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CRIMINOLOGY

DELINQUENCY, OPPORTUNITY, AND GENDER*

STEPHEN A. CERNKOVICH** AND PEGGY C. GIORDANO***

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The role of blocked or limited opportunity has commanded considerable attention in the sociological analysis of juvenile delinquency. The typical stance taken is that many juveniles are "pushed" into delinquency because they lack access to those opportunities which are defined as legitimate avenues for the realization of a relatively universal set of success goals. Those who are denied the opportunity to implement these socially approved means often turn to delinquency as an alternative or more expedient way of reaching desired goals or as a means of striking back at what is defined as an unfair system.¹

For the most part, the importance of adolescent aspirations and expectations, as well as the relative availability of the institutionalized means for realizing personal goals, has been developed mainly with reference to their etiological role in male delinquency. The potential utility of such variables in accounting for female misbehavior, by contrast, has been largely ignored. Primarily, this appears to be a function of the view that the aspirations and expectations of adolescent females, in comparison to those of their male counterparts, are quite circumscribed, not only in quantity, but also in content. That is, while males are conceived as "status strivers," preoccupied with short and long-term status and economic success, the female adolescent is more often viewed as possessing no such aspirations and, instead, is satisfied to occupy a role dependent to the male, basking in whatever attendant status her partner's relative success confers.

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¹ See R. CLOWARD & L. OHLIN, *DELINQUENCY AND OPPORTUNITY* (1960); A. COHEN, *DELINQUENT BOYS* (1955); Merton, *Social Structure and Anomie*, 3 AM. SOC. REV. 672 (1938).

Coleman² presented the most popular and classic conception of this with his contention that the greatest status enhancement for girls is in dating the "right boys." The implication is that while boys have a variety of actual and potential roles as sources of achievement and status, girls have relatively little in the way of alternatives to the "popularity with the opposite sex" role.³ As a result, and to the extent that female aspirations and expectations have been examined at all in connection with delinquency involvement, the focus has been almost exclusively on dating, marital, and familial goals.⁴

One notable exception to this narrow orientation appeared in the work of Datesman, Scarpitti, and Stephenson⁵, which explicitly examined the general occupational and educational aspirations of both males and females. The researchers in this study found that perception of limited opportunity was more strongly related to female involvement in delinquency than was the case for males. Their explanation for such unexpected results suggested that since delinquency involvement is more negatively evaluated for girls than for boys, females would need a much greater "push" to become involved than would males. These findings are clearly important, not only for what they reveal about female aspirations and expectations, but also because they represent an attempt to examine in relation to female misbehavior variables heretofore restricted to the explanation of male delinquency. The data upon which these findings were based, however, are not recent (they were collected in 1968 and 1969), and the authors did not take into account the possibility that there may have been

² J. COLEMAN, *THE ADOLESCENT SOCIETY* (1961).

³ See also A. COHEN, note 1 *supra*; Parsons, *Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States*, 7 AM. SOC. REV. 604 (1942).

⁴ See Rittenhouse, *A Theory and Comparison of Male and Female Delinquency* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan) (1963).

⁵ Datesman, Scarpitti & Stephenson, *Female Delinquency: An Application of Self and Opportunities*, 12 J. RESEARCH CRIME & DELINQUENCY 107 (1975).

significant changes in the nature of female aspirations, as well as in the acceptability of, or at least the lack of, negative sanctions for certain kinds of delinquent behavior.

Illustrating the limitation to the Datesman study, Adler,⁶ for example, suggested that recent changes in the nature of sex roles and in female aspirations have had important implications for female involvement in delinquency. She argued that the demonstrable convergence of sex roles in recent times has not only freed the contemporary female from many traditional restraints, but also has forced her to compete more actively with males on academic, occupational, and criminal levels. Although now being forced to compete on the same level with males, females are nevertheless denied access, on the basis of gender, to those legitimate opportunities which are essential for successful achievement. The various pressures associated with this sex-role convergence and competition simply make girls more vulnerable to delinquency. The upshot of Adler's thesis is that the contemporary female's "departure from the safety of traditional female roles and the testing of uncertain alternative roles"⁷ compounds the normal identity problems of adolescence and creates intense pressures to adopt traditional male role-related behavior patterns, including participation in delinquent activities.

