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Linking Criminal Choices, Routine Activities, Informal Control, and Criminal Outcomes

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Editors' Note

Marcus Felson's chapter is an ingenious attempt to link two currently influential theories in criminology: his own routine activity theory, which explains the supply of criminal opportunities but takes the supply of offenders as given, and Travis Hirschi's control theory, which does precisely the opposite. Felson's key linking concepts are those of the "handled offender," the individual susceptible to informal social control by virtue of his or her (perhaps idiosyncratic) bonds to society, and the "intimate handler," someone with sufficient knowledge of the potential offender to grasp the "handle" and exert control. The routine activities of everyday life set the scene for the web of interaction between these people and between the crime target and any guardians. Felson's chapter also attempts to link these two themes with a rational choice perspective, arguing that, together, routine activity theory and control theory provide the context within which choices are made. This aspect of his synthesis would seem to need further elaboration; at first glance it seems to us to neglect some of the social, psychological, and perhaps even constitutional influences on decision making. Nevertheless the chapter as a whole represents an important pioneering effort to provide a synthesis of theories.

People make choices, but they cannot choose the choices available to them. Nor can they be sure what chain of events will follow from their choices, including choices made by others. People blunder and fail, just as they often get what they want. This chapter seeks to place rational choice theories of crime into a broader context. This context considers how the larger structure of opportunities sets the stage for criminogenic choices as well as influences whether these choices result in successes or failures for those who make them. This approach takes into account regularities in how choices become available or remote to those with criminal inclinations or to those who might, by choice or happenstance, contribute to the informal social control of criminal behavior. The focus

here is upon exploitative crimes in which a victim is clearly distinguished from an offender.

This chapter takes certain human inclinations as given. It is assumed that some people are inclined to break laws, that others are inclined to protect their own person and property, that others are inclined to keep their children out of trouble. These inclinations may vary, but that variation is not the topic of concern here. Rather, this chapter considers how the structure of social life makes it easy or difficult for people to carry out these inclinations.

The hallmark of this analysis is that, although people may have lots of desires and inclinations, they cannot always carry them out. The opportunity structure of society places a limit on human ability to act, including acting on inclinations to commit crimes, to avoid victimization, or to control one's offspring. Moreover, changes in community life can indeed produce more crime without requiring any change in motivations of the population of likely offenders.

Economists might call this a supply question, but most economic theory is based on markets, where supply is allocated to demand via price. I want to buy nails, you want to sell them, and the price is influenced by supply and demand.

Exploitative crime is fundamentally different. If bashing heads is your business, I do not want you to bash mine. We have no meeting of the minds in this matter, and hence no market. If you catch me, it is not by my choice but rather my misfortune. Your mother probably disapproves of your behavior, as well. To attack other people or their property, you usually need to gain direct physical access to them. You have to find or stumble upon them, or they may stumble upon you. This suggests a fundamental principle for understanding the rational order of exploitative crime: The criminal event is a systematic result of the convergence of people and things over space and time. It has a rational order in the sense that we can study it systematically, like the movements of electrons or the responsiveness of price to supply and demand. This does not mean, however, that every party to the event chooses or prefers it or knows the facts leading up to it. It is a convergence without a concurrence, a product of uncoordinated, asymmetric choices.

Indeed, each event requires that one party fail to get what it wants. If a crime occurs, the victim failed to get what he or she wanted. If a crime does not occur, the potential victim succeeded but not the offender. The rational order of how many of the one and how many of the other occur goes beyond the preferences of one actor. Moreover, its dependence upon the physical structure of social phenomena—where people are when and what they are doing—renders crime analysis a special case of the ecology of daily life. Routine activity patterns provide choices to individuals, including criminals, and set the stage for subsequent events determining the success of the offender in carrying out the crime, or of the potential

victim in avoiding victimization, however unwittingly (see Felson, 1983). This boils down to a simple theory of crime production: Changes in the daily life of the community alter the amount of criminal opportunity in society, hence altering crime rates.

