





# The three most significant contributions of criminological theories to our theoretical understanding of criminal behavior made since 1985

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## 〈요 약〉

It is important to identify and discuss what the most vial contributions of criminological theories. In the field of criminology, most significant contributions or advancement have been made on the various issues such as age, the integration of structural and procedural level theories, other theoretical integration debates. However, it is hard to find ant systematic study exploring such a contribution in criminological theories. This study, therefore, has a purpose to discuss three most significant contributions to our theoretical understanding of criminal behavior made since 1985. To accomplish the study purpose, this study choose the followed three theoretical contributions; the emergence of life course theory, the revision of social disorganization theory, and the introduction of social structure and social Learning (SSSL) model. The three theoretical works will be introduced and discussed regarding other theoretical integration trends in the body of this study. The conclusion, contribution of this current study has been discussed in the last conclusion and discussion section.

**Key words :** criminology, theory contributions, life course theory,  
social disorganization theory, the social structure and social  
learning model

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## I . Introduction

It is important to look backward to go further in the future. It is also definitely applicable to the field of criminological theories. Therefore, it is important to identify and discuss what the most vial contributions of criminological theories are to get advancement in criminology.

To date, however, it is hard to find studies dealing such topics, especially among Korean criminological theory literature. Therefore, this study aims to discuss three most significant contributions to our theoretical understanding of criminal behavior made since 1985. Further, this study has a purpose to seek an answer for that question of these three which one has advanced our understanding the furthest? The contributions that the authors plan to argue are not restricted to a new theory. That includes any significant development, or we can say that improvement or addition, to theories that existed prior to 1985 are considered to be dealt with.

## **II. Age, structural factors, and theoretical integration**

Arguably, in the field of criminology since 1985, most significant contributions or advancement have been made on the issue of age, the integration of structural and procedural level theories, other theoretical integration debates, and gender issue (Akers and Sellers, 2009; Cullen and Sellers, 2006; Lilly, Cullen, and Ball, 2007). Prior to 1985, criminological theories did not consider age variation, which means one's criminal tendency could be changed as age varies in the life cycle. Theories proposed its argument based on assumption that one's criminal tendency persists regardless of age-change.

Thus, most empirical studies were cross-sectional and longitudinal studies were not necessary as Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) may argue. However, age debate argued by Sampson and Laub (1993), Moffit et al. (1993), and also Thornberry and Krohn (2005) fundamentally changed the traditional criminological perspectives and showed that one's criminal propensity could be persisted or changed depending on various circumstances in the course of life-cycle and thus cross-sectional study is not enough and longitudinal study is inevitable. Since then, various longitudinal empirical studies followed and added substantial understanding on the relationship between age and crime in the course of life cycle.

Next, another distinctive development in the field of criminological theories since 1985 seems theoretical integration trend. There still remains much debate on whether theoretical integration is appropriate (Akers and Sellers, 2002). Hirschi may vehemently oppose this trend in particular. Yet, theoretical integration is more positively accepted by many leading criminologists including Elliott, Akers, Thornberry, Krohn, and many others (Cullen and Agnew, 2006). Many attempts of theoretical argument and successive empirical studies have been made thus far.

Among those integration trends, the integration across different levels of theories is noteworthy. Prior to 1985, structural theories and procedural theories separately existed.

Structural level theories such as social disorganization theory could explain that crime is concentrated on certain group of people or neighborhood but little explained the detailed causal process of crime commission or why a particular individual commits or does not commit crime within a certain neighborhood.

By contrast, procedural level theories explained well the detailed causal process of crime commission but failed to explain structural variables such as age, gender, class, social economic status, and neighborhood. An important breakthrough on this chasm has been made since 1985 as evidenced in Sampson and Groves' argument (1989). However, theoretical integration trends have been far more extensive than the cross-level integration since 1985.

Besides cross-level integration, conceptual integrations were made as seen in Cullen and Colvin's social support and coercion theory and propositional integration have been made as evidenced in Elliott's integrative model, Krohn's network analysis, Thornberry's interactional theory, Kaplan's self-derogation theory, and Tittle's control balance theory (Akers and Sellers, 2009).