This argument is not unlike that offered by Cloward and Ohlin⁸ with respect to male delinquency; that is, culturally generated aspirations and the social pressures placed upon the individual to achieve specific success-goals are not accompanied by access to the necessary means to reach these goals. Delinquency simply provides an alternative opportunity/status structure or a means of striking back at the unavailable or restricted legitimate structure. Unfortunately, Adler did not present convincing evidence that this indeed is happening in the case of females. Nonetheless, many of the apparent and not so obvious changes in sex-role behavior, aspirations and definitions of acceptable behavior suggested by Adler and others, point to the need for a detailed reexamination of the degree of "push," if any, required to initiate and sustain patterns of female delinquency.

Adler's conjecture⁹ that females are now being forced to compete more actively with males, but are at the same time denied access to the means essential for successful achievement, is amenable to

empirical investigation. There are two dimensions of blocked opportunity which merit examination in this regard. First, it is important to consider the relationship between opportunity as generally defined (in the male delinquency literature) and female misbehavior. Essentially, this involves analysis of the adolescent's perceptions of available educational and occupational opportunities as these are related to delinquency involvement. To the extent that females are currently experiencing similar competitive pressures as males, such opportunities or their absence should bear the same sort of relationship to female delinquency as exists in the case of males. Secondly, Adler has suggested that many females are being denied access to legitimate opportunities *on the basis of gender*. If this indeed is the case, it is important to examine the degree to which "gender-based blocked opportunity" is associated with female involvement in delinquent activities. This is quite different from blocked educational and occupational opportunities in general, which are conceived as the individual's perceived ability to succeed given his/her overall socioeconomic and sociocultural background and preparation. Gender-based blocked opportunity is defined solely in terms of gender and in this case specifies the individual's perception that certain legitimate avenues to success are closed or restricted to her *because she is a female*.

We hypothesize that blocked opportunities indeed are related to female delinquency involvement primarily in the general sense. That is, those females who find that they are denied socially approved educational and occupational opportunities (or at least believe this to be the case) are likely to turn to illegitimate means as an alternative opportunity system as a source of status among peers or as a means of striking back at the system to the same extent that males in similar situations employ delinquency for these purposes. On the other hand, we would expect gender-based blocked opportunities to be weakly related or unrelated to female misbehavior. The rationale for this is that the picture painted by Adler that many females turn to delinquency because they perceive that they are denied access to legitimate opportunities on the basis of gender suggests an image of a rebelling, politically motivated female delinquent which simply does not seem to be consistent with empirical reality. This is not to say, of course, that females are not denied access to legitimate avenues of success because they are females, but only that such a perception, to the extent that it exists, is not significantly related to subsequent delinquency in-

⁶ F. ADLER, *SISTERS IN CRIME* 94-95 (1975).

⁷ *Id.* at 95.

⁸ R. CLOWARD & L. OHLIN, note 1 *supra*.

⁹ F. ADLER, *supra* note 6, at 94-95.

volvement. We hypothesize that it is the perceived absence of opportunities as such and not the perceived cause of the blockage (whether it be racial discrimination, sex discrimination, or whatever), that is likely to be productive of delinquency.

METHOD AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF VARIABLES

The data presented in the analysis that follows were derived from anonymous self-report questionnaires administered to a 1977 sample of 1,355 students in three midwestern, urban high schools. While the sample was not random, it was selected so as to maximize variation along important demographic dimensions. The mean age of the sample subjects was 16.37 years with a standard deviation of 1.03. Females constituted 55% of the sample. Forty-nine percent of the subjects were white, with the remaining non-whites being predominately black (42% of the total sample). The Warner¹⁰ seven-point Revised Occupational Scale (coded so that "1" represents the lowest status category, "7" the highest) yielded the following socioeconomic distribution: 1 = 13%; 2 = 20%; 3 = 19%; 4 = 18%; 5 = 11%; 6 = 12%; and 7 = 7%, with a mean of 3.59 and a standard deviation of 1.78.

