

Part Two Theoretical Issues

On the Compatibility of Rational Choice and Social Control Theories of Crime

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Editors' Note

In this witty excursion through the recent history of sociological thinking about crime, Travis Hirschi traces the checkered career of the rational choice perspective and discusses the reasons for its persistent failure to be granted status as a serious, testable, or even reasonable theory about human behavior. Hirschi ascribes these vicissitudes to the irreconcilable conflict of basic assumptions about human nature that underlies criminological theorizing—between those who hold to the image of human beings as social animals and those (social control, rational choice, and routine activities theorists) who perceive them as self-seeking. While recognizing the common ground between social control and rational choice theories, Hirschi proposes a division of labor, with social control perspectives providing a general theory of criminality or "involvement" (a theory of offenders), and rational choice providing a theory about specific criminal events (a theory of crimes). He sees two advantages in this division: First, it supplies the event theory with a suitably motivated offender; second, by retaining the concept of criminality—defined broadly as adherence to the pleasure principle—it enables other aspects of offending to be explained, such as its generalist nature and the stability over time of differences across people in their likelihood of arrest. Commenting that the rational choice perspective may overemphasize the intellectual sophistication of the offender, Hirschi suggests that social control theory, through its more realistic image of offenders as "losers," can provide a useful counterbalance. Similarly, it offers a partial corrective to rational choice theory's alleged lack of attention to those background factors commonly thought of as root causes of crime: Certain individual-level properties—such as age, body build, sex, gang membership—are, Hirschi proposes, situational rather than offender variables; that is, they are related to crime but unrelated to criminality. Although (cf. the Introduction) we believe that this division of labor unduly restricts the intended explanatory reach of the rational choice perspective as a general framework within which to think about crime and criminality (a concept about which we also have reservations), there are other ways of cutting the cake. One might be to

propose a tripartite division of labor. In this multistage decision-making scenario, social control theory would address itself to factors influencing the degree of basic criminality and variations therein, whereas a rational choice perspective would concentrate on the decisions relating, first, to involvement in specific crimes (using, among other things, Hirschi's individual-level properties) and, second, to decisions relating to the commission of the crime itself.

Sociology and criminology emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as part of the general revolt against the rational choice perspective. This revolt was driven by the widespread belief that the time had come to apply the techniques, assumptions, and findings of science to the study of human behavior. These techniques, assumptions, and findings did not seem to square with the rational choice model, which assumed that people pursue pleasure and avoid pain, that they can see the future, and that they therefore act to maximize their well-being. This model assumed that the legal power of the state was necessary to limit natural tendencies to use force and fraud in the pursuit of selfish interests. In fact, it often led to the conclusion that the fear of legal sanctions is the major deterrent to crime.

Neither sociology nor criminology treated the rational choice perspective as a testable, serious, or even reasonable theory of human behavior. Rather, they treated it as an obviously false theory, a theory contrary to the assumptions, findings, and techniques of science.

Because rational choice theory assumed that people are free to choose their course of action, it was at odds with the basic premise of science that events are caused by prior events. Because the theory assumed that people consider first their own profit or pleasure, it was at odds with the basic observation of science that humans are social animals found everywhere in naturally harmonious societies. Even the scientific techniques of measurement and experimentation argued against rational choice theory, since neither made sense if free will were at work.

Unfortunately for us, the assumptions of sociology and criminology were not as clear or explicit as those they rejected, and as a result we sometimes have trouble knowing what the fuss was about. Representing modern inductive science, these new disciplines felt free simply to dismiss the rational choice perspective and to excuse the vagueness of their own theories as the inevitable by-product of their grounding in observation rather than on abstract logical principles.

