a. Procedure

A questionnaire study investigating how probation officers, minors and minors' families perceive the causes of delinquency was conducted through a county juvenile probation department.⁸ This probation department is situated in a large, suburban county. It is staffed by 150 probation officers. Permission to do the data-gathering was granted by the chief probation officer as well as the presiding judge of the juvenile court. In addition, a waiver of privacy consent was obtained from the parents of each minor who filled out the questionnaire, due to the legally protected privacy of this information.

The data on the probation officers was obtained by administering the questionnaire at the weekly unit meetings for the probation officers and their supervisors. The author first contacted the supervisor, then went to each of the unit meetings to give out the questionnaire and explain the study. Typically, the questionnaire was filled out immediately, and a discussion of the study followed.

The data from the minors and their families were obtained in two ways: 1) probation officers in one of the units volunteered to hand out the questionnaire to minors after parental permission was granted and to parents who wished to participate, and 2) the author sat in the juvenile court waiting area and gave out questionnaires to waiting families and minors who wished to participate.⁹ In the first setting, care was taken to ensure the participants that the information would not be seen by the probation department, and in both settings the participants were ensured of total confidentiality.

b. Subjects

One hundred and one probation officers completed the questionnaire. In all there were 150 probation officers in this department. However, the data was collected during the summer vacation, and no attempt was made to reach those

not present at the unit meetings. Only 9 probation officers (one unit) declined to participate. Sixtyseven and three tenths percent of all the probation officers participated.

Probation Officers. Of the 101 probation officers, 73 were male and 28 were female. Thirteen were supervisors and 86 were deputy officers. Two of the probation officers were under 25, 30 were in the age group 26-30, 34 were in the age group 31-35, 18 in the 36-40 group, and 16 were over 40 years old. Three probation officers had worked 0-1 years as probation officers, 20 had worked 2-5 years, 43 had worked 5-10 years, and 33 had worked over 10 years. Thirtyfive probation officers had Master's degrees, 98 had a Bachelor's degree, and 3 had no B.A. Fiftythree had a B.A. in social sciences, while 45 had it in other disciplines. Fourteen had an M.A. in social sciences, while 19 had it in other disciplines. The monthly case load varied greatly with no cases at all for supervisors, to 99 a month.

Minors. Sixtyeight minors completed the questionnaire. Of these 46 were male and 22 were female. (No attempt was made to record the refusal rate of parents or minors-but it appeared low). The age of the minors varied from 12 to 18, however most of the respondents were in the age group 14 through 17, with 82% in the age group 13-17. The respondents were in grades 7 through 12, with 11th grade as the most represented.

The minors who were contacted by the probation officers were all on formal or informal probation. The minors who were contacted in the court waiting area were either waiting to be put on probation or already on such probation. No detention hearing cases were included in the study. The subjects were all in the juvenile system because of behavior that brought them within the description of section 601 or 602 of the Welfare and Institutions Code.¹⁰ All dependency cases were excluded from the study. Among the minors who answered the questionnaire, 54.9% were on probation for property offenses, 13.7% for running away from home, 13.7% for incorrigibility, 2% for truancy, and 2% for drug violation. The rest did not indicate why they were on probation or in the court. Most of the minors came from families where both parents had completed high school or more. Thirtyfour and two tenths percent of the father were skilled workers, 44.7% professionals, and 21.8% of the mothers were skilled or professionals, while 21.7% were housewives. Fortyone and two tenths percent of the minors said they wanted a skilled job as adults, 17.6% wanted a professional training, while 41.2% did not indicate what they wanted. Several

said they wanted to become famous rock and roll stars or rich, professional athletes. Thirtyfour percent of the minors were brought to the Probation Department by their parents, 50.9% by the police, and 5.5% by others. Fifty percent of the minors came from families with both parents living at home, while the other 50% came from broken families. Twentyfive percent lived with mother alone, 10.3% lived with father alone, 14.7% lived with one parent and another person, 1.5% lived with foster parents, and 4.4% lived with others.

Families. Fiftyseven parents participated in the study. Of these 44 (77.2%) were mothers, and 10 (17.5%) were fathers, 1 (1.8%) was a grandfather, and 2 (3.5%) did not indicate the relationship. Eight of the parents were under 35, 10 between 35-40, 16 between 40 and 45, 4 between 46-50, and 4 between 50-64. Fifteen of the families had other children on probation. Twentyeight and one tenth percent had brought the juvenile to the probation department themselves, 49.1% of their children were brought in by the police, 5.3% had brought the child in with the police, and 8.8% had been brought in by others. Three of the fathers had completed only elementary school, 13 had completed high school, 11 some college, 8 four years of college, 6 graduate school. There was no information for 16 of the fathers. Two of the mothers had completed only elementary school, 22 had completed high school, 17 two years of college, 6 four years of college, and 5 mothers had completed graduate school. Information on education was missing for 9 of the mothers. Six of the fathers were unskilled workers, 16 skilled workers, 8 professional, 9 were in business for themselves, and occupation was unknown for 10 of the fathers. Two of the mothers were unskilled workers, 15 were skilled, 25 were housewives, 3 were students, 1 was in business, 1 was unemployed, and 4 did not list any information.

c. Questionnaire Instrument

Three different questionnaires were administered, one to probation officers, one to minors and one to minors' families. The questions were basically the same in each of the questionnaires, but were written so that they applied specifically to each subject group. The main dependent variable was the attribution to internal or external variables. Subjects were asked to make such attributions, both in an open ended form and in structured questions. In the structured questions the internal variable was the juvenile himself/herself, and the external variables were family, school, neighborhood, social class background etc. Subjects were asked to make both general explanations of delinquency, as well as explanations for specific types of offenses, such as truancy, running away from home, being beyond the control of one's parents.

