

Piliavin, Irving, Rosemary Gartner, Craig Thornton, and Ross Matsueda. 1986. "Crime, Deterrence, and Rational Choice." *American Sociological Review* 51" 101-119.

Piliavin et al frame their paper by contrasting the different mechanisms of social control raised by our discussion and Kornhauser last week. Arguments about deterrence have centered on the relative importance of internal controls (like norms, values, and socialization ala Durkheim) or external controls (through state coercion ala Hobbes). The authors also cite Becker's economic model of crime (1968, recommended for this week) and Wrong's (1961) critique of normative models and "the oversocialized man" in sociology. Rational choice and deterrence research then is an improvement on normative models and their focus on internal controls and socialization, but the authors argue that empirical research in the area has been overly concerned with the "isolated effects of the severity and certainty of sanctions" while ignoring the impact of perceived rewards associated with crime.

Specifically, Piliavin et al criticize deterrence research in sociology for:

1. utilizing no explicit theoretical framework,
2. ignoring the role of perceptions in macro-level studies (macro-level studies tend to use objective measures of risk),
3. relying on restricted populations of conventional samples (when they should concentrate on those most at risk of crime and those who are "morally uncommitted"),
4. over-reliance on cross-sectional data which doesn't allow for causality through clear temporal ordering,
5. and omitting important control variables, especially measures of rewards and returns associated with crime.

The last point is particularly important as the authors note that deterrence research has yielded no consistent effect of the severity of punishment and only modest certainty effects. That the effects of certainty appear to be conditioned upon norm socialization or variation in strains underscores the paper's argument that deterrence research has suffered from its reliance on samples of conventional populations.

The data are taken from the National Supported Work Demonstration, an experiment which provided employment to three groups: drug addicts who had been in treatment in the last 6 months, those released from prison in the last 6 months, and recent high school dropouts. The sample represents those who the authors describe as "morally uncommitted" and at high risk for criminal offending.

Respondents were followed up to 18 months and asked about their perceived criminal opportunities, the risk of formal (e.g., arrest and imprisonment) and informal (e.g., the loss of friends or a spouse) sanctions if they commit another crime, as well as their self-

reported criminal involvement and arrests. A measurement model of formal and informal risks of crime was specified as well as structural equation models for self-reported offending and arrest. The paper also exploits the longitudinal nature of the data in order to causally order perceptions of costs and benefits of crime prior to offending.

The authors find that perceived costs of crime has almost no impact on offending while perceptions of reward and greater opportunities for crime were more strongly related to offending. Moreover, those with more criminal experiences were less likely to view crime as costly or risky while those who were younger were likely to perceive crime as more rewarding.

Sherman, Lawrence W., Douglas A. Smith, Janell D. Schmidt, and Dennis P. Rogan. 1992. "Crime, Punishment, and State in Conformity: Legal and Informal Control of Domestic Violence." *American Sociological Review* 57: 680-690.

This article is a follow-up to prior research involving an experiment in Minneapolis on the effects of arrest on subsequent domestic violence incidence. Police officers were randomly assigned two responses to domestic violence incidents – arrest or a “talking to” by police in which the offender remained at the home where the incident occurred. The Minneapolis experiment suggested that arrest was uniformly associated with fewer incidents of domestic violence. The results led to the passage of mandatory arrest statutes in 15 states, however, the experiment was replicated in other cities and results from those cities showed no deterrent effect of arrest (some results suggested that arrest actually escalated violence). This article is an attempt to reconcile the disparate results of the domestic violence experiment across several cities.

The authors argue that variation in the degree of social bonding may explain variation in the impact of arrest. Thus, those with greater “stakes in conformity” (Toby 1957) may react differently to arrest relative to those who are less socially-bonded. Prior theoretical research on deterrence and rational-choice suggests three ways in which formal and informal sanctions may interact:

1. Conditional: Least supported in the literature, formal threats may be conditional on informal controls, thus formal legal threats of sanction may only deter those who can be stigmatized (e.g., those who are socially-bonded).
2. Replacement: The opposite of the conditional hypothesis, legal threats may only be effective for those where informal social controls are absent.
3. Additive: Supported in self-report studies, informal and formal social controls may be additive deterrents from crime.

In addition to rational-choice arguments, the authors also outline conflicting expectations with respect to formal sanctioning from the labeling perspective. Classic labeling theories suggest that formal sanctions escalate offending and those who have strong social bonds (to parents, friends, and co-workers) are more vulnerable to the stigma associated with punishment. Alternatively, other labeling theories suggest that those with greater social supports may be less amenable to formal sanctions. In this view, those with strong social networks are buffered from formal legal sanctioning.

The analysis models the interaction between formal sanctioning (arrest) and stakes in conformity (measured with marriage and employment) in Milwaukee. The models were also replicated across other experimental sites to varying degrees. Overall, the findings support the conditional deterrence hypothesis and more recent labeling perspectives in that those with greater social bonds are most amenable to formal sanctioning. Arrest reduced the incidence of domestic violence for offenders who were employed and increased it for those who were unemployed and unmarried.

