Introduction

Families and Crime

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Abstract
This volume highlights the theoretical and empirical connections between family sociology and criminology. We review the historical interconnections between these two fields. We argue for greater intellectual conversation across the two areas, and then we identify several elements they hold in common. These include their use of social theory, their attention to human development, and their use and appreciation of longitudinal research. We conclude with brief overviews of the six articles that make up this special issue.

Keywords
family sociology, criminology, theory, human development, longitudinal research

Almost 20 years ago, a session at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology was devoted to elaborating the positions of criminology and sociology as academic disciplines (Savelsberg & Sampson, 2002). Although criminology began as a subdiscipline of and continues to be a specialty area in sociology (Akers, 1992; Triplett & Turner, 2010), there has been an increasing gulf between the two, especially as the number of journals and graduate programs dedicated to the study of delinquent and criminal behavior has grown (Wrede & Featherstone, 2012). We are among those who lament this widening gulf since, as specialists in family influences on youth outcomes, we believe that there is much that may be gained by studying the complementary theoretical and empirical contributions of sociology and criminology.

This special issue contributes to advancing an important intellectual conversation regarding the theoretical and empirical overlap between criminology and family sociology. Each field has developed over many years with occasional references to the

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other. Sociologists have studied topics such as the effects of parental working conditions on child behavior problems (Parcel & Menaghan, 1994a, 1994b) and the effects of family structure and process on adolescent delinquency (Zito, 2015; Zito & De Coster, 2016). Criminologists have pursued similar topics, including how parent-child relations influence delinquent activities or whether family turmoil affects the development of antisocial and criminal behaviors (Farrington, 2011; Hoffmann, 2015). Many of their studies draw from one or more theories, including social bonding (Hirschi, 1969), social learning (Akers, 1998), self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), strain (Hollist, Hughes, & Schaible, 2009), or labeling/symbolic interactionism (Matsueda, 1992). Across such studies, there is often awareness of related fields and some degree of intellectual acknowledgment. But there also remain acute areas of overlap that are often overlooked.

Each of us has been actively publishing in this intellectual space for many years. Parcel began studying children’s behavior problems in the 1990s, and more recently, he has investigated family effects on adolescent delinquency and drug use (Dufur, Hoffmann, Braudt, Parcel, & Spence, 2015; Dufur, Parcel, Benjamin, & McKune, 2013; Parcel, Campbell, & Zhong, 2012; Parcel & Menaghan, 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Rogers, Parcel, & Menaghan, 1991). Her approach is to study the role that family characteristics play in affecting the development of problem behaviors in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Hoffmann is a criminologist who has studied family influences—including structure and processes—on delinquency and substance use for more than 25 years (Hoffmann, 1993, 2002, 2015; Hoffmann & Dufur, 2008). Both of us have published works that take seriously the theoretical overlap between these two fields, and where we use insights from each to strengthen the empirical approaches we employ.

In pursuing this work, we have found that often criminologists are underinformed regarding the theoretical and empirical works that family sociologists rely on. Similarly, family sociologists are inconsistent in acknowledging that criminologists have seriously engaged with family effects, both theoretically and empirically. To explore this space further, we organized two paper sessions at the meetings of the American Society of Criminology held in Philadelphia in November 2017. We asked presenters to engage with both family sociology and criminology theory/research in ratios appropriate to their topics and to look for insights from each field. For those scholars whose background was primarily in family sociology, this meant investigating the overlap between the concepts/theories central to their topics and criminological theory, especially the bonding, strain, and learning theories well respected in criminology. For criminologists, this meant considering the ways in which sociologists had treated concepts central to family structure and family processes, especially social capital theory. We deliberately invited several presenters trained in both family sociology and criminology, and who had been actively exploring this key intersection for several years. The sessions were useful for giving authors feedback to improve their work.

We view this special issue as a vehicle for deepening the relationship between family sociology and criminology. We begin by acknowledging the similarities that the
two fields share because these elements provide intellectual building blocks that could facilitate greater cross-fertilization. First, each field is devoted to using and improving social theory. Criminologists distinguish themselves from other professionals studying criminal justice processes and outcomes by organizing their work around theories, such as social bonding, social learning, self-control, strain, and labeling (Cullen, Wright, & Blevins, 2011). Family sociologists also use and inform a variety of theories, including the social exchange and symbolic interaction (e.g., LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009; White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). And, yet, given the common substantive interests, it is likely that theories useful in one subfield may be useful in another. A key example of such an overlap is the use of the social capital perspective (Coleman, 1990; Hoffmann & Dufur, 2008; Parcel & Bixby, 2016; Parcel, Dufur, & Zito, 2010; Portes, 1998). As we indicate below, we believe that this perspective is especially useful for sociologists and criminologists who study social behavior. One goal of this special issue is to explicate theoretical overlaps across these two subfields.