In addition, the introduction of gender was an important development in the field of criminology. As Feminists criminologists rightly argued, traditional criminology prior to 1985 male-centered, while downplaying the gender one of the important structural variable on crime causation. However, it is difficult to deny the fact that gender is important causal factor in crime commission and also female experience and perspective had been missing for a long time. Regarding this matter also, a substantial advancement has been made since 1985. Various Feminist perspectives have been introduced and well positioned in the field of criminology. Also, many traditional criminological perspectives have been reformulated in order to address this gender issue (Cullen and Agnew, 2006).

### **III. The three works of theoretical contributions of the major contributions, age, structural factors, and theoretical integration**

Here three works of theoretical contributions will be listed and discussed to talk about substantial developments addressed above. A particular contribution will be introduced to talk about each area of contribution. First, the emergence of life course theory will be introduced and discussed regarding age. Second, the revision of social disorganization theory will be introduced and discussed regarding cross-level theoretical integration. Last, Social Structure and Social Learning (SSSL) model will be introduced and discussed regarding other theoretical integration trends. Although gender issue is important, it will not be discussed here, due to the limitation of choices.

#### **1. The emergence of life course theory and age issue.**

First, life course development theories have a significant contribution in understanding criminal behaviors particularly regarding age (Moffitt et al., 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Thornberry & Krohn, 2005). Among them, Sampson and Laub (1993)'s life course theory is noteworthy. Sampson and Laub (1993)'s age-graded life course informal social control theory which draw theoretical propositions from social bonding theory (1969) explores both continuity and change in offending across life time by utilizing Glueck's data (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993).

In essence, they argue that social bonds in adulthood (i.e., good marriage, employment, and military service) stemming from life events (which is called as turning points in theory) explain persistence in and desistance from crime, despite early childhood antisocial behavior (Dorothy, 2006:808; see also Laub and Sampson, 2003; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson, 1998; Sampson and Laub, 1992, 1993). Although, similar to social bonding theory, it emphasizes informal social control on crime, this theory

argues that the informal social control can be shifted in possibly transformative ways as an individual ages. Therefore, “turning points” in the life course are crucial for understanding substantial change of one’s criminal propensity.

Further, Laub and Sampson (2003) later added that persistence and desistance from offending can be explained by factors such as human agency, social ties, and routine activities. In particular, they emphasized time-varying predictors and the role of human agency. They argued that developmental theory should not ignore the human part and their will (Sampson and Laub, 2005:14). Their claim is simply that human agency is a crucial ingredient in crime causation (Sampson and Laub, 2005:39). Human are active participants in constructing their lives including turning points by making willful choice. Besides, social ties, such as marriage, job, and military service, and the change of routine activities also predict crime persistence and desistance over the life course (Sampson and Laub, 2005).

Sampson and Laub (1993; 2005)’s life course perspective has been largely supported by empirical evidences (Elliott, 1993; for a review of empirical validity of this theory, see Laub, Sampson, & Sweeten, 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 1994; 1997; Simons et al., 1998; Uggen, 2000; Warr, 1998). Simons et al (1998)’s finding corroborated with Sampson and Laub (1993)’s argument. They found that more problematic antisocial behavior in childhood does not assure greater risk for delinquency than children displayed more conventional behaviors.

Uggen (2000) found work opportunities reduce recidivism among older participants (offenders over the age of 26). Also, Laub, Nagin, & Sampson (1998) found that quality marriage functions as an informal social control that leads to desistance from crime.

Recently, Sampson, Laub and Wimer (2007) presented an empirical test to examine within individual change on crime caused by marriage status. Upon their findings, they concluded that their research results support for the inference that marriage status is a causal insulator of men from crime throughout the life course.

Also, Laub, Nagin, and Sampson (1998) found that quality marriage functions as an informal social control that leads to desistance from crime. Using data from Glecks’ data, Laub, Nagin, & Sampson (1998) found that marriage negatively associated with



delinquency and crime in adulthood and that the positive effect of spouse attachment is gradual and cumulative over time. They concluded that the findings indicate that quality marriage functions as an informal social control that leads to desistance from crime.

Recently, Sampson, Laub and Wimer (2007) presented an empirical test to examine within individual change on crime caused by marriage status. Marriage man reduced the likelihood of recidivism by approximately 35 percents compared to unmarried counterpart. In addition, cohabitation also has negative lagged effects on crime like the marriage effects (p. 498). Upon their findings, they concluded that their research results support for the inference that marriage status is a causal insulator of men from crime throughout the life course.