When broken down into subsamples on the basis of sex, the demographic characteristics remained virtually the same. For the male subsample, 48% were white, the remaining non-whites being predominately black (44% of the male subsample). Of the females, 50% were white, with the remaining non-whites again being predominately black (41% of the female subsample). The mean age for males was 16.42 years with a standard deviation of 1.02, while for females the mean was 16.33 with a standard deviation of 1.04. The Warner socioeconomic distribution for the two subsamples follows. Males: 1 = 11%; 2 = 20%; 3 = 19%; 4 = 18%; 5 = 10%; 6 = 15% and 7 = 7%, with a mean of 3.67 and a standard deviation of 1.80. Females: 1 = 13%; 2 = 20%; 3 = 20%; 4 = 17%; 5 = 12%; 6 = 11%; and 7 = 7%, with a mean of 3.52 and a standard deviation of 1.77.¹¹

The variables to be examined in the analysis were operationalized in the following manner:

¹⁰ L. WARNER, M. MEEKER & K. FELS, *SOCIAL CLASS IN AMERICA* (1949).

¹¹ The reader is cautioned as to the possibility of a race-class bias in the data since the socioeconomic distribution tends to be skewed toward the lower statuses for non-whites ($\mu = 3.07$), and toward the higher statuses for whites ($\mu = 4.07$). The Warner *et al.* distribution for the four race-sex groups follows. *white males*: 1 = 8%; 2 = 16%; 3 = 18%; 4 = 16%; 5 = 12%; 6 = 20%; and 7 = 10%, with a mean of 4.06 and a standard deviation of

Delinquency involvement was measured by a combination of items selected from the Short-Nye¹² and Sellin-Wolfgang¹³ self-report inventories. Individual items were selected so as to maximize the seriousness range of the behaviors. A total delinquency involvement score for each subject was derived from the summation of the thirty-six personal, property, and victimless/status offense items which were included in the scale. The coding scheme for self-reported involvement in each of these acts was as follows: "Very Often" = 4; "Several Times" = 3; "Once or Twice" = 2; and "Never" = 1.

Questionnaire items measuring socioeconomic status were modifications of items taken from Blau and Duncan,¹⁴ with the subjects' social status positions determined by the Warner seven-point Revised Occupational Scale. High scale scores reflected high status.

Perception of general blocked opportunity was defined as the awareness of blocked or limited access to legitimate educational and occupational opportunities. Scale items designed to measure this variable were modifications of items taken from Landis¹⁵ and Short.¹⁶ High scale scores indicate a perception of blocked or limited opportunities. Perception of gender-based blocked opportunity was similarly defined except that these items were intended to measure whether or not the subject perceives a limitation of legitimate opportunities *as a result of occupying the status-role of female*. Representative items were: "Men tend to discriminate against women in hiring, firing and promotion" and "Many qualified women can't get good jobs;

1.84. *white females*: 1 = 6%; 2 = 16%; 3 = 19%; 4 = 20%; 5 = 13%; 6 = 15%; and 7 = 11%, with a mean of 4.08 and a standard deviation of 1.75. *non-white males*: 1 = 15%; 2 = 24%; 3 = 20%; 4 = 20%; 5 = 7%; 6 = 10%; and 7 = 4%, with a mean of 3.26 and a standard deviation of 1.67. *non-white females*: 1 = 22%; 2 = 25%; 3 = 20%; 4 = 14%; 5 = 11%; 6 = 6%; and 7 = 2%, with a mean of 2.90 and a standard deviation of 1.57. The reader should keep these sample characteristics in mind when evaluating the results to follow.

¹² Short & Nye, *Reported Behavior as a Criteria of Deviant Behavior*, 5 Soc. Prob. 207 (1957).

¹³ T. SELLIN & M. WOLFGANG, *THE MEASUREMENT OF DELINQUENCY* (1964).

¹⁴ P. BLAU & D. DUNCAN, *THE AMERICAN OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE* (1967).

¹⁵ Landis, Dinitz & Reckless, *Implementing Two Theories of Delinquency: Value Orientation and Awareness of Limited Opportunity*, 47 Soc. & Soc. Research 408 (1963).

