

Pragmatism & Symbolic Interaction

Crime and the Life Course
SOC 401D

Rational Choice Theory (briefly)

- **Utility Maximization Theory**

- Maximize utility subject to constraints
- Utility function for crime (Gary Becker 1968):

$$E(U) = (1 - p) U(y) + p U(y - f)$$

where $U(\)$ = utility function

$E(U)$ = expected utility

p = likelihood of being punished for the crime

y = expected returns (material or psychic) from crime

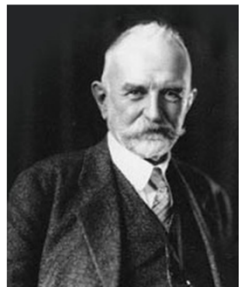
F = expected penalty resulting if the actor is punished for the crime

- **We maximize this utility function subject to constraints (time, ability, money)**

- **Bounded Rationality**

- We have limited capacity for information processing
- We are usually unable to maximize utility
- Instead we “satisfice”
 - Use standing decisions and rules of thumb
 - Consider only two or three alternatives
 - Opt for the best of those considered

American Pragmatism & Symbolic Interactionism



George Herbert Mead
1863-1931

Mead, George H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall



Herbert Blumer
1900-1987

Mead & American Pragmatism

- Social Process, Evolution, and Science
 - Bring scientific methods to bear on practical problems
 - Emphasize social process and evolution (Darwin)
- Meaning of an idea, proposition, or hypothesis lies in its observable consequences
- Pragmatic theory of truth:
 - Truth is not absolute, and cannot be determined outside of social interaction with others.
 - A belief is true when it has practical utility for someone
 - It solves a practical problem
 - A hypothesis is true if it solves a scientists' problem.

Symbolic Interactionists (Blumer)

- Focus on interaction
- Meanings are built up in interaction
- Interpret situation
- Social structure is constituted in interaction
- Emphasis: Study how individuals interpret situations and construct meanings

Social (Symbolic) Interaction (Mead)

- **Social Act:** Interaction between two or more people
- **Meanings are built up in interaction**
 - One person initiates an action (gestures, language, symbols)
 - Elicits a response from an other (gesture, language, symbols)
 - That response gives meaning to the first gesture
 - The meaning is tentative
 - First person responds to the second's response, etc.
 - This may alter meaning of the response
 - Meaning is built up through interaction
 - Because symbols have common meanings, we can share meaning
- **Example**
 - Luckenbill: stages of homicide transactions
 - Insult, perception, response, escalation, retaliation

Taking the Role of the Other (Mead)

- **Habitual behavior**
 - Unthinking, unconscious
 - Most behavior is habitual
- **Problematic situation**
 - An action or impulse is blocked
 - Individuals engage in a cognitive process
 - Take the role of other (put yourself in their shoes)
 - View your self as an object
 - Consider possible solutions from standpoint of others
 - Respond to a hypothetical solution
 - Reject it, move to consider another solution from the standpoint of others
 - Accept it, try it out. Criterion: first idea that seems promising
 - Role-taking: Inner dialogue between phases of the self
 - The “I” is the actor
 - The “me” is the other(s)
 - Agency: dialogue between phases of the self (process)
 - End point: problem is solved, or give up
 - The “me” becomes a part of the self (including the “I”)

The Generalized Other

- Significant others: Reference groups (family, peers, coworkers)
- Generalized others: Organized group
 - Roles in the group
 - Norms and expectations governing roles
 - Locate self in the group versus other roles
 - Institutional control (self control is social control)
- Child development: Play and the game

Role-Taking: Implications

- Decision-making is more like bounded rationality than utility maximization
 - Consider a small number of solutions (from the standpoint of others) serially
 - Accept the first one that “works” (practical solution)
 - Only occurs in problematic situations
- Consistent with dual process models of cognition
- The self (from the standpoint of others) is the key to social control
 - Stable versus situational self
 - Self is multidimensional (reflects organized groups)

Role-Taking and Crime

- Identity theory: stable self will predict behavior
- Reference groups
 - Salient for a given problematic situation
 - Rules and expectations
 - Overlapping reference groups; conflict
- Meaning of criminal behavior
 - Derives from social interaction
 - Once learned, becomes part of the stable self
 - Evaluations, expected consequences

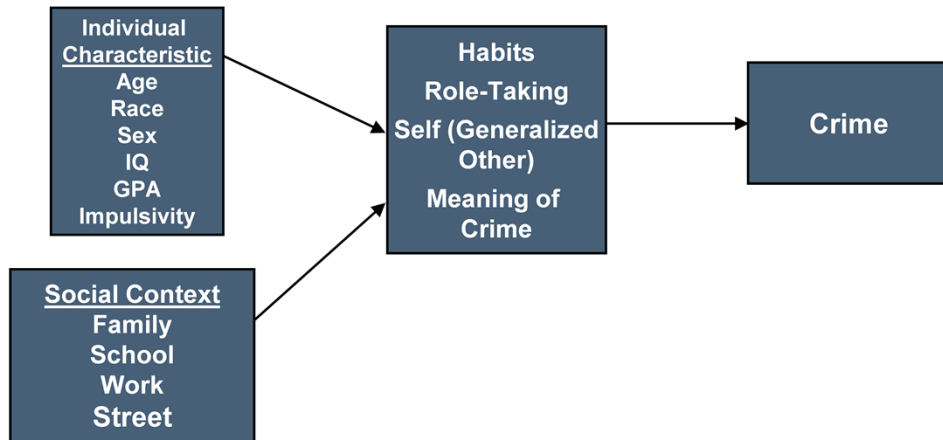
Symbolic Interaction, Crime, & the Life Course

- Life course role transition and crime: Causal mechanism
- Cognitive transformation (Giordano et al. 2003)
 - Envision a new role and new future
 - Give up the past & embark on a new role
 - Hook for change
 - Reconstruct the past in light of the future
- Change reference groups
 - Slowly change the stable self
 - Exercise agency (a process of reconstituting the self)
- Long term change: must maintain new self and reference groups

Labeling Theory

- Definition of deviance: process of interaction in which one is labeled deviant
 - Labeling by powerful groups
 - Self-labeling; fighting labeling
 - Social reality of crime: solipsism
 - Pragmatism: reality out there, can be characterized in many different ways.
- Deviance amplification
 - Negative labeling leading to stigma, segregation, loss of self esteem
 - Problems reentering conventional society
- Primary versus secondary deviance (Lemert)

Causal Implications of Social Learning Theory



Symbolic Interactionism & Crime: Conclusions

- Provides a cognitive theory of decision-making
- Provides a causal mechanism of why role-transitions will affect crime
 - Not just a unidimensional attachment or commitment variable
 - Hooks for change and cognitive transformation
 - Change in reference groups and the self
 - Note: one could transition into a criminal role, which would increase the probability of crime
- Provides a theory of agency
 - Agency is a process of exercising cognition to change one's behavior, situation, and self
 - Agency is a dialectical process between structure and individual
- Weaknesses
 - Difficult to operationalize and test rigorously
 - Not very parsimonious