Besides previously mentioned new theoretical propositions, the life course model suggested by Sampson and Laub made a significant contribution by encouraging longitudinal study over cross-sectional. Their life-course proposition was initially made by their longitudinal analysis of the Gluecks data which supplied supportive empirical evidence that their theoretical framework had considerable merit (Sampson and Laub, 1990, 1993; 1994).

The more recent longitudinal analysis of this theory in 2003 are also made from 52 in-depth interviews with the same men from the Gluecks data from age 17 to age 70. Such an unprecedented lengthy longitudinal data gave a great significance on their findings. In addition, Sampson and Laub also generated several studies by utilizing improved and integrative methodology which not only quantitative methods, but also qualitative methods, they contributed to advance the integrative methodology.

Regarding this methodological issue, Sampson and Laub's longitudinal study indeed falsified competing propositions from self-control theory. Sampson and Laub's findings are the biggest challenge for Gottfredson and Hirshci's (1990) self-control theory, but it is also sound and healthy way to improve and modify criminological theories. Also Sampson and Laub demonstrated the necessity of longitudinal study (Akers and Sellers, 2009).

## 2. The revision of social disorganization theory and cross-level theoretical integration

Second, revised social disorganization theory is another important contribution in the field of criminology by integrating structural theory with procedural theory and therefore proposing more complete causal process of crime commission (Bursik, 1988; Sampson, 1993; Burt, Simons, and Simons 2006; Pratt, Turner and Piquero, 2004).

Social disorganization theory was initially the work of Shaw and McKay (1942). Initially, Show and McKay (1942) argued that the neighborhood conditions increasing the risk of delinquency are characterized by concentrated poverty, high residential mobility, population heterogeneity and high crime rates, and high family disruption proposed (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Show and McKay, 1942; Sampson and Groves, 1989). Thus, early social disorganization theory focused primarily on these structural variables (i.e., residential mobility, racial and ethnic heterogeneity, family disruption, and socioeconomic status) as proxies for social disorganization (Blau and Blau 1982; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003).

Yet, there was an issue with tautology with these earlier literatures because researchers examined what they want to explain. Thus, by 1985, social disorganization theory lost favor among criminologists partly in that social disorganization theory could not explain individual level behavior and that the measurement of social disorganization is not measured correctly (tautological issues) (see Bursik, 1988).

Since 1985, the original social disorganization theory was refined by several scholars (Sampson and Groves, 1989; Bursik and Grasmick 1993; Sampson et al., 1997). In response to the critics, who posit that the theory suffers from tautology, and other criticisms, these researchers have replaced these ecological measures with a systemic model which separating crime from social disorganization measures with improved methodology with various types of data such as victimization and self-report data (Akers and Sellers, 2009).

Furthermore, they focused on what is happening inside communities not just the structural characteristics and began to unpack the elements of social disorganization and

define as the capacity of a community to regulate itself through formal and informal social control.

Sampson and Grove (1989) suggested direct indicators of social disorganization can be weak local friendship networks, low organizational participation, and unsupervised teenage groups within a neighborhood. These community level social disorganization factors account for the delinquent structural aspect and crime. In analysis, they defined that social disorganization results from a community's inability to formally or informally supervise its residents, which means the lack of collective efficacy. By doing so, Sampson and Grove indeed proposed a cross-level integrative model, which integrates structural social disorganization theory with procedural social control theory (formal or informal social control).

In line with the integrative model, researchers recently have begun to assess the extent to which social disorganization- tapped with direct measures of collective supervision, "social capital", "collective efficacy", and community participation- mediates the effects of structural disadvantage on crime. Sampson et al. (1997) further argued that the weakened capacity of social control mechanism (social ties, collective efficacy, & culture of neighborhoods) mediated structural characteristics and high crime rates in socially disadvantaged communities.

In analysis, they operationalized the concept of collective efficacy with measures such as the ability to regulate youth peer groups, trust and social ties among neighbors and a willingness to intervene and to help neighbors for the common good. They found supportive evidence for revised social disorganization theory (Sampson et al., 1997).

This shift in focus from community structure (poverty, instability and heterogeneity) alone to the influence these factors have on more proximate levels of control and socialization has made social disorganization attractive in contextual research. There are more studies that either directly tested it or adopted the social disorganization theory as theoretical framework in their studies.