All subjects were asked to explain the causes of truancy, running away from home, being beyond the control of one's parents, property offenses and violence. However, only probation officers were asked to attribute sex offenses, as it was felt that this offense was too sensitive for the other groups. In the open ended question probation officers were asked how they would explain how most juveniles got into trouble, while minors and families were asked to explain how they or their children got into trouble. In the objective questions all subject groups were asked to explain how juveniles typically got into trouble.¹¹

In addition, subjects were asked questions that were particularly relevant to each group. Probation officers were asked about class and sex differences in the explanation of juvenile crime, how they would react to first time offenders as opposed to second time offenders, and how they would explain it if probation supervision did not appear to be successful. Families were asked more specific questions about their child, feelings of guilt, and whether they had other children on probation. Minors were asked about the extent of their delinquency participation and about their reference groups.

Finally, a series of background questions were asked of each subject group such as socio-economic background, sex, age, years of experience in the probation department, caseload, etc. A full copy of all three questionnaires is available in the appendix.

Results

Actor-Observer Differences

The results show that the minors, i.e. actors, tended to make external attributions, while the probation officers and families, i.e. observers, tended to make internal attributions. This was particularly true for the structured responses to the specific questions about different kinds of offenses. Thus, the Jones and Nisbett hypothesis was supported by this data.

The results of the responses to the specific and structured questions are listed below.

(Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 about here)

The tables show that the probation officers and the family members find the juvenile himself as the most important cause for all but one type of offense, while the minors gave external reasons as the most important for all types of

offenses. The only exception for the observers was running away where the probation officers listed the family as the most important cause.

As can be seen from the tables, probation officers gave the family as the second most important reason for all offenses, and friends as the most frequent third reason. For families, friends was the second most important reason typically given. Minors gave the following reasons as the most important: fun outside school (truancy), family (running away), fun (property offenses), and friends (violence). Minors saw themselves as an important cause (2nd most important) only for running away.¹²

All three groups were also asked to indicate in a structured question, why they thought minors would typically get into trouble. The answers are listed in Table 6.

(Table 6 about here)

As can be seen from the data, both probation officers and family members still gave the minor as the most important cause of delinquency. However, here minors also listed the juvenile as the most important cause (55.9%), followed closely by friends as the second most frequent cause given (52.9%). Thus, both probation officers and families again conformed to the Jones and Nisbett prediction, while minors did not. Sixtyone and four tenths percent of the probation officers ranked the minor as the most important cause of delinquency generally, compared to only 36.6% who ranked the family as the main cause. Only 8.9% ranked friends as the main cause. Probation officers overwhelmingly gave internal reasons for delinquency. Likewise, more families (61.4%) checked the minor as a cause of delinquency than any of the other causes listed. For the family, friends ranked as the second most important cause (57.9%) with boredom as a close third (56%). For juveniles friends was the second most important cause (52.9%), with both boredom and lack of money ranking as the third most important causes (47.1%).

In summary, all three groups tended to see the minor as the main cause of delinquency in general, with probation officers the most likely, and the minors the least likely to do so.

In the probation officer group, cross tabulations were run by sex, age, number of years worked in the department, caseload per month, type of position and type of education for all objective attributions. The most significant discriminating variable turned out to be type of position in the department. Supervisors consistently gave more internal attributions than did deputy probation officers for almost all types of offenses, (p. <0.0001)¹³

The fact that supervisors tended to make internal attributions may also be a function of their generally higher age, rather than their supervisory position. Age was another clearly discriminating variable. Probation officers over 30 were much more likely ($p < 0.0001$) to give more weight to the minor himself and to his family and siblings, while younger probation officers, i.e. under 30, gave significantly more weight to external variables such as friends, social class and neighborhood. The only exception is the important attributed to friends in violence cases; here the over 30 group gave more importance to friends

Similarly, persons who had worked many years as probation officers were more likely to make internal attributions than were people who had worked for a shorter time. There was an interesting exception, however. Those who had worked for only a year or less tended to agree more with those who had worked for many years than those in intermediate time periods. Thus, in the general explanations of delinquency, probation officers who had worked 10 years or more were more likely to make internal attributions, $\chi^2 = 63.14$ (24df), $p < .0001$. Persons with more experience also tended to hold parents more responsible, $\chi^2 = 63.14$ (24df), $p < 0.05$. Similarly, for property offenses, $\chi^2 = 17.20$ (9df), $p < 0.04$, and sex offenses $\chi^2 = 53.37$ (12df), $p = .001$, the probation officers with more experience (those over the 5-10 years category) were more likely to hold the minor personally responsible. Correlations were not run on work experience holding age constant, but it would be important to find out whether it is the accumulating work experience or just age that accounts for this growing tendency to give internal attributions.