A second way in which the two subfields coincide is in their theoretical attention to processes of human development. Scholars such as Hirschi (1969, 1983) argue that the family is critical to providing the foundation for willingness to avoid deviance. This is accomplished via building social bonds within the family that encourage children to identify with their parents and adopt their prosocial norms, norms that guide offspring behavior even when outside the immediate influence of family members. This foundation provides the means through which children adhere to prosocial norms as they mature, thus creating the potential for resistance to delinquent influences during adolescence and criminal actions during adulthood. Family sociologists also pay considerable attention to processes of human development.

This conceptual overlap leads to a third similarity: the use of longitudinal empirical approaches to evaluate these ideas. For many years, scholars in each subfield have taken advantage of longitudinal databases that contain large numbers of cases, typically children embedded in families, where these cases are followed longitudinally so that social behaviors in later childhood and adolescence may be studied as a function of both contemporaneous and prior characteristics. Several of our articles illustrate this approach. Such databases are typically constructed with the needs of multiple researchers in mind, and often, these researchers come from various subfields and even different disciplines. When such usage occurs, there is the potential for intellectual communities to form around common interests, in this case, motivated by use of the same data. Such interactions provide one mechanism through which we can identify additional commonalities.

Finally, both sociologists and criminologists have placed race and gender at the center of much theoretical and empirical work. To be sure, theoretical frames and empirical approaches vary across scholars, with these ascribed statuses taking a more central role in some studies than in others. Taken as a group, however, scholars in both fields have taken seriously the reality that gender and race condition key social processes differently and that the study of status group differences as well as more in-depth investigations of disadvantaged groups are both legitimate. Several of our articles study these issues within the context of gender and race. These articles further
extend our audience to scholars concerned with inequality based on these social statuses.

This special issue includes six articles that we believe will significantly advance the intellectual conversation around this scholarly overlap, with beneficial effects for both communities. Our first article, by Chris L. Gibson and Abigail A. Fagan, is titled “An Individual Growth Model Analysis of the Effect of Childhood Spanking on Change in Externalizing Behaviors During Adolescence: A Comparison of Whites and African Americans Over a 12-year Period.” There has been substantial attention in sociology, criminology, and psychology about the deleterious effects of corporal punishment on children’s subsequent problem behaviors (Gershoff, 2010). Using data from a longitudinal sample of five regions of the United States, the authors find that there was a significant, positive association between spanking during childhood (measured at ages 4, 6, and 8 years) and initial levels (at age 12 years) of externalizing behaviors for the full sample and for African Americans. However, there are racial differences in patterns of corporal punishment and their effects on problem behaviors, with African American youth affected more by this parenting practice. Their work has implications for both social learning and strain theories.

Our second article explores family effects on criminal behavior among young men. The article is by Stacy Bosick and Paula Fomby, titled “Family Instability in Childhood and Criminal Offending During the Transition to Adulthood.” Using 1,127 18- to 27-year-old young men from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, another longitudinal, nationally representative data set, the authors argue that these issues are relatively unexplored using dynamic measures of family instability. They find that family instability is an important factor in arrests for White men but not for Black men. Their work highlights the importance of attending to the extent to which youths experience family instability, in contrast to earlier formulations that treated one family disruption as equivalent to more than one. Their work has implications of the study of life course criminology, and it brings together the study of criminal offending with both family sociology and social demography.

Monica Bixby Radu’s article, “Do Students’ Perceptions of Unsafe Schools and Experiences With Bullying Hinder the Effects of Family and School Social Capital in Deterring Violence?” is concerned with the moderating effects of family and school characteristics in preventing youth violence. Much research has documented that family characteristics are more powerful than school characteristics in affecting a variety of child and youth outcomes (Dufur et al., 2013; Dufur et al., 2015; Parcel & Dufur, 2001a, 2001b; Parcel et al., 2010). However, as children mature, school characteristics may become more important. In addition, we know relatively little about what factors limit the role of these resources. Using social capital and social control theories and a sample of 4,130 12-14-year-old adolescents from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Radu finds that although family and school social capital act as buffers to deter adolescent violence, when youths have been bullied, family and school resources are less effective in preventing violence. Family resources are also not effective, such that when students perceive that their schools are unsafe, they are more likely to engage in subsequent violence. Her findings have implications for social
capital, social control, and ecological systems theories because they point to the contexts, that is, the family and the school, in which social capital is effective in deterring adolescent violence. They also show the limits of these resources and as such contrast with earlier research pointing to the effectiveness of family social capital. They provide cautionary evidence suggesting that although family and school social capital can be important in preventing child and adolescent deviance, there are limits to their effectiveness when youths have been the victims of bullying.