With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to see that these new disciplines were not so free of a priori assumptions. Linked initially to biology, criminology focused on human nature as that of an evolving social animal. Its logic therefore explained crime as the behavior of a *defective* animal. An emergent discipline in its own right, sociology stressed the social nature of human beings, and its logic therefore explained crime as

the behavior of a moral animal caught between groups or in otherwise unfortunate or abnormal circumstances. When, in the first quarter of this century, criminology became a subfield of sociology, all it had to do to become compatible with its parent field was abandon the image of the criminal as defective. Sharing as they did the positivist's distaste for rationalistic, voluntaristic theories of human behavior, sociology and criminology got along very well for some 50 years, with little tension beyond that typical of field-subfield relations.

Given this history, it is easy to understand the concern within sociological criminology for possible contamination from the rational choice perspective. Given this history, it is remarkable how often the rational choice perspective has managed to work its way into sociological theory in general and sociological theories of crime in particular. Apparently, the idea of choice has some special affinity with the idea of crime. Apparently, too, the standard assumptions of the sociological perspective are inherently problematic when applied to an explanation of crime.

Perhaps the most instructive example is found in the work of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim devoted much of his scholarly effort to establishing sociology as an independent discipline. As part of this effort, Durkheim very cleverly refused to consider the individual apart from society on the grounds that such analytic exercises are contrary to nature, where the individual is always found *in* society. This was, of course, a variant of the standard positivistic procedure already described: Do not treat rational choice as an alternative theory. Instead, declare it contrary to nature and go about your business as though it did not exist. So far, so good. But what about such things as lust, greed, selfishness? Do they or do they not exist? Yes, said Durkheim, they do exist. They exist under conditions of egoism or anomie, which are unnatural conditions signifying the breakdown of society. This, too, came to be standard positivistic procedure: First declare the rational choice perspective contrary to nature; then assert that the rational choice perspective is applicable to the unnatural conditions of modern society. Many years after Durkheim, the American sociologist Robert K Merton could be found asserting that "the image of man as an untamed bundle of impulses . . . look[s] more like a caricature than a portrait" (1957:131). Later in the same paper Merton can be found saying that criminal behavior "presupposes that individuals have been imperfectly socialized" and, more directly to the point, that in the American society he was describing:

there occurs an approximation to the situation erroneously held by the utilitarian philosophers to be typical of society, a situation in which calculations of personal advantage and fear of punishment are the only regulating agencies. (1938/1957:149,157)

Social Disorganization

Between Durkheim and Merton, rational choice thinking made an important incursion into American criminology by way of the concept of social disorganization. This concept, too, removed individuals from their natural or normal location in a smoothly functioning society and made them the rational calculators of classical or prescientific theory. Coming as it did from sociology, this perspective focused on the causes and consequences of social disorganization rather than on its own assumptions about human nature and society. The causes of social disorganization—mobility and heterogeneity (i.e., modern American society) follow the traditional pattern: The applicability of the rational choice model and the occurrence of crime presuppose a disruption of natural conditions. In any event, the social disorganization perspective borrowed much from the classical or rational choice perspectives. It assumed that freedom from social influence was an empirical as well as a logical possibility. It assumed that the wants of individuals exceed the means of satisfying them; that wants may be satisfied by illegal means, and that illegal means will be chosen by people when they conclude that the benefits are likely to exceed the costs (Kornhauser, 1978:24).

Although the term itself implies an unnatural or abnormal condition, this was not enough to protect social disorganization from sociology's distaste for rational choice theory. Indeed, the attack on social disorganization theory followed the usual lines: Its assumptions about human nature and society were contrary to fact; it mistook differences in social organization for defects in social organization; it incorrectly assumed that natural propensities are deviant; it therefore failed to provide *a positive* explanation of criminal behavior.

Practice makes perfect, and this second attack on the rational choice model led to theories of crime constructed better to minimize rational choice elements and better to conform to accepted standards of positive science. Before examining these theories, let me say something about the second major incursion of choice thinking into the sociology of crime.