¹⁶ Short, Rivera & Tennyson, *Perceived Opportunities, Gang Membership, and Delinquency*, 30 Am. Soc. Rev. 56 (1965).

men with the same skills have much less trouble.¹⁷ The items included in this scale were modifications of items taken from Mason,¹⁷ Kelley and Suelzle,¹⁸ and Erskine.¹⁹ High scale scores reflected a perception of gender-based blocked opportunities.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The analysis to follow will examine the relationship of adolescents' perception of blocked opportunity, in general and on the basis of gender, to delinquency involvement. Beyond this straightforward comparison of the relative importance of the two opportunity variables, the analysis also will assess the impact of these perceptions controlling for the effect of race, sex, and socioeconomic status.

Table 1 presents the intercorrelations among the major variables to be examined in the analysis. General blocked opportunity clearly bears the strongest zero-order association with delinquency and (see Table 2) accounts for the most explained variance in juvenile involvement. Further, since general blocked opportunity is negatively related to socioeconomic status, one would predict, consistent with subcultural theory,²⁰ that to the extent that perception of limited opportunity is predictive of delinquency, the incidence of juvenile misbehavior would be greatest in the lower class. Although such an explanation has been applied primarily to males, it is not unreasonable to expect this relationship to persist in the female case as well. That is, perception of general blocked opportunity is, theoretically at least, a function of social class position, not of gender, so that similarly situated males and females should be similarly affected. These data indicate, however, that while perception of blocked opportunity indeed is related to delinquency involvement, adolescent misbehavior itself is unrelated to socioeconomic status.

Although this is an interesting finding, the data in Table 1 are more notable for what they do not tell us than for what they actually do reveal. For example, perhaps gender-based blocked opportunity is unrelated to delinquency involvement be-

¹⁷ K. MASON, D. DENISON & A. SCHAT, *SEX-ROLE ATTITUDE ITEMS AND SCALES FROM U.S. SAMPLE SURVEYS* (1975).

¹⁸ Kelly & Suelzle, *Family, Career, and Political Ideology: A Preliminary Account* (1971) (paper read at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Denver, Colo.).

¹⁹ Erskine, *The Polls: Women's Role*, 35 *PUB. OPINION Q.* 275 (1971).

²⁰ See R. CLOWARD & L. OHLIN, note 1 *supra*; A. COHEN, note 1 *supra*.

TABLE 1
INTERCORRELATION MATRIX (R)

	X1	X2	X3	X4
X1	1.00	.24*	.02	.04
X2		1.00	.03	-.22*
X3			1.00	.13*
X4				1.00

X1 = Delinquency Involvement

X2 = Perception of General Blocked Opportunity

X3 = Perception of Gender-Based Blocked Opportunity

X4 = Socioeconomic Status

* $p < .001$

cause no distinction is made between males and females in the table. One would certainly expect this perception to be more closely associated with the delinquent behavior of females than of males, since it is defined in terms of a restriction of opportunities resulting from one's female gender. Obviously, this will have little meaning for males, and the inclusion of males in the sample on which this association is based may simply be depressing the strength, as well as altering the direction of the relationship. Secondly, the data in Table 1 do not distinguish between racial groups, and on the basis of similar research,²¹ we would expect there to be significant racial variation in the impact of the independent variables on juvenile misbehavior. Finally, it is not unlikely that there are significant class differences as well. For these reasons, the analysis to follow will examine the relationships presented in Table 1 separately for racial and sex groups and controlling for the effect of socioeconomic status.

Table 2 presents, for the total sample and the four race-sex groups, the results of the regression of the three independent variables on delinquency involvement.²² In general, these data not only re-

²¹ See Katznelson, *The Female Offender in Washington, D.C.* (1975) (paper read at the meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Toronto); Cernkovich & Giordano, *A Comparative Analysis of Male and Female Delinquency*, 20 *Soc. Q.* 131 (1979); Giordano & Cernkovich, *On Complicating the Relationship Between the Liberation Delinquency* (publication forthcoming in *Soc. Prob.*, 1979).