John P. Hoffmann and Mikaela J. Dufur also explore social capital theory in their article titled “Family Social Capital, Family Social Bonds, and Juvenile Delinquency.” Using the longitudinal and nationally representative data set AddHealth, they study a sample of 6,432 and explore the conceptual overlap and distinctions between social capital and social bonding theories. Examining a series of measurement models, they find that there is both conceptual overlap and conceptual distinction; specifically, they find that family social capital is a more efficient predictor of delinquent behavior than family social bonds. Their work has implications for both these vital theoretical perspectives, as well as for social learning theory. Among the six articles, they take the most rigorous empirical approach to studying exactly where there is overlap between social capital and social bonding theories, and where the two theories diverge. Hoffmann and Dufur’s article provides an important foundation for sociologists and criminologists to consider further their theoretical commonalities and differences regarding these perspectives.

Michael E. Roettger and Susan Dennison review the burgeoning literature on parental incarceration and offspring risks of offending in his article titled “Interrupting Intergenerational Offending in the Context of America’s Social Disaster of Mass Imprisonment.” In contrast to most treatments of social capital and social bonding theories that assume that parental influences are positive, Roettger and Dennison are concerned that there are intergenerational effects of parental deviance. Offering a useful analogy between the sociology of disaster research, which focuses on natural disasters, and parental incarceration, they term the latter a social disaster with attendant traumas that affect the development and life course of youth whose parents are absent due to imprisonment. They argue that parental incarceration has effects on children throughout their development stages, from prenatal through early adulthood. Parental incarceration results in cumulative disadvantages for children stemming from the parents’ imprisonment itself and from the untoward social conditions that accompany their absence from the family. They offer suggestions for interventions that can disrupt this process.

Roettger and Dennison’s contribution will be of strong interest both to academicians and to policy makers. In addition to providing input regarding developmental and life course perspectives, it provides input into the working of social capital and social bonding in families. Undoubtedly, parental incarceration disrupts social bonds between family members, perhaps most critically between the incarcerated parents and their children. However, the reality of incarceration means that parents who are incarcerated may, perhaps inadvertently, be transmitting antisocial norms to children, such as via role modeling. It is therefore vital that sociologists and criminologists
interested in social bonds and their effects on children engage with the parental incarceration literature.

Our final article by Cindy Brooks Dollar and Joshua A. Hendrix is an important reminder that the family continues to be a critical factor in motivating deviance well into adulthood. In “‘I’m Not a Traditional Woman’: Tranquilizer Misuse as Self-Medication Among Adult Women,” they use a mixed-methods approach to analyze how work and family demands may prompt drug use later in the life course. Their quantitative analysis of 17,059 adult women from the 2010 National Survey of Drug Use and Health shows that misuse of tranquilizers is more likely among those suffering from depression or other mental health issues, among Whites, among married women, and among those women who have abused other drugs. Women with children are less likely to abuse tranquilizers. They follow up with results from one-on-one interviews with nine middle- and upper-middle-class women, many of whom candidly said that their misuse was not problematic, that they did not intend to stop, and that they feared that their friends and family would react badly to their behaviors if they did stop. Dollar and Hendrix tie their arguments to gendered theories of deviance and strain theory. Their work informs the larger literature on work and family conflict and points to how deviant behaviors can emanate from such conflict, even among women who are socially advantaged.

We hope that these arguments will be welcomed by scholars in criminology, criminal justice, and family sociology, as well as by scholars engaged in the broader field of family studies. In addition, developmental psychologists, economists, and demographers also study child, adolescent, and young adult social behaviors. We believe that this collection of articles will provide additional encouragement to scholars working at the intersections of these intellectual areas to continue such work, identify and explicate additional intellectual compatibilities, and provide new findings that point to theoretical commonalities as well as important distinctions.

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