Caseload per month turned out to be another important variable. Probation officers with a caseload of 30 or less, gave significantly more weight to the individual and his family, while probation officers with larger caseloads gave more weight to external variables, such as friends, social class and neighborhood. This was particularly true for probation officers with a caseload of 60-99. Again, it could be that this finding is a result of the fact that most supervisors fit into this category and they tend (as we have seen) to make internal attributions. But it could also be a result of the nature of the workload. A person working with a large number of cases might be more prone to generalizing than a person working with a small caseload.

Crosstabulations by sex did not give as many significant correlations as the above variables, but generally, men tended to give external variables

slightly more weight than women, while women assigned more weight to the minor and his family. The main difference between male and female probation officers was found in the attributions of sex offenses; females tended to assign more weight to the minor and his family, while males gave friends a great deal of blame.

Finally, the respondents were asked to explain, in their own words, what they thought were the major reasons for delinquency. Probation officers were asked to indicate the reasons for delinquency, based on their experience, while families and minors were asked to explain their child's or their own delinquency. Minors were specifically asked to explain their own delinquency to avoid the possibility of having them become observers of other delinquents. 14 The open-ended responses were recoded into internal, external or mixed internal-external categories. This recoding was performed by three independent persons in order to ensure the greatest reliability. A typical external reason would be peers, a typical internal reason would be self-esteem, and a typical mixed attribution would be if the respondent mentioned both peers and self-esteem.

The results of the re-coded open-ended responses are shown in Table 7 below.

(Table 7 about here)

The table shows that both probation officers and families were more likely to give external or mixed internal and external attributions than they were to give exclusively internal attributions. On the other hand, minors were more likely to give internal attributions than they were to give external or mixed attributions. At first glance, this may seem totally reversed from the earlier findings. However, even when probation officers and families rank-ordered the minor as the main reason for delinquency, they also included other external reasons in their explanations of delinquency. Thus, at least in the mixed attributions, internal reasons may still be perceived as the most important reasons. If this is taken into account, about half of the probation officers would tend to make internal and about half external, while more family members would tend to make internal than external attributions. Using the same reasoning for minors, more minors made external attributions than internal attributions.

Although both probation officers and families gave about the same proportion of internal attributions only, there was a clear difference in the

type of attributions given. Over half of the probation officers that gave internal attributions only, saw the minors as personally responsible for their behavior, while none of the family members did so. Typical examples of attributions would be: "They choose to be delinquent, it is their own responsibility", "it is his own fault", "he is criminal", etc. Ten of the 30 probation officers who used both internal and external attributions also used such accusing attributions, while this was never the case for family members. Among the rest of the probation officers the most frequent external cause was low or faulty self-esteem.

Typical internal attributions from family members would tend to "excuse" the minor: "He's sick-he needs help", "he's immature-he needs help", "easily influenced," "not grown up", etc. It was interesting that family members would never say, as probation officers often did: "he is immature because of faulty upbringing in the family". Family members would just say: "he's immature."

Even more distinctions between probation officers and families were evident in the external attributions used. Here, the most frequent cause mentioned by probation officers was the minor's family, (46 times), while the family members hardly ever mentioned themselves as a cause of delinquency. Only in 7 cases was the family mentioned as a possible cause among family members. But whereas probation officers would refer to "bad or poor family influence", family members would blame the delinquent problem on absent fathers, sickness, death, or a working mother. The main external cause for parents was clearly the influence of bad friends. Peers were also viewed as the second most important cause among probation officers. The second most important cause of delinquency, as viewed by the family respondents, was boredom. This was mentioned only four times by probation officers.

Among the minors, 18 out of 36 answered that they themselves were to blame. (Thirtytwo of the minors did not answer this question). Typical answers to the question of "who or what is to blame for your delinquency?" were:

"Me, I'm to blame", "it was no one's fault but my own", "I feel ashamed that I should have done so", "I was wrong, I am to blame and nobody else".

This indicates an assumption of personal responsibility on the part of these youngsters, i.e. a use of a criminal model in self-attributions. However, a few of the youngsters also answered:

"I am to blame, but I don't care."

The main external reasons given by the minors were parents, bad friends, school, lack of money, and society not allowing them enough freedom. Here are some examples of the perplexity experienced by these youngsters:

"I feel it's not me - why all of a sudden on my 15 years I all of a sudden get into trouble? Why, because I'm depressed all the time. My mother and step-father argue all the time and I can't study for homework. So I stay late at parties and get in trouble and I can't come home right after school."

"I think it's partly my fault, and partly not my fault. Because when I was 11 years old my mother died, and then I had to take care of myself because I was just left with my father, and he works all day. My father really didn't care about me, and I had no money or anything, not even friends."

"I don't feel I'm a thoroughly rotten kid, I just have problems with my mom."

Minors also often attributed their problems to chance. As one minor cryptically said: "I was born". Another said: "life". Attribution to chance was only used twice by probation officers, i.e. being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and only once by a parent who said "why not" in response to the question of why his kid got into trouble. One mother reacted with a great deal of hostility to this question and wrote: "my kid is not in trouble, mam" - when the child was in for burglary.

In summary, probation officers tended to blame the families for the minors' problems, the families blamed the minors' friends, and the minors blamed themselves, their parents and their friends.

Seriousness of the Delinquent Offense

Is it true that the more serious the offense, the more guilty the offender is seen, or the more internal the attribution? The perception of the seriousness of offense may of course differ from person to person, but it can probably be assumed that running away from home and truancy are considered less important crimes than property offenses, sex offenses and violence. A rank ordering of the frequency by which the minor is mentioned as the most important cause of the offense for all types of offenses is given below.