This chapter considers the rational structure of crime from the viewpoint of the analyst, not of the offender. The rational crime theory must explain not only the offender's successes but also the offender's failures, as well as the successes and failures of the potential victim.

Let us assume that criminals think and forget, plan and blunder, work and idle, choose and stumble, reason and react, all with some order and predictability. Let us assume also that most victims think or fail to think about their risks, are informed or misinformed, move about or stay put according to certain regularities. Furthermore, let us consider that parents interact predictably with their children, informally controlling them or failing to do so. Finally, let us assume that daily life systematically brings together or disperses offender and victim, parent and child, person and property, and so on.

The basic elements of crime and its control as suggested in this chapter include something old, something borrowed, and something new. To repeat (Cohen and Felson, 1979), a criminal act has three minimal elements: a likely offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardians against crime. The capable guardian is seldom a policeman, more likely a housewife, brother, friend, or passerby. These three elements must converge in time and space for a direct-contact, predatory violation to occur.

Now, let us borrow from Travis Hirschi (1969) the fundamentals of control theory. Hirschi's four elements in the informal social control of delinquency are commitments, attachments, involvements, and beliefs. He reviews these in another chapter of this volume, but I am going to summarize them with one word: handle. Society gains a handle on individuals to prevent rulebreaking by forming the social bond. People have something to lose if others dislike their behavior, if their future is impaired, if their friends and families are upset with them, if they are occupied with conventional activities, or if their beliefs can be situationally invoked to make them feel bad every time they break a rule.

The handle is a necessary condition for informal social control to occur. Lacking commitment to the future, attachments to others, or conventional involvements and beliefs in the rules, an individual has no handle that can be grasped, and informal social control is impossible. The social bond is the handle. This chapter does not consider how handles are affixed as people grow up. Just assume that almost everyone has a handle, and consider how others may grasp that handle to impose informal social control.

In some cases, handles may be sufficiently graspable that they work without names. An older stranger scolds a child, who walks away

shamed, informal sanctions having succeeded anonymously. A young adolescent is humiliated by being told that he will never amount to anything, and he does not stop to think that the humiliator does not know his name, address, or parents.

In time, children learn to go in groups, cheering one another up after scoldings by adults and inoculating one another against future scoldings. On reaching this stage, anonymous scolding loses its force, and handles cannot be grasped by just anyone.

Some youths scoff at parents and the future, but most seem to have specific handles, even if they are not readily controlled by sheer respect for adults in general. If Fred wants to hide his misbehavior from anybody at all, if he pursues any long-term goal, or if his mind contains any belief by which he can be shamed, then a handle remains. Such handles are personal and specific. To grasp the handle you have to know it. Information about Fred's actions last Friday may reach somebody who knows Fred's handle and can grasp it. This information makes Fred subject to informal social control, and its absence makes Fred immune from such control. Effective informal social control over Fred is possible, using his strong social bonds. Yet this potential informal control may be difficult to put into practice. This difficulty stems from poor channels of communication and interaction that prevent existing handles from being grasped by persons who might know how to keep Fred in line.

Combining the old and the borrowed, here is something slightly new. Figure 8.1 presents the "web of informal control" as it applies to exploitative offenses. Four minimal elements are considered: (1) a handled offender, that is, someone who can both offend and be handled; (2) an intimate handler, that is, someone close enough to grasp the handle; (3) a suitable target of crime; and (4) a capable guardian against such a violation. (In the special case where a potential offender is unhandled—that is, lacking in commitments, attachments, involvements, and beliefs—the intimate handler does not exist. In this case, the four

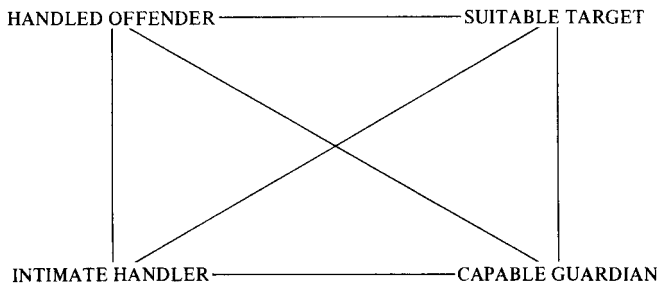


FIGURE 8.1. The web of informal crime control.

minimal elements are reduced to three: offender, target, and guardian.)