²² The reader should note that there are a substantial number of missing cases in the sample. This is primarily a function of missing data on the general and gender-based opportunity scales. The items comprising these scales were the last ones presented in a rather lengthy questionnaire, and since there was a time limit for completing the schedule (a 50-minute class period), many of

TABLE 2
MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR TOTAL SAMPLE AND FOUR RACE-SEX GROUPS

Independent Variable	Multiple R	R Square	RSQ Change	Beta	(p)
Dependent Variable = Delinquency Involvement					
Socioeconomic Status	.048	.002	.002	.113	(.001)
General Blocked Opportunity	.268	.072	.070	.271	(.001)
Gender-Based Blocked Opportunity	.268	.072	.000	-.005	(ns)
<i>Total Sample (N = 917; F = 23.56, p < .001)</i>					
Socioeconomic Status	.034	.001	.001	.028	(ns)
General Blocked Opportunity	.311	.097	.096	.317	(.001)
Gender-Based Blocked Opportunity	.323	.104	.007	.088	(.05)
<i>White Females (N = 324; F = 12.43, p < .001)</i>					
Socioeconomic Status	.022	.000	.000	.040	(ns)
General Blocked Opportunity	.079	.006	.006	.085	(ns)
Gender-Based Blocked Opportunity	.087	.007	.001	-.039	(ns)
<i>Non-White Females (N = 221; F = 0.56, p < ns)</i>					
Socioeconomic Status	.062	.004	.004	.142	(.01)
General Blocked Opportunity	.359	.129	.125	.361	(.001)
Gender-Based Blocked Opportunity	.360	.129	.000	-.025	(ns)
<i>White Males (N = 231; F = 11.24, p < .001)</i>					
Socioeconomic Status	.027	.001	.001	.008	(ns)
General Blocked Opportunity	.154	.024	.023	.153	(.05)
Gender-Based Blocked Opportunity	.163	.027	.003	-.055	(ns)
<i>Non-White Males (N = 135; F = 1.20, p < ns)</i>					

veal interesting differences in the relative contribution of the two opportunity variables to delinquency involvement, but also indicate significant variation in their impact on the delinquent behavior of the four race-sex groups.

First, perception of limited educational/occupational opportunity is a much better predictor of delinquency involvement than is perception of gender-based blocked opportunity. This again should not be surprising for the male groups since gender-based opportunity is defined in terms of female status. However, the fact that gender-based opportunity bears little relationship to female delinquency involvement is quite interesting. The orientation posited by Adler²³ and others, which suggested a relatively direct relationship between sex-

role liberation and female delinquency, would lead one to expect female involvement to be closely associated with the view that one's opportunities are restricted on the basis of gender. This clearly is not the case. Both white (Beta = .088) and non-white (Beta = -.039) females' delinquent involvement were found to be virtually unrelated (or negatively related) to the belief that opportunities are limited for reasons of sex discrimination. Rather, the evaluation of general opportunities was a much stronger predictor of delinquency, especially for white females. Specifically, of the 10.4% variance explained in white female involvement, general blocked opportunity accounted for 9.6% itself. Gender-based blocked opportunity contributed only 0.7% to the total.

Secondly, it was clear from our study that there are more similarities within racial groups than within sex groups; that is, the regression equations are statistically significant ($p < .001$) for the two white groups, but nonsignificant for non-white males and females. Further, the impact of general blocked opportunity was greater for white males (Beta = .361) and females (Beta = .317) than for non-white males (Beta = .153) and females (Beta = .085). Intuitively, one might expect there to be more similarities within sex groups than within

the students simply were not able to respond to these items. This obviously creates the potential for bias. However, detailed dummy variable analysis (wherein the three independent variables were coded as either missing or not missing) revealed no significant correlation whatever with the dependent variable and no significant contribution to the explained variance in delinquency involvement. This was the case for the total sample and for the four separate race-sex groups to be examined in the analysis.

²³ F. ADLER, note 6 *supra*.

racial groups. There certainly would seem to be a reasonable amount of substantive support for this expectation. To the extent that males traditionally have been more tied in to the economic system than have females and have also been socially expected to assume primary economic roles, we would expect males to be acutely attuned to their future occupational/educational opportunities, options and overall probabilities of success. Insofar as they are so conditioned, it would have been expected from such a model that the thwarting of occupation-related aspirations/expectations would be productive of delinquency involvement. This is not to say that females do not have these concerns or that they are not similarly affected by a restriction of opportunities. However, to the extent that females have less often than males assumed primary economic/occupational roles, historically at least this variable simply would have been expected to be much more salient for males than for females. However, the data in Table 2 obviously do not support this view. Nor do they support the perspective that blocked opportunity should be similarly related to the delinquency involvement of white males and non-white females since it often is assumed that these two groups are similar in the economic/occupational roles that they perform for their respective families.