(Table 8 about here)

Table 8 shows that for probation officers it is indeed the case that the more serious the offense, the more the minor is perceived as guilty, or the more frequent the internal attributions. Forty and six tenths percent of the probation officers perceived the minor as the main cause for run-aways, 51.6% perceived him as the main cause for truancy, 66.3% for sex offenses, 67.3% for property offenses, and 72.3% for violence. Thus, probation officers increased their internal attributions, the more serious the offense.

This is not true for families. In fact, families appeared to see the minor as less responsible, the more serious the offense, with the exception of truancy. Thus 68.4% of the families checked the minor as a cause for running away from home, while only 61.4% checked him as a cause for violence. This decreasing tendency may be a result of the halo-effect; the minor's misdeeds may reflect negatively on the family, and family members do not wish to blame themselves for serious offenses.

For minors there was no apparent order in this rank ordering. They saw themselves as the most guilty in violence, but the least guilty for property offenses. However, minors showed less agreement on external causes, the more serious the offense. External reasons were considered the most important for all types of offenses, but fewer of the minors thought so, the more serious the offense.

Perception of success and failure

In the objective, specific questions, most minors gave external attributions for their delinquency. In the general and open ended questions however, many also gave internal attributions. Earlier studies have shown that self-attributions of success tend to be internal, while self-attributions of failure tend to be external. The internal attributions given by minors could indicate that minors look upon delinquent behavior as positive events, due to a delinquent reference group. It is therefore interesting to look at some of the responses that are relevant to the issue of the minor's reference group.

Seventyfive and five tenths percent of the minors reported that they had friends with similar delinquent problems, while 20.6% said that they did not have such friends. Similarly, 75.0% said that they had friends on probation, while only 23.4% said they did not. Seventy and six tenths percent had been with friends when the alleged incident took place, while only 23.5% had been alone. And 91.2% said that they would not be losing friends because of their problems as "most friends did not care". These answers should indicate

that the minors in this sample had friends who hold delinquent values.

However, this might not necessarily mean that the minors feel they are less to blame. Fortyseven and one tenth percent of the minors said that they felt guilty about what they have done, while 51.5% said that they did not feel guilty. Fortyfive and six tenths percent of the sample said that they were first time offenders, while 51.5% said that they were not. Is it the same 51.2% of second time offenders who did not feel guilty? The data show that first time offenders were more likely to feel guilty (54.8%) than second time offenders (40%). However, there was only a slight tendency for minors with no delinquent friends to give internal attributions (57%) than for minors with delinquent friends (51%). Minors who did not have friends on probation were also slightly more likely to give internal attributions (62.4%) than minors with friends on probation (58.5%). These numbers indicate then that first time offenders, offenders with no friends on probation or with similar problems are somewhat more likely to make internal attributions, but the differences are not big enough to be significant. Thus, having a delinquent reference group as measured by our questions, did not have a significant impact on the type of attributions made.

The perception of the delinquent act as success or failure may also influence how probation officers make their attributions. A second time offender may be seen as a personal failure for probation officers. Afterall, he's already been through the system once, and it didn't do anything for him, i.e. the probation department failed in its attempt to rehabilitate. Eighty-three and nine tenths percent of the probation officers said that they would explain the behavior of a second time offender differently from a first time offender. The probation officers were asked to explain their answers, and many did so. Thirtysix of these thought that when a person committed a second offense, it was primarily his own fault, while only 7 thought that it was the system's fault for not succeeding. Typically, the first offense would be seen as accidental, coming under the influence of bad friends, whereas the second time offender would be seen as a hardened criminal, incapable of learning the morals of society, etc. Examples of such responses were:

"Fails to deal with himself", "Continues to feel that he can get away with it", "Instilled in behavior-less control", "mentality of a thief and a liar, does not accept responsibility", "feels little respect", "no respect for the law", "unable to learn from past mistakes".

The first time offender in contrast was described in the following manner:

"impulsive", "mistake", "accidental", "Only an experiment", "can control himself", "more responsible", "capable of learning and changing".

Those who did feel that second time offenses were the system's fault, expressed themselves in the following manner:

"The system is geared only to first time offenders", "If the system did not make an impact the first time, it loses its effectiveness", "The more a minor gets involved in the system, the less he benefits", "It is our fault".

Crosstabulations with age and number of years worked in the probation department were run with the attributions of first time and second time offenders. It was clear that older probation officers and those who had worked in the system the longest were more likely to see the minor as guilty if he did not respond to supervision. Probation officers with fewer cases were also more likely to blame the minor himself for continued delinquent involvement.

The probation officers were also asked to explain why it might be that a minor did not appear to benefit from probationary supervision. Sixty-four and four tenths percent of the probation officers thought this would be the minor's own fault, 43.6% thought that the family was the most important reason. Eighteen and eight tenths percent thought the friends, 19.9% thought the school, and 30.7% thought that problems with the supervision itself caused the problem. - Twice as many thought the problem laid with the juvenile, than with the probation department.

Thus, probation officers were more likely to give internal, criminal model type attributions for second time offenses than for first time offenses, and this was particularly true for older probation officers and/or for those who had worked in the system for a long time.