To assess the importance of the four elements and the web linking them, let us start with the situation of tightest informal social control and work toward the situation in which such control is most lax. Informal control is tightest when all four elements are in direct physical contact and when relevant people know one another very well. Imagine a duplex with a boy and his mother living on the left and a nice television set and its owner living on the right. The boy has some criminal inclination and is tempted by the TV set, but he is close to his mother, who would never allow him to steal it. She is also a significant mother in crime-control terms because she is at home, knows the neighbor, and recognizes the neighbor's TV set. (She may even function partly in the role of guardian for the neighbor's TV, but we will neglect this point to keep the discussion tidy.) In such a situation, theft is highly unlikely. Even if mother is out and her son can easily monitor the guardian next door, he may be reluctant to risk mom's return at an inopportune moment. Household items and scents may also serve to remind him of his social bonds and to discourage him from committing delinquent acts.

It is likely that this youth will look for or stumble upon criminal opportunities further from home, where he can escape his mother's watchful eye as well as reminders of her bond. However, if he goes a block away, he is endangered by an important intermediary omitted from Figure 8.1: the informant. Someone who knows him and his mother might tell her she saw him over there after dark. Someone who recognizes the television set might ask what he is doing with it. Someone else may function as a guardian.

A tight community—where people know people, property, and their linkages—offers little opportunity for common exploitative crime. The Israeli kibbutz, where crime rates are low because there is not much to steal and nowhere to go with it, is a case in point. (Bordua, David, personal communications, 1973, 1982). The dispersion of kinship and friendship over a wider metropolitan space and the automobilization of the population make more difficult the kind of informal control discussed earlier.

Nonetheless, carrying out an ordinary violation requires that minimal conditions be met, even in a modern metropolis. The handled offender must not have the intimate handler near and must get to a target with the guardian away. As daily activity patterns disperse people away from family and household situations (Felson and Gottfredson, 1984; Cohen and Felson, 1979), it is more likely that criminogenic conditions will apply. Not only will offenders find targets with guardians absent, but they will be able to get away from their handlers and be fairly sure that their handlers will not recognize the loot or compare notes with the guardians. It is not that urbanites lack friends or family ties, or that they

are unhandled, but merely that their handlers are scattered and segregated from the suitable targets and capable guardians. Informants are less and less likely to link the handler to the evidence that Fred has been bad.

Even if Fred is apprehended in a theft situation, the guardian will not be able to invoke informal control easily, not knowing Fred's name or his family. The choices available are to invoke the law of the jungle or the criminal justice system, but not informal social control. It does not take Fred long to learn that "I'll call your mama" is an empty threat from a total stranger, who probably will not notice his lawbreaking anyway.

Some technological and genetic factors assist informal control. Telephones may allow informants to call around quickly and try to find out who the freckle-faced boy belongs to and which one is missing from school at the moment. Adults can compare notes and solve the puzzle. Genetic inheritance of appearance makes it so that, without knowing your name, I might be able to ask, "Is that red-haired kid one of the Johnson boys? He was hanging around when your TV was taken. Maybe I'll have a talk with his dad." The modern, multinucleated family, with stepparents and half-brothers, makes this genetic branding less dependable and reduces the clear link between the intimate handler and the handled delinquent.

The single-parent household gives the community only one parent to know and hence reduces the potential linkages that can be evoked for informal social control. Lower fertility has the same effect. In large families, there is a greater chance I will know one of the brothers and have a good guess that this is the O'Reilly kid. In smaller families, this is less likely, and knowing the particular Smith becomes necessary. High geographic mobility rates make it harder to maintain recognition of one family versus another and to piece together the relationships needed for evoking informal social control. The automobile makes it simpler for youths to evade the risk that this will happen in the first place.