Social Control Theory

The second major incursion came with the social control theories of the 1950s and 1960s. In social control theory, actors weigh the costs and benefits of alternative lines of action, legal and illegal, and choose those they consider most likely to maximize their pleasure. Specifications of the theory, such as my own (Hirschi, 1969), attempt to list the factors the actor takes into account in making this decision—such things as attachment to people or institutions, commitment to conventional lines of action, involvement in noncriminal activities, and belief in the moral validity of

norms. In a more explicitly rational choice context, these same factors might be labeled interpersonal attachments, economic or pecuniary investments, time constraints, and moral considerations. In any event, the theory holds that to the extent these factors have large values the individual is likely to conclude that the costs of crime are not worth the benefits. In pure control theory, it is assumed that all people are capable of crime if the price is right, where price is defined as the product of crime benefits and the likelihood of detection. As a consequence, the theory, like standard choice theory, may be applied to crime anywhere it is found in the social system—as much to white-collar crime as to street crime, to drug use as to robbery or burglary.

Coming from sociology, control theory is not as clean or deductive as those rational choice theories found in, say, economics, but its assumptions seem to be much the same. Because control theories have been advanced by many sociologists (e.g., Reiss, Matza, Toby, Reckless, Nye, Kornhauser) and tests of such theories are reported frequently in the sociological journals, often with favorable results, it might appear that this time there is hope for reconciliation of rational choice and traditional sociological explanations of crime.

Integrated Theory in Sociology

Such optimism is not supported by recent work in the field. When Delbert Elliott reports that the emphasis in sociology in recent years has shifted from competitive tests of alternative theories to efforts to combine "elements of historically divergent theories into more inclusive and powerful theoretical models" (1985:123), the ecumenical spirit he describes does not extend to rational choice theory. On the contrary, rational choice assumptions are specifically eliminated from the integrated models constructed by Elliott and his colleagues, leading me to complain that they have adopted the terms and ignored the claims of control theory (Hirschi, 1979:34). My complaint was based on statements that will be recognized as derivations from the traditional sociological position: "[D]elinquent behavior, like conforming behavior, presupposes a pattern of social relationships through which motives, rationalizations, techniques and rewards can be learned and maintained" (Elliott et al., 1979:13); "We postulate that, in addition to weak bonding and the absence of restraints, some positive motivation is necessary for sustained involvement in delinquent behavior" (1979:15).

Such statements describe what Kornhauser has called the "automaton conformist of cultural deviance theory," an individual whose nature is "wholly passive, docile, tractable, and plastic," a wantless creature so good "he must *learn* to be willful, greedy, and cruel" (1978:35-36). In other words, these statements describe the social animal that nature gave

sociology a hundred years ago to use against rational choice theories of crime, the animal with just the right mix of properties to assure the truth of certain brands of sociology and to deny scientific status to its competitors.

Evidence that this animal is still alive and well is found in a 1983 article in the *American Journal of Sociology* by Mark Colvin and John Pauly, who claim to recognize no less than seven major theoretical currents in sociology today: "learning theory, strain theory, control theory, labeling theory, conflict theory, radical criminology, and . . . integrated theory" (1983:516). Let us briefly look for rational choice content in each of these theoretical traditions as described by Colvin and Pauly.

As described, learning theory has virtually none. As described, it assumes human beings to be social animals who must learn to recognize the potential benefits of force and fraud, animals who engage in such activities only when they have the support of learned favorable evaluations of these activities or the support of important reference groups.

Strain theory, too, has no choice component. This is not surprising: The theory originated in opposition to control theory (Merton, 1938/1957) and has moved progressively away from rational choice assumptions. In his historically important variant of strain theory, Cohen (1955) introduced the reaction formation defense mechanism, making the delinquent's behavior nonutilitarian by definition and clearly overdetermined by the emotions of the situation. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) also described a "desperate" offender forced into crime by unwarranted discrimination.

Labeling theory has roots in symbolic interactionism, a tradition often seen as friendly to choice theory. However, no choice element appears in labeling theory as described by Colvin and Pauly. On the contrary, labeling theory too assumes an animal incapable of sustained violence or greed without social support.