Minor's class and sex background

It was hypothesized that the minor's class background and sex might influence the attribution process. Probation officers were asked if they thought that delinquency was caused by different reasons in different classes. Thirtynine (38.6%) thought that there were no differences among classes. The majority of these respondents thought that the family or a "multiplicity of factors" were the main causes. The rest, 62 probation

officers (61.4%) thought that there were different causes for delinquency in the different classes.

The main explanation for lower class delinquency was economic hardship, for middle class delinquency it was the family, and for upper class delinquency it was boredom and a search for excitement. Specifically, when explaining lower class delinquency, 43 gave purely economic reasons, such as economic deprivation and fewer material advantages, 9 gave family related reasons, and the rest gave a mixture of economically related reasons such as low self-esteem due to few resources, bad peer pressure due to bad neighborhood, etc. Even the family causes would be related to economic factors, such as "dysfunctional family systems", "many siblings", "less stability in the family", and "lack of parental training". Two probation officers said that there was more delinquency in the lower class due to more detection and "lots of police in the neighborhood."

The reasons given for middle class delinquency were noticeably different. Here family related reasons were given 40 times, peer pressure 12 times, boredom 9 times, and low self image 4 times. Other reasons given were questioning of parental values, lack of community cohesiveness, drugs and the media. Economic problems were never mentioned. The family causes given were practically identical for all respondents; most probation officers felt that the typical middle class family was too busy "making it" to care about the children. The children often felt rejected, and became delinquent in an effort to attract attention. Others complained of middle class children being supervised too much or not enough. For example,

"Parents fail to imagine that their kids would get into trouble, it's an attention getting device from the kids."

"Parents are too busy working and engaged in their own activities and neglect their kids. They do not provide positive role models."

"Parents are just too busy for their children."

Whereas both lower class delinquency and middle class delinquency were given mainly external attributions through economic or family problems, upper class delinquency was given mainly internal attributions. The upper class youth was seen as being bored (19), seeking excitement (13) and rebelling against parents and society (24). Parents were described as giving their kids everything except love, and spoiling their kids with material possessions. For example:

"having acquired all the material things, they often find themselves with nothing to strive for".

Some of the probation officers also thought that upper class kids get into trouble with the law because they see themselves as being above the law.

Thus, the probation officer's perceptions of the causes of delinquency differed greatly by the social class background of the minor. Minors from the lower class and middle class were seen as reacting to external problems either in their economic background or family, respectively, while upper class minors were given more internal reasons for their delinquency. It might be concluded that the attributions gradually become more internal as one moves from lower class to upper class delinquency.

How did the families themselves and minors view the distributions of delinquency across classes? Minors were asked if they thought that rich kids committed just as much delinquent behavior as do poor kids. Fiftyfive and nine tenths percent of the minors thought so, 19.1% thought that rich kids committed fewer crimes, 13.2% thought that rich kids committed more crimes, and 11.8% did not answer the question. Thus, about half of the minors thought that there were no differences in the amount of delinquency across classes.¹⁵

Similarly, 78.9% of the family members thought that there was the same amount of delinquency in the lower and upper classes, 12.3% thought that there was less delinquency among rich kids, and 1.8% thought that there was more delinquency among the rich.

Probation officers were also asked if they would explain how girls got into trouble differently from how boys got into trouble. Thirteen of the probation officers did not answer this question, 42 said that they would not do it differently, and 46 said that they would make different explanations. However, there was some overlap in the perceptions of differences or no differences. Six of those that said there were no differences in their explanations, would explain the delinquency of both boys and girls as a result of the differing sex role expectations for the two groups. This answer was also sometimes used by those that gave different explanations.

The main conclusion of those giving different explanations for the two sexes was that girls rebel against existing sex role expectations, while boys conform to them. The girls were seen as wanting independence, particularly from parents, while boys conformed to peer pressure and masculinity demands. Specifically, 39 mentioned the independence striving for girls, 6 mentioned influence of boy friends, 14 lack of self respect, 2 drugs,

and 1 lower class reinforcement. For boys, 23 mentioned peer pressure and masculinity norms, 6 family problems, 5 lack of self image, 2 school, and 3 a desire for more freedom. Thus, this data fit the Jones and Davis (1955) hypothesis that expected behavior is given external attributions, while unexpected behavior is given internal attributions.¹⁶

Discussion

The Jones and Nisbett hypothesis that actors tend to make external attributions and observers internal attributions was confirmed by this study. Minors tended to make external attributions for all kinds of delinquency, while probation officers and families tended to make internal attributions.

This was true mainly for the objective questions asking about specific kinds of delinquency. In the general objective question minors gave as much weight to the juvenile himself as they did to external causes. However, it may be that since the minors here were asked to view delinquency in general, they were put into the role of observers explaining the delinquency of other delinquents, rather than in the role of actors, and hence they tended to make internal attributions as much as external attributions. In fact, the almost equal division between internal and external causes here may reflect the ambiguity the minors may have felt at this question; they were asked to explain the delinquency of others, and yet they themselves belonged to the delinquent group. In the open-ended descriptions of the causes of delinquency, all three groups showed a reversal of earlier trends. Minors tended to make more internal attributions, while families and probation officers tended to make more external attributions. It is possible that the wording used in this question for the minors: "who is to blame for your delinquency" may have led the attention of the minor to the blameworthy aspects of this behavior, and hence pushed the admission of own guilt in an effort to appear better with the probation department, i.e. the minors may have seen the author as an extension of the probation department in spite of assurances to the contrary.