McCarthy, Bill. 2002. "New Economics of Sociological Criminology." *Annual Review of Sociology*: 28: 417-442.

This review article seeks to update sociologists on the rational choice perspective on crime. McCarthy argues that though most criminologists are familiar with Becker's (1968) economic theory of crime, recent work in the area is less visible. McCarthy presents an overview of the rational choice perspective, reviews rational choice work on crime, and advocates an ambitious research agenda emphasizing game theories of decision-making and individual agency in our explanations of crime.

In his review, McCarthy notes that he does not address research about "whether offenders consider all relevant information" and ignores arguments that focus on offender's personalities or background which prevent them from making rational decisions. He is also careful to distinguish his rational choice perspective from that of Clarke and Cornish's "reasoned offender" approach.

McCarthy first outlines the major features and assumptions of rational choice theory: people have definite preferences, preferences are complete and stable, preferences are influenced by present versus future outcomes, most outcomes are uncertain, costs and benefits are based on information collected by individuals (which is itself a cost, so usually people have access to imperfect or incomplete information), rational actions are those consistent with the above assumptions, and irrational action occurs often. Finally, people's actions are usually also affected by decisions made by others.

In his description of the rational choice approach to crime, McCarthy argues that the perspective is consistent with a number of sociological theories, namely, routine activities approaches, reasoned offender theories, and theories focusing on the features of criminal event. Notably, rational choice is inconsistent with theories over-emphasizing personality problems (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), ineffective socialization (e.g., Durkheim, Sutherland), or structural conditions.

In his review of research on punishment, game theory, and policing, McCarthy notes a number of contributions rational choice can make to the sociological study of crime. The reverse is also true, as economists now incorporate "sociological" variables like guilt, shame, and rejection by significant others as costs in their analyses. Interestingly, these social costs of crime tend to be more important than those elevated by economists (imprisonment or job loss) (but see Piliavin et al).

The study of punishment is but one example of an area where sociologists might benefit from a rational choice perspective (McCarthy provides others in his review of game theory and policing). McCarthy then does not argue that sociology "abandon its interest in culture, values, [and] social structure"; rather sociology should own up to the fact that an assumption of rational decision-making underlies much of its work already and explicitly incorporate its tenets into our work. To that end, McCarthy recommends that sociologists reframe its explanations of crime. For example, McCarthy interprets results from life course research which associate changes in crime over time with major life

course transitions as the result of changes in preferences. Similarly, though sociologists often assume that offender characteristics remain stable across innumerable situations, a rational choice theory allows for greater flexibility in decision-making based on the decisions of others and the conditions of particular events. Related to this, McCarthy describes rational choice as a contextualizing device that lends itself to more dynamic explanations of crime and offending over time (as Sampson advocated last week). Finally, McCarthy's main plea is with respect to the place of individual agency in rational choice theories and his belief that many sociological theories of crime are overly deterministic. Overall, sociology would profit considerably by integrating human agency into its explanations of crime.

Discussion Questions for Class:

1. Sociologists seem resistant to rational choice theory because it undermines a central task of the discipline – explaining the effects of macro-level societal features on individuals. It also undermines one of our central (and beloved) concepts, norms. Is this the case? Does the methodological individualism implied in rational choice theory preclude popular areas of sociological study? Are norms or normative considerations inconsistent with the rational choice perspective?
2. What's the difference between social control theories and rational-choice theories? They both share similar assumptions about the nature of man (a fundamental aspect of theories according to Kornhauser), arguing that people naturally possess strong motivations to offend.
3. The Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities* shows that a slight majority of inmates were drinking or using illegal drugs when they committed the act for which they are incarcerated. What are the implications of this for offenders' evaluation of the risks and rewards associated with crime? Does it matter that empirical research (e.g., Piliavin et al) measures perceived risks and rewards long before the criminal event takes place? How stable are perceptions of risk and reward over time and across situations? Might evaluations of risk be partly dependent on the immediacy of the event being evaluated?
4. McCarthy argues that the rational choice perspective is a “theoretical orientation for explaining how individuals make “rational” choices” but recognizes that many people often do not make rational decisions. His review also does not engage several sources of “irrational” decision-making and offers a number of examples in which rational decisions do not result. To what extent does his description of rational choice theory undermine his argument that rational choice “provides a fruitful approach to understanding criminal decision-making”?
5. McCarthy and others argue that a major contribution of rational choice theory is its emphasis on individual agency in decision-making and that many sociological theories of crime are overly deterministic, especially with regard to structural factors. What is the place of agency in other theories of crime (strain, differential association, cultural deviance, social control, etc)?
6. McCarthy notes that certainty effects of punishment are greatest for whites relative to blacks and Hispanics. What explanation would a rational choice perspective offer for racial differences in deterrent effects?