# Chapter 8
# Understanding Adolescent Offending:
## The Intentions to Transgress (ITT) Model

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of the research reported in this chapter is to provide a theoretically based model to inform educational interventions that aim to divert young people from criminal pathways. This chapter outlines the cross-disciplinary approach used to develop the Intention to Transgress (ITT) model, which draws from leading theories in the disciplines of social psychology and criminology. The framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB, Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005) was used together with the motivators of crime identified from dominant criminological theories by Agnew (1995) to determine the antecedents of adolescents' intentions to engage in offending or transgressional behaviour. The ITT model, comprising four proximal antecedents of attitudes, subjective norms, perceived control, and negative affect, and two distal factors of moral norms and reputation enhancement, adds to the understanding of adolescent offending, although it remains to be empirically tested.*

## INTRODUCTION

While criminology has drawn the attention of scholars since the Enlightenment when Cesare Beccaria first published *An Essay on Crimes and Punishments* (see Paolucci's (1963) translation), and statistics indicating the prevalence and nature of youth crime abound (Skrzypiec, 2005; Skrzypiec & Wundersitz, 2005), there is

little agreement amongst criminologists on "why crime occurs" (Leavitt, 1999). In a study examining the causes of crime, Weatherburn (2001) concluded that there was "no single factor or set of factors which causes an individual to become involved in crime" (p. 8) but that crime initiation, amongst other things, was strongly influenced by inadequate parenting practices, poor school performances and delinquent peer association,

which increase the risk of criminal behaviour. To combat crime Weatherburn (2001) posited that risk factors should be addressed so that "governments anxious to maximise their control over crime are better off trying to influence as many factors as possible, rather than concentrating all their efforts on one or two factors" (Weatherburn, 2001, p.8).

However, according to Farrington (2003), an issue with a risk-factor prevention approach is that knowledge about the known risk factors of crime are based on studies which have focused on between-individual differences, but it is within-individual differences that are more relevant to the concept of cause. It is characteristics "within" the individual that must be considered in any intervention or preventative strategies, as it is within the individual where changes must occur (Farrington, 2003).

Notwithstanding that the causes of crime are multiple and multi-faceted, and that strategies to reduce and prevent crime would be equally complex, another crime prevention approach would be to consider an intervention utilising a "within individual" approach such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB, Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). The TPB is a more parsimonious approach, as only a few factors would need to be considered to facilitate change within an individual. As Fishbein (2008) has stated:

*although there are almost an infinite number of variables that may directly or indirectly influence the performance (or nonperformance) of any behaviour, there is a growing consensus that there are only a limited number of variables that need to be considered in order to predict, understand, change, or reinforce a given behaviour. (p. 835)*

In terms of understanding antisocial and offending behaviour, Farrington (2003) has suggested using multi-theory comparisons so that a consensus about necessary key elements in theory can be reached. Taking this approach, this study sought to develop a model of offending by comparing theories across two disciplines. The aim was to advance our understanding of antisocial behaviour by exploring theoretical explanations drawn from the disciplines of social psychology, using the TPB, and criminology, using the key motivators of crime identified by Agnew (1995) from leading crime theories, including Social Control (Hirschi, 1969), General Strain (Agnew, l992), Differential Association (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960) and Social Learning (Akers, 1985), as well as the General Theory of Crime proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990). The aim was to develop a model that could be empirically tested and used to inform a future crime prevention intervention, because "just as one cannot 'throw together' a vaccine, one cannot 'throw together' an intervention" (Fishbein, 2008, p. 842).

## BACKGROUND

In discussions about young offenders it is necessary to first provide clarity about the meaning of the terms "offender" and "offending". Whether or not a young person is an "offender" is a distinction clearly made by people involved in the juvenile justice system, because the term "offender" in Australia has its basis in legislation. For example, the South Australian Young Offenders Act 1993 defines an "offender" as "a person who commits an offence" and an "offence" as "a wrong prohibited by the criminal law". The term "offender", therefore is a label used only for young people who have come to the attention of the law and who have either admitted the offence or have been found guilty of the offence. Other young people who may have committed an offence but who have not had their offence "proven" by the juvenile justice system would not be considered "offenders". To address this distinction, a more appropriate term would be the word "transgressor", which is operationally defined and used for the purposes of this inquiry as an adolescent who engages in illegal behaviour and who may or may

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