Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory
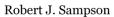
Crime and the Life Course
SOC 401D

Sampson and Laub. 1993 *Crime in the Making*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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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

Build on Hirschi's (1969) Social Control Theory

- Take deviance for granted; conformity is problematic
  - Crime is not learned; it is natural.
  - Why do some people refrain from crime?
  - Answer: Strong bonds to society.
- Bond to society
  - Attachment to parents, peers, teachers, others.
  - Commitment to conventional activities
    - Acquire education.
    - Develop a career.
    - Build a reputation.
  - Involvement in conventional activities (idle hands are the devils workshop.
  - Belief in the moral order.
- When the bond is weak or broken, individuals are free to deviate if they so desire.
- Delinquent peers do not transmit crime.

Stability and Change in Offending

- If crime is correlated .60 over time, that means that stability explains 36%
- Leaves 64% unexplained by stability. This is change.
- Assume individual differences in propensity to offend
  - Maybe due to early socialization
  - Maybe due to genetics and prenatal care
- Beyond individual differences in propensity, try to explain variation over the life course.

Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control – Sampson and Laub

- Follow Hirschi (1969) emphasizing informal social bonds.
  - Interpersonal social bonds:
    - Parent-child
    - teacher-student
    - friendships
  - Social bonds (embeddedness) to conventional institutions:
    - Families: marriage, parenthood
    - Schools: commitment to education
    - Workplace: job stability
    - Military
- Allow social bonds to vary across the life course

Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control, continued

- Emphasize life course trajectories and turning points.
- Trajectories begin early in life
  - Shaped by parent-child socialization – build in controls
  - Trajectories shaped by interaction with environment
  - Cumulative continuity
- Turning points: Life course transitions
  - Transition to adolescence and adulthood: what does this consist of?
  - Elementary school: attachment and commitment to school
    - Peer processes: attachment to peers reduces delinquency
    - Delinquency is not learned from delinquents
    - Delinquent peers may increase delinquency by providing criminal opportunities or situational motives

Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control, continued

- Turning points, con't.
  - High school: commitment and attachments reduce crime (see Hirschi)
  - Deemphasize subcultures
  - Adulthood
    - Job stability
    - Military service
    - Marriage
- In examining turning points, always consider selection into the life course role
  - Unobserved heterogeneity: delinquency selects negatively for life course roles
  - Cumulative continuity: temperamental children select into negative social environments
  - But net of selection, Sampson and Laub argue that life course transitions reduce crime.

Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control, Laub and Sampson

- Modified their theory based on qualitative interviews
- Emphasis on three concepts:
  - Human Agency: subject's constructive activity (emergent process)
  - Situational Context: routine activities & opportunity (suitable targets, capable guardians)
  - Historical Context: effect of WWII and the GI bill for members of the Glueck sample.

Criticisms of Informal Social Control Theory

- Causal mechanisms explaining life course transitions are simple
    - Job stability, good marriages, military service
    - Relies on Hirschi
    - Need a situational decision-making model
    - No theory of the meaning of crime.
- Parenting and child development is not well-developed
    - Child development
    - Interplay between genetics and environment not well developed
- Reliance on control theory ignores the role of subculture, organization among criminals, and delinquent peers.