Likewise, when asked to respond to the causes of delinquency in their own words, probation officers may be more likely to employ the sociological

ideology of their profession than when asked to check off causes on an objective list. Nevertheless, the results in the open-ended responses pose a puzzling and startling contrast to the objective results. The probation officers and families may indeed be more "forgiving" of the minors than they give themselves credit for, and the minors may be more willing to accept responsibility for their own actions than commonly assumed.

The results also confirmed the prediction that events which might reflect negatively on oneself are attributed away from oneself. Probation officers were much more likely to give internal attributions to second time offenders than to first time offenders. They all saw the second time offender as more criminal than the first or one time offender. This might be an attempt to explain away behavior that could possibly appear damaging to the probation department, or be interpreted as an example of the probation department's failure to rehabilitate. Likewise, family members only rarely saw themselves as a cause of the minor's delinquency, whereas the probation officers saw the family as the main cause. In using internal attributions, family members only gave causes that did not in any way put the blame or the responsibility on the minor. He was continually perceived as being sick and needing help by family members. The minors' main tendency to give external attributions of delinquency also confirms the hypothesis that external attributions are more likely in negative situations. Even though an overwhelming majority of the minors had delinquent friends and did not think that they would lose any friends as a result of their delinquency, this did not appear to have created a delinquent set of values where delinquency was viewed as a positive event. However, minors with delinquent friends appeared less guilty about their behavior than minors without such a reference group.

The data also confirmed, in the case of probation officers, the hypotheses that the more serious the consequences of an event, the more internal the attribution.

The differences in the perception of causes by class and by sex both show that the more unexpected the behavior, the more likely it is to be given an internal attribution. Several studies have shown that lower class delinquency is more expected than upper class delinquency. Likewise; male

delinquency is more expected than female delinquency. When then, the unexpected and socially undesirable behavior of delinquency does occur for these two groups, internal attributions are given, (as predicted by Jones and Davis).¹⁶

Finally, the differences by age, position, years of experience within the probation officers group are important indicators that the causal perceptions are not governed only by the circumstances surrounding the minor. The probation officer himself may have as much impact on the perception of the minor as the minor himself.¹⁷

Conclusion

This study has shown that there are major differences in the ways that minors, their families and probation officers view the causes of juvenile delinquency. The low satisfaction expressed by families and minors with the probation department (59% of the families and 47% of the minors said that they were satisfied with the probation department and the court) may be a result of these divergent perceptions. Each of the groups may honestly feel that its perception is the correct one, even though we have seen how a series of social factors influence the perceptions of each group in different directions. The information presented in this paper should therefore lead to greater understanding across groups, as well as suggesting ways of overcoming these biases.

The importance of these causal perceptions should not be underestimated. How a probation officer perceives the causes of a minor's misbehavior will affect how he decides to deal with the youngster. If he makes an internal attribution along a criminal line, he would probably advocate punishment. If he makes an internal attribution along a medical model, he will probably recommend treatment to deal with the problem. If an external attribution is made, the recommendation would logically be to deal mainly with the external factors in the minor's life. Similarly, the causal perceptions of minors and their families will affect how much they agree with the probation officer in his assessment, and consequently how much they will cooperate

with the recommendations that are made. The eventual success or failure of the treatment program may also be a measure of the correspondence in causal perceptions. The more the minor and his family agree with the perceptions of the probation officers, the more they will be willing to go along with the prescribed course of action. The more the family and the minor agree on the assignment of responsibility for the delinquent act, the better their own family relationship.

It has been assumed here that there is a correspondence between causal perceptions and actual treatment recommendations. It is of course possible that no such relationship in fact exists. Probation officers may believe one thing and do another. Practical constraints may hinder a probation officer from carrying out his causal perceptions. For example he may feel that the economic structure of society is at fault, yet have no power to do anything about the economic structure and recommend individual counseling for the minor. However, a recent paper by Zimmerman and Chein, (1977) using the actual recommendations made by the probation department to the court as data, came up with very similar findings to those reported in this paper. There was also a great deal of similarity in the internal and external categories used, which strengthens the assertion that causal perceptions are in fact indicative of what actions will subsequently be taken. Zimmerman and Chein also found that the recommendations made by the probation officers had more impact on the final dispositions of the case than the legal facts of the case. Thus, not only may these causal perceptions influence the recommendations that are made, they will also influence the final disposition of a case.

The personnel in the Juvenile Court and the probation department have been given a complex and difficult task: to analyze and decide on the best course of action for each of the many cases that passes through their system. This task is further complicated by their dual function: to help the minor, and to protect the community. This paper has pointed to a series of factors that importantly affect the perceptions and interactions of the persons involved in this process. A knowledge and awareness of these factors might serve to make this complicated task easier.