At first glance, conflict theory also sounds as though it might be based on assumptions rather different from those thus far encountered. Again not so. The conflict that is crime is conflict between groups, all of whose members are so well socialized that they cannot even consider acts contrary to their values or to their group's interests. They can, however, recognize criminality in the behavior of those outside their group and can, apparently, choose to notice or ignore it. Such voluntarism is offensive to the authors of the article in question, to whose theory we now turn.

In the "structural-Marxist perspective" described by Colvin and Pauly, the structure of authority on the job is reproduced in the home, in the school, and in the peer group, where it has the same attitudinal and behavioral consequences. The alienated, hostile, and eventually criminal child is a result of the "coercive workplace control structure" experienced by his parents. So, once again, our good animal is made evil by evil

institutions, and the solution to crime is to join in "the workplace struggle by subordinates for more equal and democratically controlled forms of production relations that shape their lives and the lives of their families" (Colvin and Pauly, 1983:545).

The integrated theory proposed by Elliott, Ageton, and Canter is the example of integrated theory discussed by Colvin and Pauly. As indicated earlier, this theory meets the test of the social animal model by acceding to those constituent theories based on such a model. As far as I can determine, the bulk of integration efforts in sociology accede to this model. How, then, do they deal with control theory, a theory based explicitly on the assumption that humans are self-seeking animals?

Colvin and Pauly simply reject the idea of quantitative variation in bonding in favor of the idea that bonding distinctions are qualitative. This is a direct and complete rejection of the basic assumption of control theory. It is a restatement of the position that people differ in the content of socialization rather than in the degree of socialization, from which it follows that all are well and equally socialized. Colvin and Pauly also reject the idea of a "society" or a "conventional order" to which people may be more or less bonded in favor of pluralist, conflict, or class images of the social order. This, too, is a restatement of the traditional position of cultural deviance theory to the effect that people must have different values (preferences?) because they occupy different structural positions and because they behave differently.

So, Colvin and Pauly reject the constituent assumptions of control theory on the grounds that they are "uncritical" or "untenable," and the mystery is why they bother to include control theory in their list in the first place. (One reason control theories are sometimes included in integrations proposed by sociologists is that such integrations are really multiple factor theory in disguise. Such integrations give researchers an excuse to look at everything and still allow them to appear to accede to modern demands for theoretical relevance. Given their frequent appearance in research proposals, integrated theories might well be called "grant" theories.)

In any event, we must conclude that little has changed in the hundred or so years since sociology came into being. Sociology rejected rationalistic, voluntaristic, and individualistic theories then, and it rejects them now. The reasons for rejection remain much the same: Adequate theories of crime must be positive. They must provide the motives for or the causes of criminal behavior. They cannot assume that crime will occur in the absence of restraint, because absence-of-restraint theories are non-scientific in two senses of the term: They are contrary to the scientific assumption that behavior is caused by antecedent events, and they are contrary to the scientific observation that people are naturally social and must therefore be propelled into antisocial behavior by forces over which they have no control.

Causation and Determinism

In my view, the causation issue is easily resolved. As I have argued in detail elsewhere (Hirschi, 1978), positivists often seem to misconstrue cause as synonymous with force or motive when, by their own definitions, causes are merely nonspurious correlates of the effect in question. As such, causes may as well be restraints as motives. Take, for example, IQ, a variable that probably qualifies as a cause of crime by the usual criteria: association, causal order, and nonspuriousness. Assuming that IQ is a cause of crime, we can ask how it is related to crime without being forced to give it to one theoretical scheme rather than another. The strain theorist could and probably would interpret the association between IQ and crime as resulting from cruelty or injustice in the social system. Low-IQ people commit crimes as a means of venting rage at a system that has unfairly oppressed them. As hypothesis, this is fair enough. Its truth is neither confirmed nor denied by the existence of a causal relation between IQ and crime. It certainly has no more a priori claim to accuracy than the hypothesis that low-IQ people are more likely than high-IQ people to commit crimes because they are less able to effect profitable exchange relations with conventional institutions. Being relatively unrewarded by conformity, low-IQ people are simply freer to commit criminal acts and will be more likely to do so should the opportunity arise.