In the event that informants do figure out who an offender is and talk to his or her parents, if they are complete strangers there is greater likelihood that the parents will dismiss the stranger's accusation rather than blame their own flesh and blood. In a tight community, however, where one parent knows another, they may accept the unpleasant truth that their freckled, angel-faced boy broke the law, and then impose informal social control.

Application of technology to personal appearance further clouds responsibilities for informal social control. If the Jones family all have curly, red hair and light complexions, identifying Jones Jr.'s transgressions is simpler. If each Jones selects a different wave and tint, informal social control is complicated. Adolescent adornment patterns may impair informal social control without the need of a subculture simply by impeding identification. Increases in within-family variance

and decreases in between-family variance in appearance may be a long-term social trend detracting from informal social control. Similarly, mass production of goods makes them difficult to identify with a particular owner.

That conventional activities serve to control delinquency was well explained by Hirschi (1969). In his treatment of the issue, involvements in conventional activities can reduce delinquency by keeping youths occupied. Other possibilities can also be imagined. Conventional activities might reduce delinquency if they occur near handlers or their informants, or if they produce new handlers. Also, involvement in desirable activities provides handlers with something they can withdraw as a punishment for delinquency, and hence with an extra handle. When conventional activities have a routine time, place, and list of participants, informants have some facts to check if delinquency is suspected at nearby times and places or if someone is suspiciously absent from conventional activities. The location and timing of conventional activities can be important, for these can be proximate or distant from criminal opportunities. Conventional activities can tie down potential delinquents, but they can also hamstring potential handlers and guardians. Sometimes they bring offender and target together, assemble accomplices, or facilitate transgressions at proximate times and places, after the adults have gone home (see Klein, 1971). Clearly, conventional involvements are a mixed bag. Indeed, Cohen and Felson (1979) argued that increases in certain conventional activities fostered rising crime rates.

None of this discussion hinges on normlessness or changing standards. Indeed, crime can increase even when social bonds persist, parents care deeply, and offender motivation stands pat. All one needs for a crime wave is a decline in the ability of handlers to handle or guardians to guard. What varies is the pattern of daily life and the structure of households, work, school, and transport, as these make it more or less possible for conventional parents to carry out their inclinations and keep their kids out of trouble. Indeed, criminal opportunity can increase greatly if the changing physical structure of communities obstructs the watchful eye of parents. (see Felson and Gottfredson, 1984). When people choose to drive a car, to let their children drive the family car or have their own, to live several miles from work and relatives, to have smaller families, to divorce and remarry, to send their children away to college, to purchase lightweight durable goods, to enjoy alcoholic beverages, or to go out at night, these choices set the stage for criminal events. The latter occur as the result of combinations of choices by different actors, moving about but not consulting one another. They are happenstances resulting from prior decisions. Highly predictable on an actuarial basis, with systematic consequences for crime rates, they yet occur without a meeting of the minds. Handled offenders, intimate handlers, capable guardians, and victims converge and diverge without consultation.

Let me add one more triplet of simple concepts: space, time, and relationships. Here we have some basics of human ecology and social control. People and things stay put and move over space and time and are tied into relationships while doing so. Things belong to people who belong to each other, but these ties are not always reinforced by proximity. When those so tied move together, guardianship and handling are simple. When they diverge, guardianship and handling are impaired. One might envision daily life as an ebb and flow of routine activities, setting the stage for informal social control to succeed much of the time, but not always.

Social change alters the stage, alters the probability that a handled offender and a suitable target will converge without handler or guardian near. The technology of the automobile disperses people over space and time, away from their property, guardians, and handlers. The organization of daily life in the modern metropolis assembles or disperses people for work, school, shopping, and leisure in a fashion that invites crime. Modern metropolitan life disperses people away from family and household settings, drawing strangers together, assembling adolescents without parents or other adults who know them, and otherwise putting informal social control at a disadvantage. The rational order of modern metropolitan life is one in which likely offenders have a greater supply of choices and less room for blunder and are more likely to get what they want, whereas potential victims are less likely to get what they want with regard to evading crime. Moreover, freedom and prosperity, enticing people with social life or stereo components, systematically expose them to the risk of victimization.