Footnotes

1. Internal attributions can further be classified into two types: a) criminal model attributions, and b) sick model attributions (Aubert and Messinger, 1958). The criminal model assumes that the minor is responsible for his behavior and must be punished, while the medical model assumes that the individual is not responsible and must be "treated".
2. Jones and Nisbett argued that actors are predominantly focused on the situation around them, while observers are focused on the actor. The actor also has much more information about himself and his past history which the observer does not have. The observer is more likely to see the actors' behavior as an expression of his personality. Several studies have shown support for the hypothesis that actors tend to make external attributions, and observers tend to make internal attributions (Jones, Rock, Shaver, 1972; Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, Maracek, 1973; Storms, 1973; Taylor and Fiske, 1975). The argument that observers of delinquent behavior would tend to give internal attributions is further supported by Jones and Davis' dispositional inference theory, (Jones and Davis, 1965). Jones and Davis argue that most people want to behave in a conforming and socially acceptable manner. The more non-conforming an act, and the less socially desirable the consequences the more the observer feels that he learns about the actor.
3. The tendency for actors to make external attributions of own failure or negative situations is supported by several research studies (Fitch, 1970; Friese and Weiner, 1971, Luginbuhl, Crowe and Kahan, 1975). This tendency is sometimes referred to as "egodefensive attributions". In the literature on juvenile delinquency this assumed tendency for juveniles to put the blame for their own behavior on outside factors has sometimes been referred to as the neutralization techniques (Sykes and Matza, 1957), or as a need to avoid the psychological guilt and discomfort that would follow from internal attributions (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). Matza also argues in his book, Delinquency and Drift, that this tendency to blame the outside system in general sociological interpretations may have filtered down to minors themselves, may have had an unhealthy impact on the juvenile justice system, and in particular the minors pass through that system.
4. The tendency to attribute causality of events that could reflect negatively on oneself in interactive situations is referred to by Hastorf et al (1971) as the (autistic tendency). Johnson and Feigenbaum and Weiby (1964) found in a study involving students and teachers that teachers attributed the success of students to their own teaching ability, while the failure of students was attributed to the students lack of ability. Following this study one might hypothesize that probation officers would put the blame on minors for repeated delinquency, i.e. "he failed in spite of our repeated efforts to help him", while giving themselves credit for successful rehabilitation, i.e. "he succeeded

because of our efforts". Similarly, families might give themselves credit for a well behaved child, while putting the blame on the child himself for misbehavior.

5. Walster (1966) found that in automobile accidents, drivers were held more responsible when the outcome was severe, even though the actual driving behavior was held constant. Sultzer and Burglass (1968) found that the subjects tended to attribute more responsibility to an actor whose actions resulted in negative behavior rather than positive outcomes.
6. Thibaut and Riecken (1955) showed that the compliance of a high status other is seen as more internally caused than that of a low status complier.
7. Deaux and Emswiller (1974) found that success on male tasks were attributed to internal factors for male actors, and to external factors, particularly luck, for female actors. Failure was typically attributed to internal characteristics for females, and to external characteristics for males. Feather and Simon (1975) report a similar finding. Women are not expected to do well on a male task, and if they do their success is attributed to outside factors. In so far as delinquency might be defined as a predominately "male task", attributions of female delinquency might tend to be external. However, there is also the influence of the Jones and Nisbett model: the more unexpected the behavior and the less socially desirable the behavior, the more likely it is to be getting internal attributions. In so far as female delinquency is unexpected and unusual and is considered socially undesirable, the more internal attributions it might get.
8. The study was conducted in the juvenile probation department of Santa Clara County. This is a large county in the San Francisco Bay Area, and has more than 1.7 million residents.
9. The first procedure outlined was used initially due to the confidentiality of the subjects matter. It was felt that the author should not even personally see the delinquent. After some time as the court and the probation department gained more familiarity with the project, the author was allowed to contact the minors directly in the court waiting area.
10. Section 601 in the California Welfare and Institutions Code refers to children with problems such as running away, being beyond control of parents and truancy. It refers to behaviors that would not be considered law-violating if committed by adults. Section 602 refers to law violators, i.e. violations of laws that would also be considered law violations if committed by adults. Although the term "delinquent" only properly applies to law violators under section 602 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, the term "delinquency" is used here to refer to both types of cases, as a matter of convenience.

11. The answers for probation officers were later recoded to also give information about whether a given cause was simply chosen or not chosen, regardless of rank order, thus allowing for more comparability with the other two groups.
12. The rank order of the causes for probation officers was 1) truancy: minors, family, school, class, for 2) running away from home: family, minor, friends, school, for 3) property: minor, family, friends, class, for 4) violence: minor, family, friends, class, and for 5) sex offenses: minor, family, others, school. Thus, the second most important reason given by probation officers was the family.

The rank order of causes for family respondents was for 1) truancy: minor, school, fun, family, friends, for 2) run away: minor, family, friends, neighborhood, school, for 3) property offenses: minor, friends, family, school, for 4) violence: minor, friends, family, other, media. Thus, in addition to the minor himself, friends were seen as the most important cause of delinquency. Only in run away, families were seen as the second most important cause. It is interesting to note that in truancy, families saw themselves only as the fourth important cause (35.1%).

The rank order of causes for minors was 1) for truancy: fun outside school, school, minor, friends, family, for 2) run away: family, minor, school, neighborhood, other, for 3) property offenses: fun, friends, minor, poverty, other, and for 4) violence: friends, minor, family, anger, for fun. Thus, for minors, fun and friends featured as important causes, with self only seen as an important cause (2nd) in run away cases.