Sampson et al., (2001) found that concentrated disadvantage in combination with low levels of informal social control and kinship networks increased rates of homicide. Snell (2001) found that poor urban neighborhoods suffered from higher crime rates, as

explained by higher levels of disorder and lower levels of friendship and kinship networks (Snell, 2001). Lowenkamp et al., (2003) provided further support for the validity of this perspective. Besides, many other studies positively supported the empirical validity of the revised social disorganization theory (Browning, 2002; Lane and Meeker, 2003; Sun et al., 2004).

### **3. The Social Structure and Social Learning (SSSL) model and theoretical integration trends**

Next, other theoretical integrations are another important trend in the field of criminology since 1985 (Cullen and Agnew, 2006). This trend of integration is a substantial achievement of recent criminological theories (Akers and Sellers, 2009). Among many noteworthy integrative theoretical models, Akers' Social Structure Social Learning Theory (SSSL) model (1998) can be considered as an important contribution in this trend of theory integration (Cullen and Agnew, 2006).

Akers' social learning theory proposes that both criminal and conforming behaviors are learned through the process of social interaction in intimate groups or networks which supply favorable and unfavorable definition of crime. These learning mechanisms have balance in influencing an individual's behavior, functioning as four key mechanisms: differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation.

This social learning theory is well established theory with substantial empirical support and a wide range of research applications from minor to serious crimes and delinquency, especially mostly focused on general delinquency (see Akers and Sellers, 2009), and adolescent and elderly substance use (Akers et al., 1979, Akers et al., 1989; Akers and LaGreca 1991; Hwang and Akers, 2006; Sellers, Cochran, & Branch, 2005), gang membership and activities (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Winfree et al., 1993, 1994), premarital sex (DiBlasio and Benda, 1990), and even terrorist violence (Akers and Silverman, 2004).

However, social learning theory is still procedural theory which may not address the issue of structural variables such as age, gender, class, social economic status, and

neighborhood. Akers' (1998) SSSL addressed this limitation and proposed more comprehensive explanations by integrating social learning theory with social structural variables. It is not only cross-level integration but also conceptual and even propositional (end-to-end) integration (Akers and Sellers, 2009; Cullen and Agnew, 2006).

This theoretical model specifies the process and mechanism of individual deviant and criminal behaviors. Differences in social structures such as "macro-level and meso-level causes of crime" across various "structure, context, and environments" will have an effect because they generate difference in operations of social learning variables (Akers, 1998:322). The SSSL proposes that cognitive/behavioral process and behaviors specified in social learning process is the primary mechanism linking social structural variables (meso- or macro-level structural factors) to individual behaviors (Akers, 1998:329).

In SSSL, Akers maintains four main dimensions of social learning process as key mechanisms mediate structural conditions in neighborhood: differential association, differential reinforcement (cost/rewards), definitions and imitation. With the mediation mechanism, Akers integrates four major dimensions of macro-level conditions to SSSL model, which offer various context that the social learning process assumed to operate: differential social organization (society, community, culture), differential location in social structure (age, gender, class, race), meso-level of social organization (primary, secondary, and reference groups), and theoretically defined structural variables (social disorganization, collective efficacy).

To dates, there is a few of studies found supportive evidences of the mediating role of social learning measures between structural conditions and delinquency and crime (Bellair et al., 2003; Holland-Davis, 2006; Lanza-Kaduce et al, 2003; Lee et al., 2004; Verrill, 2008). Lanza-Kaduce, Capece, and Alden (2006) explored the effect of gender on college drinking using the SSSL framework from a feminist perspective. Their results suggested that social learning did mediate the direct effect of gender.

Lee et al (2004) tested the propositions of SSSL model to examine whether social learning variables mediate structural variables on adolescent alcohol and marijuana use behaviors. They found supportive evidence of the model. Also, Holland-Davis' (2006) multilevel analyses also found that social learning variables mediate structural variables

on adolescents substance use.

## IV. Conclusion and discussion

In criminology, scholars continuously argue the importance of paying greater theoretical attention to the contingencies that influence the strength with which the causal processes operate (Tittle, 1995:35). Therefore, it is vital to study accumulated literatures to generate fruitful contributions of theories for the future. Yet, little studies has been conducted to examine what the most significant contributions to our theoretical understanding of criminal behavior in criminological theories. Therefore, this study attempted to offer an opportunity to reflect three significant development in criminological theories.