Note that the rational choice explanation also asserts nothing contrary to or inconsistent with the initial conclusion that IQ is a cause of crime. Choice theory is therefore perfectly compatible with the idea that criminal behavior is caused, and choice theory therefore cannot be rejected on grounds of inconsistency with the idea of causation. In choice theories, causes of crime are factors consistently taken into account by the choice maker.

Determinism is harder than causation to deal with in the context of choice theory, if only because the word itself seems to deny choice. Because space is limited, let me quote my earlier conclusion on this question:

Some believe that accepting a probabilistic definition of cause implies retreat from the postulate of determinism. Actually, it does not. To assume that delinquent acts are caused by prior states or events is not to assume that they are determined by any single state or event, but only by some combination of all states and events present at the time they are committed. . . . Some of the [states and events present at the time delinquent acts are committed] are the calculations and desires of the actor himself. It is he who wants sex, money, or peace; it is he who decides they may be had by robbing a liquor store; it is he who concludes no policeman is near the scene. . . . If he is 'compelled' to commit the act, it is by forces common to us all. . . . (Hirschi, 1978:327-330)

Whatever the adequacy of my effort to show agreement between choice

theorists and positivists on the question of determinism, the fact remains that the concept of causation does not commit us to a particular theory of crime. In particular, the concept of causation does not require preference for motivational theories over choice or restraint theories.

If there is nothing in the logic of positivism that would require rejection of rational choice theory, how do we deal with the positivistic *observation* that we are social animals and with the logical consequence of this observation that positive motivation is therefore necessary to explain our criminal acts? I am afraid I know no way to bring rational choice and sociological positivism together on this point. Man the social animal is of course not an observation at all. It is an image, a picture in the mind. Images are theories, and the image of man as a social animal is the core of sociological theories of crime, just as man the rational animal is the core of choice theories of crime. If sociologists will not accept the idea that some people are more social than others (which they apparently will not), we cannot hope to reconcile the social and the rational images, and those who claim to have done so have almost by definition rejected one image in favor of the other.

I come, by a long and circuitous path, to some conclusions: There is no hope for reconciliation of rational choice theory and those theories derived directly from sociological positivism. There is no hope for reconciliation of social control theory and the sociological theories in question. Rational choice theory and social control theory share the same image of man, an image rather different from the image of sociological positivism. Rational choice theory and social control theory are therefore the same theory reared in different disciplinary contexts. Given their distinct histories and circumstances, we would expect social control theory and rational choice theory to have developed models differing markedly in detail and emphasis. If our analysis is correct, however, it should be possible to account for these differences in a reasonably straightforward way. Let us look at some of the more apparent differences between the two theories with this thought in mind.

Crime and Criminality

An obvious difference between choice and social control theory is that one tends to focus on specific crimes—the decision to burgle or not to burgle, to kill or not to kill—whereas the other tends to ignore distinctions among crimes, treating them as being all of a piece. In other words, one theory concentrates on what Clarke and Cornish (1985) call events, and the other concentrates on what they call involvement. Michael Gottfredson and I (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1986) have explored the same distinction using the words *crime* for events and *criminality* for involvement. (Criminality, by the way, we define as

"relatively stable differences among individuals in their propensity to engage in criminal or equivalent acts.") Whatever the terms used, the distinction seems worth making. We do need theories of offenders and we also need theories of offenses, and in the best of all possible worlds these theories would be compatible. It turns out that we seem already to have arrived at this ideal state, for control theory is a theory of criminality, and choice theory is a theory of crime. If, then, the offender is a choice maker whose general situation is such that he or she is likely to depreciate the costs of crime and the benefits of noncrime, it is not difficult to imagine the offender weighing the difficulties in gaining access to a building, the risk of detection, and the probable gain against the desire for a little something extra for a night on the town. In other words, if the offender has been constructed by control theory, the choice theorist need not worry about predispositions or other tendencies of the actor inconsistent with a choice model. I might add that if the offense has been constructed by a choice theorist, the control theorist need not worry about the offender behaving at the scene of the crime in a way inconsistent with control theory—for example, acting as though compelled to commit crime by forces over which he or she has no control.