The percentages indicate that there might have been more agreement among the probation officers as a group than among the other two groups. Also, the minors appeared to be more in agreement among themselves when explaining serious offenses, such as violence, than when explaining less serious offenses, such as run away.
13. All significance levels refer to results of chi-square tests run for all correlations of supervisors and attributions of all causes for all objective questions. Since there were so many of these correlations, the author has chosen not to report individual results for all runs.
14. A difference in wording among the three groups may have affected the results somewhat; probation officers and families were asked to explain why, while minors were asked on whom or what they would put the blame.
15. The minors and families were not asked if they felt that the causes of delinquency would vary from class to class.
16. Jones and Davis (1955) hypothesized that the more unexpected the behavior and the less socially desirable it is, the more likely the observer is to see it as indicative of the actor's personality. Otherwise, why would he behave that way?
17. Dornbush and (1955) found that the background and personality of the perceiver had more impact on the perception of others, than did the background and personality of the perceived other.

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TABLE 1

Structured Attributions of Truancy by Probation officers, Families and Minors.*

Causes	Respondents		
	Probation officers	Families	Minors
	N = 101 % of 1 rank	N = 57 % checked	N = 68 % checked
Minor	51	71.9	47.1
Family	48.5	35.1	33.8
School	25.7	42.1	58.8
Fun outside school		36.8	67.6
Friends	4	29.8	41.2
Neighborhoods	4		
Media	1		
Class	6.9		
Other	1	10.5	

- * For probation officers, the percentages refer to how many rank ordered each cause as the most important. For families and minors, the percentages refer to how many checked each cause as important. This is the case for all tables.

TABLE 2

Structured attributions of Running-Away, Incurrigibility, and Beyond Control by Probation officers, Families and Minors.

	Respondents		
	Probation officers	Families	Minors
	N = 101 % of 1 rank	N = 57 % checked	N = 68 % checked
Minor	40.6	68.4	36.8
Family	73.3	59.6	91.2
School	6.9	15.8	42.6
Bad friends	7.9	54.4	27.9
Television	2.	10.5	1.5
Neighborhood	3	22.8	27.9
For fun			17.6
Class	5		
Other	5.9		14.7

TABLE 3

Structured Attributions of Theft and Property Offenses
by Probation officers, Families and Minors.

Causes	Respondents		
	Probation officers N = 101 % of 1 rank	Families N = 57 % checked	Minors N = 68 % checked
Minor	67.3	70.2	32.4
Poverty			27.9
For fun			54.4
Family	30.7	24.6	8.8
School	4	8.8	1.5
Friends	25.7	56.1	54.4
Television	3		4.4
Class	9.9		
Neighborhoods	9.9		
Boredom			
Other	5.9		11.8

TABLE 4

Structured Attributions of Violence by Probation
officers, Families and Minors.

Causes	Respondents		
	Probation officers N = 101 % of 1 rank	Families N = 57 % checked	Minors N = 68 % checked
Minor	72.3	61.4	57.4
Family	36.6	38.6	36.8
School	4	14	20.6
Friends	11.9	41.1	60.3
Television	8.9	15.8	14.7
Anger			29.4
Fun			29.4
Neighborhoods	6.9	14	
Police		8.8	
Class	9.9		
Other		19.3	10.3

TABLE 5

Structured Attributions of Sex Offenses by Probation officers.

Causes	<u>Probation officers</u>
	<u>N = 101</u> <u>% of 1 rank</u>
Minor	66.3
Family	43.6
Friends	3
School	4
Neighborhoods	3
Class	4
Media	3
Other	5

TABLE 6

Structured Attributions of Juvenile Delinquency in
General by Probation officers, Families and Minors.

Causes	<u>Respondents</u>		
	<u>Probation officers</u>	<u>Families</u>	<u>Minors</u>
	<u>N = 101</u> <u>% of 1 rank</u>	<u>N = 57</u> <u>% checked</u>	<u>N = 68</u> <u>% checked</u>
Minor	61.9	61.4	55.9
Family	36.6	43.5	27.9
Friends	8.9	57.9	52.9
School	4	33.3	27.9
Neighborhoods	4	15.7	22.1
Boredom	6.9	56	47.1
Lack of money	4	29.8	47.1
Siblings	3	10.7	8.8
Television	2	14.1	5.9
Too much money	2	8.7	10.3
Police	2	14.1	23.5

TABLE 7

Open-Ended Attributions of Juvenile Delinquency in General
by Probation officers, Families and Minors.*

Respondents

Causes	Probation officers		Families		Minors	
	N = 101		N = 57		N = 68	
	N		N		N	
Internal only	(17)	16.8%	(9)	15.7%	(18)	26.4%
External only	(39)	38.8%	(17)	29.8%	(12)	16.1%
Both Internal And External	(30)	29.7%	(13)	22.8%	(11)	17.6%
No Response	(15)	14.8%	(18)	31.5%	(22)	32.3%
	101		57		68	

* Recoded into internal and external categories.

TABLE 8

Frequency of Perceiving the Minor as the
Main Cause by Seriousness of Offense

Respondents

Type of Offense	Probation officers	Families	Minors
	N = 101 % of 1 rank	N = 57 % checked	N = 68 % checked
Run-Aways	40.6	63.4	47.1
Truancy	51.6	71.9	26.8
Sex offenses	66.3		
Theft/Burglary	67.3	70.2	32.4
Violence	72.3	61.4	57.4

END