In summary, this study discussed three works of integrative theoretical developments; the emergence of life course theory, the revision of social disorganization theory, and the introduction of the social structure and social learning model. Generally, the authors agree with that the above mentioned three theoretical models all significantly contributed to the field of criminology since 1985. Among the three theoretical contributions, however, the authors conclude that Akers' SSSL theory seems to have advanced our understanding the furthest due to its theoretical strength over two other theories, Sampson and Laub's life course and revised social disorganization theory.

First, more contributive theory needs to address previously mentioned important theoretical issues such as age, the integration of structural and procedural level theories, other theoretical integration debates, and gender issue. Sampson and Laub's model (1993) cannot address gender issue and failed to integrate social learning variable (peer influence) which is a major procedural theoretical proposition (Warr, 1998).

The revised social disorganization theory (Sampson et al., 1997; Sampson and Grove, 1989) does not address gender and age issues despite its successful integration of structural theories with two major procedural theories (social learning and social bonding) (Holland-Davis, 2006).

By contrast, SSSL can explain age, gender, and even other contextual level variations, including opportunity in criminal behavior. Akers argues that “variations in the social learning variables at each age can explain “variations in criminal and deviant behavior at each age” in SSSL model (Akers, 1998:344). “The theory would predict that persistence or desistence, increase or decrease in deviant behavior as persons grow older accompanies deviant or conforming changes (persistence, increase, or decrease) in the social learning variables in the life course, operating in the sequential and reciprocal manner (Akers, 1998:344; Krohn, Skinner, Massey, and Akers, 1985).

In SSSL, gender is also incorporated as an important locator within the social structure and predicted that social learning variables should mediate substantial portion of gender effects on crime and delinquency, if not fully mediate it (Akers, 1998:320). Empirical evidence supports for that social learning and SSSL model explains the gender variance in criminal behaviors (DeCoster, 2003; Jensen, 2003; Sellers et al., 2003; Lanza Kaduce et al., 2003, 2006; Piquero , 2005).

Further, it integrates social learning theory and social bonding theory (conceptually integrated into social learning mechanism) into structural level theories (i.e., social disorganization). (Akers and Sellers, 2009). As a general theory, the theoretical capability of social learning theory (and also social bonding theory) has been well established.

Thus, integrating the theory with macro level theory would have a lot of benefits to establish empirical power. Jensen and Akers (2003) suggest that structural theories which have garnered the most empirical support are also likely to be well-suited to the prospect of integration with empirically supported micro-level theory. In short, for all those reasons SSSL is the most significant contribution since 1985 although more rigorous empirical test need to be done to examine either full or partial propositions of SSSL model.

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【Abstract】

**범죄학 이론의 발전에 영향을 미친 이론들에 대한  
고찰:  
-1985년 이후의 중요한 범죄이론을 중심으로-**

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이 연구는 1985년 이후의 범죄학 이론의 발전에 심대한 영향을 미친 것으로 이해되는 세 가지의 주요 범죄학 이론들에 대해 고찰한 연구이다. 지난 수십 년간의 범죄학 이론의 발전은 눈부시다. 그러나 국내에서는 그 간의 범죄학이론의 발전에 영향을 미친 주요 이론들에 대한 논의가 매우 부족하였. 앞으로의 한국의 범죄학이론의 발전을 위해서 현재까지의 범죄학이론을 발전시킨 이론들에 대한 고찰은 매우 중요하다. 이에 따라 이 연구는 1985년 이후의 범죄학이론의 발전에 큰 영향을 미친 것으로 이해되는 생애과정이론(life course theory), 사회해체이론, 그리고 사회구조 및 사회학습이론(the SSSL model)의 세 가지의 범죄학 이론들에 대해 소개하고 현재까지의 각 이론들의 경험적지지 및 주요 이론적 쟁점 및 공헌점들에 대해 논의하였다. 결론과 논의부분에서 저자의 결론, 연구의 공헌점 등이 논의되었다.

**주제어 :** 범죄학이론, 이론적 공헌, 생애과정이론(life course theory), 사회해체이론, 그리고 사회구조 및 사회학습이론(the SSSL model)