The distinction between crime and criminality and the division of labor between choice and control theories thus allows us to resolve the long-standing dispute between those who favor looking at specific offenses and those who would treat offenses as interchangeable. At the offender level, it is reasonably clear that offenses are interchangeable. Offenders may be studied without too great concern for the mix of offenses used to describe them. Their general tendency is toward short-term, immediate pleasure without undue concern for how such pleasure is obtained or for long-range consequences. Given this tendency, many criminal acts will suffice, and many noncriminal activities are the functional equivalents of crime (e.g., job quitting, drinking alcohol in the morning on a workday). As a result, offenders rarely specialize in particular crimes, and few have careers in crime in a meaningful or informative sense of the term *career*. (The idea of a career contradicts the idea of criminality, because one involves a capacity for long-term commitment denied by the other.)

At the same time, distinctions among offenses are worthwhile for all sorts of theoretical and practical purposes having little to do (at least directly) with the characteristics of offenders. Burglary can be usefully studied (from a choice or routine activities perspective) without concern for its connection to robbery or rape. It can, we assume, given our theory of the offender, be prevented without producing equivalent increases in robbery or rape. (Displacement effects are limited by the sloth of the offender.) Because the causes of crime are to some extent independent of the causes of criminality, the rate of burglary may change without a change in the number of potential burglars. So it is for all offenses

sufficiently serious to warrant individual attention.

Our distinction also allows us to comment on the serious versus trivial crime issue often encountered in etiological research: It turns out that trivial offenses may be as good as—and in some respects, such as frequency of occurrence, better than—serious offenses in establishing levels of criminality. The assumption that serious crime scales are automatically better than trivial crime scales flows from failure to recall that in research on offenders the criminal event is used as an indicator of some underlying propensity. Seen in this light, it is evident that "more serious" is not identical to "more valid." In fact, the reverse may well be true, because serious crimes almost by definition have more of an eventlike character than trivial crimes. (Person crimes, involving interaction between victim and offender, may be especially problematic as indicators of the criminality of the offender, however serious they or their consequences may be.)

Mindlessness and Intellectualism

In the revolt against the rational choice model, positivists often transformed the offender from a deliberating, intellectual animal to an organism reacting mindlessly to the forces in the environment. In some positivistic research on offenders, such as that of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1950), there is reason to wonder whether the investigators bothered even to talk to their subjects, let alone concern themselves with their decision-making strategies. In the current counterrevolt there is a reverse tendency to see the offender as thoughtful and intellectually sophisticated. I think this tendency should be resisted. Accepting a choice model does not require that we assume planning or foresight beyond the bare minimum necessary for the act to occur. If greater levels of planning and foresight were required by a choice model, I believe the model would be in trouble.

Let me briefly mention some observations I think relevant to this question. The median age of persons arrested for burglary in the United States is about 17. Whatever their age, burglars on the whole are described as having limited skills at gaining entrance to buildings, as doing little in the way of scouting or planning, and as reaping at best modest profits for their efforts (Repetto, 1974). Robbers tend to be older than burglars, but not because robbery requires more skill or planning than burglarly. According to the reports of robbers themselves, robbery is pursued at more advanced ages (here the median is about 22) because robbery is easier than other forms of instrumental crime. In a nutshell, the criminal career does not appear to be a career of increasing skill and sophistication but the reverse, a career that starts with little of either and

goes downhill from there. (Material on robbers cited is from Petersilia et al., 1978).