Overall then, blocked opportunity is more strongly associated with the delinquency involvement of whites than of non-whites, regardless of sex. Why this should be the case, however, is not readily apparent. One possible explanation is suggested by the data in Table 3. These data reveal that non-white females have a higher mean score on the general blocked opportunity scale than do white females ($p < .001$). At the same time, there is less variation in this perception among the non-whites than among the whites. Since this same pattern prevails for the male subgroups as well ($p < .003$), it appears that non-whites as a group are

more likely than whites as a group to perceive a blockage of legitimate opportunities ($p < .001$). Substantively, this means that while non-whites may in fact perceive fewer opportunities for success than whites, the fact that there is less variation in this perception among the non-whites indicates that it will not as effectively discriminate between delinquents and non-delinquents, or among those with varying levels of involvement in delinquent activities.

A related explanation would suggest that to the extent that non-whites as a group historically have been more likely than whites to perceive a blockage of effective opportunities, there may have developed an attitude of resignation concerning future occupational goals. If limited opportunity is defined as a fact of life by non-whites, particularly lower-status non-whites, the fulfillment of such an expectation may simply not engender frustration, bitterness or pressures toward deviance. Whites, on the other hand, especially higher-status whites, simply may entertain more lofty goals or may not expect opportunities to be restricted, so that when there are blockages of life changes, such a situation may create extreme frustration and bitterness with the attendant pressures toward delinquency. Such an explanation must, however, remain a matter of conjecture since there are no data presented here to support or refute it.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The focus of the present research has been on the application of opportunity theory to the explanation of female delinquency. Self-report data gathered from 1,355 male and female high school students showed general blocked opportunity to be significantly more predictive of delinquency than any other variable examined. Gender-based blocked opportunity was found to be altogether unrelated to delinquency involvement. Separate analyses by race and sex revealed the same overall

TABLE 3
MEAN SCORES AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR DELINQUENCY INVOLVEMENT, GENERAL BLOCKED OPPORTUNITY AND GENDER-BASED BLOCKED OPPORTUNITY

	Delinquent Involvement			General Blocked Opportunity			Gender-Based Blocked Opportunity		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
White Males	1.61	.42	286	2.35	.56	259	2.88	.50	248
Non-White Males	1.56	.39	280	2.50	.49	188	2.85	.44	173
White Females	1.46	.34	367	2.20	.55	352	2.87	.55	346
Non-White Females	1.39	.27	339	2.39	.51	285	2.87	.48	269

pattern, in addition to indicating important differentials in the impact of the opportunity variables among the four race-sex groups. Specifically, the influence of blocked opportunity on subsequent delinquency involvement was greater in the case of whites than of non-whites, regardless of sex.

Aside from the straightforward finding that general blocked opportunity was more strongly associated with the delinquency of females than was gender-based blocked opportunity, the remainder of the results were rather difficult to interpret. This was particularly true with regard to the finding of more similarities within racial groups than within sex groups. Why whites, both male and female, should be more significantly affected by a perceived blockage of opportunities than non-whites is not easily accounted for. It was suggested, however, that this may be a function of racial variation in the level of expectations regarding occupational/educational goals as well as in the expected access to the available means of attaining specific goals.

This interpretation was highly speculative however, and the issue clearly demands further research and specification.

In light of the findings presented here, this paper points to the utility of examining, in relation to female delinquency, variables which have proven useful in the explanation of the misbehavior of adolescent males. At the same time, it is hoped that the orientation of the present research does not encourage an assumption that females who engage in delinquent activities are more "male-like" than those who remain relatively conformist. Our perspective by no means suggests that gender-specific variables do not operate in the genesis of juvenile delinquency. Nonetheless, by rushing to find differences or unique explanations, we invariably ignore important similarities in the nature, patterning, and causation of male and female delinquency involvement. Subsequent research hopefully will break away from this unfortunately narrow tradition.