Human choice enters at many steps in this process. The choice to move to a new neighborhood is as important as the choice to steal a car. The decision to buy a new car is, in the most basic sense, criminogenic. The decision to buy your son a car may be even more criminogenic. The decision to select a residence on a cul-de-sac or to move to the countryside may be criminocclusive. Different stages of choice affecting the genesis or occlusion of criminal opportunity have been considered by different scholars. Cusson (1983) considers strategic analysis from the offender's viewpoint, taking into account not only property gain but also power and excitement. Brantingham and Brantingham (1984) cataloged the spatial, temporal, and activity features of criminal choice. Rengert and Wasilchik (1980) explored geographic impingements on offender awareness and choice. Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garafolo (1978) showed that decisions about life-styles greatly influence risk of victimization. Mayhew, Clarke, Sturman, and Hough (1976) demonstrated that public system planning has consequences for crime rates. Each of these studies have added an important piece to the puzzle, demonstrating that the rational structure of crime rates has more to it than an all-seeing,

all-knowing offender. Indeed, the criminally inclined population, too, is subject to the irreducible and stubborn facts of the larger environment.

Criminal decision analysis must therefore consider many choices made by many actors at many stages in social and economic life, nor can these decisions be considered in isolation from the physical world. The convergences and divergences of people and things needed for normal crime to occur and the possibility that decisions will go sour make rational analysis of crime more complex. Let me specify another triplet: decisions, situations, and outcomes. To understand criminal opportunity, we need to know not only some of the decisions made by offenders, human targets, guardians, and handlers, but also the situations of their physical convergence as a result of these decisions, regardless of whether the decision makers know what we, as analysts, know. And we have to know the outcome. Was the offender wrong, missing a golden opportunity or committing a silly blunder? Did the getaway car stall or did the selected target trap him? Did the victim succeed by going through the day safe from crime, regardless of whether he or she thought about it? What choices on the part of a citizen produce an unplanned victimization and impair or assist guardianship of targets and handling of offenders? Indeed, a criminal situation is made possible by various decisions by those who set the stage for the convergence of the four minimal elements, however inadvertently. Any set of decisions that assembles a handled offender and a suitable target, in the absence of a capable guardian and intimate handler, will tend to be criminogenic. Conversely, any decision that prevents this convergence will impair criminal acts. Even though an offender may prefer to violate the law, his or her preference can be thwarted by the structure of decisions made by others, regardless of whether they know they are preventing a crime from occurring. In short, we cannot understand the rational structure of criminal behavior by considering the reasoning of only one actor in the system.

These ideas lead to practical advice for the crime researcher and theorist: Count television sets, monitor their portability, check their location. Examine travel patterns away from home; numbers of persons moving about with family, friends, or strangers; adolescent activities with peers and parents; automobilization of youth; shopping patterns, parking patterns, and so forth. Check household composition, housing types, and patterns of occupancy of buildings and of ties among occupants. Examine when crime fails and when it succeeds, as well as its control. Look at hourly patterns of activity and where people are on the map. Check parental position vis-a-vis their own children and patterns of recognition among neighbors. Like physics and physiology, criminogenesis derives from a movement of physically bounded and identifiable entities about the physical world—movements that can be tracked according to map, clock, and calendar, and that from time to time

assemble or disperse the four minimal elements in the web of informal crime control.

A good start can be made by studying just three populations of entities: adolescents, parents, and television sets. Find out the size, location, movements, and convergence of these three populations of entities and you will go a long way in understanding crime rates and their variance over space and time.

Although any event may surprise, the larger population of events is systematized by daily life: the volume of people and goods, their location, and their movements over space and time (see Felson, 1980). To understand the rational order of crime, one must study the volume and composition of people and property, their relationships, and their movements according to map, clock, and calendar.

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