If my facts are accurate, I see no problem in them for rational choice or control theory. The burglar who enters a house by smashing doors with a crowbar is as compatible with a rational choice model as the burglar who opens doors with counterfeit keys obtained through clever long-range planning. In fact, the crowbar burglar is more compatible with a choice model than the counterfeit-key burglar because it is easier to see burglary as a reasonable choice of occupation for one whose door-opening skills are limited to crowbars. In any event, if choice models are developed to guide crime prevention policy, accurate portrayal of the skills of the offender would seem to be an important ingredient of effective policy.

With its origins in the positivistic disciplines, control theory exhibits little tendency to romanticize offenders or to ascribe to them unusual awareness or foresight. In fact, control theory explicitly asserts that people often turn to crime because their prospects for gain through noncrime are limited. This "loser" image of the offender then carries over into his or her career in crime. Control theory therefore has no difficulty with the view that offenders on the whole are not very good at what they do.

The same kinds of considerations seem to apply in assessing the role of offender-talk in studies from a rational choice perspective. The perspective itself tells us that reason is a servant of the passions, that offenders will use their tongues to cover their tracks, to hide their purposes from themselves as well as from the researcher. So, if the rational choice perspective is open to listening to offenders, to hearing their assessment of the reasons for their actions, it is not committed to believing all it hears.

Correlates of Crime

The choice perspective typically pays little attention to correlates of crime beyond the certainty, celerity, and severity of legal punishment. (The fact that these deterrence variables have an impact on crime in choice theory reminds us that the idea that crime is caused by external events was around long before the positivists made such a fuss about it.) The general tendency is to treat other correlates as "root causes" or "background variables" about which little can be done and which are therefore largely irrelevant to a choice or policy perspective.

This tendency stems from the belief that choice analysis and causal analysis are incompatible. We have seen that this is not the case, that at least in some instances causes of crime may be interpreted as factors that reliably influence the decision to engage or not to engage in criminal acts. This leads to another distinction that has not heretofore been pursued to

the extent it might be, namely, the distinction between correlates of crime and correlates of criminality. There is reason to believe that some individual-level properties affect the likelihood that people will commit crimes without affecting their relative propensities to commit crime—that is, without affecting their criminality. For example, age is strongly related to arrests, but differences across people in the likelihood of arrest remain reasonably stable over long periods of time. This suggests that age is in effect a situational rather than an offender variable and that as such it should be of special interest to choice theory. Other variables that may be related to crime and unrelated to criminality include body build, gang membership, and sex. In all these cases, those in the high-rate categories (males, gang members, those with muscular bodies) may be there because they are more likely to discount the risk of injury from victims or guardians (or the risk of legal penalty). If so, these, too, would be crime rather than criminality variables, variables with a direct impact on the likelihood of criminal events, variables that do not operate through the criminality of the actor.

If there is anything to these speculations, choice theory could benefit from close examination of those individual-level correlates of crime usually relegated to positivistic research. If there is anything to these speculations, the field as a whole could benefit from efforts to measure criminality independent of involvement in crime.

Conclusion

It appears from this brief examination of the history of sociological and choice theories of crime that the image behind a theory is more important than its disciplinary base in determining its compatibility with other theories. Thus, sociological control theories and rational choice theories have much in common, and neither is compatible with those sociological theories that may be traced to the positivistic origins of the discipline.

I continue to see little point in attempting to integrate theories whose basic assumptions are incompatible. In this case, each theory should face the data alone in open competition with alternative theories. At the same time, I see considerable merit in efforts to combine compatible theories that have developed independently of each other. A list of such theories would certainly include rational choice, social control, routine activities, socialization, and at least some varieties of social learning theory.

In this chapter I have mentioned possible contributions of social control theory to development of the rational choice perspective. I am confident that choice theorists could do much to sharpen the insights of control theory were they to accept the task. Certainly they could be more constructive than those who continue to reject control theory on grounds of incompatibility with some sacred image of man.

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