Low Self-Control Theory

Crime and the Life Course

SOC 401
Two Mechanisms Producing Stability in Crime

• James Heckman: Unobserved heterogeneity vs. state dependence in employment

• Unobserved Heterogeneity
  ▫ Individual differences that are stable over time.
  ▫ E.g., IQ, personality, sex, race
  ▫ If their effects on crime do not change over time, they will produce stability in crime.

• State Dependence
  ▫ Committing crime at one time changes the probability of committing a crime at a second time.
  ▫ E.g., labeling and stigma, peer associations, learning, opportunities.
Unobserved Heterogeneity

Correlated over time (stability)

Crime Time 1

Crime Time 2

Crime Time 3

Uncorrelated after controlling for unobserved heterogeneity
State Dependence

Correlated over time

Crime Time 1

Crime Time 2

Crime Time 3

Crime Time 1

Crime Time 2

Crime Time 3
Both State Dependence and Unobserved Heterogeneity

Unobserved Heterogeneity

Crime Time 1 —> Crime Time 2 —> Crime Time 3

Correlated over time
Assumptions of Control Theories

- **Consensus model of society**: Society consists of a single moral order
- **Crime is not relative**, but is invariant across time and societies
- **Everyone is equally-motivated to commit crime**
  - Crime is **not learned**
  - Explain conformity, not crime
A General Theory of Crime: Low Self Control Theory

- Universal definition of crime: force or fraud committed for self-interested gain.
- Assumes criminal acts are short-lived, immediately gratifying, simple, easy, and exciting.
- Crime shares much with some noncriminal behavior: gambling, accidents, skydiving
Three Empirical Facts that Other Criminological Theories Cannot Explain

- Age distribution of crime is invariant across time, social groups, societies
- Versatility (or lack of specialization)
  - Cafeteria-style offending patterns
  - Wolfgang, et al., Delinquency in a Birth Cohort
- Stability of Crime
  - After about age 8, crime is relatively stable
  - Best predictor is prior crime
Identifying the Concept of Low Self Control

H&G: Look at modal characteristics of crime and infer modal characteristics of criminals:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Crimes</th>
<th>Characteristics of Criminals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exciting &amp; risky</td>
<td>Seek excitement and risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediately pleasurable</td>
<td>Seek immediate pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No delayed gratification</td>
<td>Cannot delay gratification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No manual or academic skill</td>
<td>Lack manual or academic skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entails suffering of others</td>
<td>Indifferent to suffering of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-centered</td>
<td>Tend to be self-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive</td>
<td>Tend to be impulsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low tolerance for frustration</td>
<td>Have a low tolerance for frustration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adds up to low self-control: A stable trait like personality. Doesn’t change throughout the life course (Note: example of unobserved heterogeneity.)
Low Self Control and Stability of Crime

- People high on self-control have low propensity to crime at all times.
- People low on self-control have high propensity to commit crimes at all times.
- But they don’t have to: Depends on opportunity and the situation.
  - Given a crime opportunity, individuals will calculate costs and benefits of crime.
  - But persons low on self control will have less control (seek immediate rewards and discount long term outcomes).
- Explains the stability in crime (note: unobserved heterogeneity).
Low Self Control & Versatility

• People low on self control are also more likely to engage in risky noncrimes:
  ▫ Unwed pregnancies
  ▫ Illicit sex (premarital and extramarital)
  ▫ Smoking, drinking, drugs
  ▫ Gambling
  ▫ Divorce
  ▫ Accidents
  ▫ Fired from job

• Whether they engage in a particular criminal offense or risky behavior depends on opportunity and situations.
Low Self Control & Age Distribution

- Distinguish between criminal propensity (low self-control) and criminal events (situations)

- **Criminal propensity** is low self-control: stable individual trait causing high propensity throughout the life course

- **Criminal events** are the “event-like” character of crimes:
  - Criminal opportunity: suitable targets and capable guardians
  - Rational choice: weighing of costs and benefits
  - Physical ability and skills
  - Age

- Serious offenses are more “event-like” and explained both by propensity and criminal events

- Nonserious crimes (e.g., petty theft, vandalism) are not “event-like” (no special opportunities needed) and are explained by propensity only

- This explains the age effect, which operates through criminal events
Origins of Low Self Control

• Early parental child-rearing
  ▫ Caring parents will identify undesirable behavior and punish it through disapproval. Result: High self-control
  ▫ Some parents don’t recognize such behavior or fail to punish it. Result: Low self-control

• Influences: Attachment, caring parents, parental criminality and low self-control, many children in the home

• Schools play a secondary role (require parental cooperation).
  ▫ Teachers monitor and punish behavior to maintain order.
  ▫ High self-control is required for doing homework, getting good grades, getting along with others, liking school (attachment and commitment)
Criminal Organization and Delinquent Gangs

- Criminal and delinquent organizations don’t exist.
- Mafia is a creation of the media and Department of Justice.
- Crips and Bloods were fanciful creations of Daryl Gates (L.A. Police Chief).
- Criminals cannot sustain stable organization or relationships: lack social skills, planning, etc.
- Criminals fight and victimize their peers.
Delinquent Peers and Delinquency

Correlation between delinquent peers and delinquent behavior is not causal

- **Spurious:** Low self-control causes delinquency and delinquent peer association
- **Reverse causal order (selection effect):** “Birds of a feather flock together”
- **Measurement artifact:** (asking respondent about delinquent peers tells us about his/her own delinquency)
Delinquent Peers and Crime are Spuriously Correlated

Low Self Control → Delinquent Peers → Crime
Birds of a Feather Flock Together

- Low Self Control
- Delinquent Peers
- Crime

Crime causes delinquent peers
Life Course Transitions and Crime

• Life course events have no effect on crime.

• Work, marriage, military are spuriously correlated with crime.
  ▫ Confounding variable: low self control.
  ▫ Low self-control selects for poor jobs, divorce, and desertion.
  ▫ High self-control selects for good jobs, marriage, and military service.

• If you controlled for low self-control, the correlation between life course events becomes zero.
Life Course Events and Crime: Spurious due to Low Self Control
Criticism: Tautology (Circular Argument)

- Akers: Self-control is identified by characteristics of crimes. Therefore, the theory argues that crime causes crime.

- In fact, H&G argue that the best measure of low self-control is prior crime.

- H&G: Tautologies can be good. Question is whether empirically it explains crimes.

- Empirical research: Has difficulty separating out measures of self-control from characteristics of crimes.