Comment: Testing a Unified Anomie and Choice Model of Offender Decision Making

by

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Thomas tackles an interesting question: can we reframe classic Mertonian anomie theory in a rational choice framework? He begins with Baumer's (2007) multi-level interpretation of Merton's anomie theory but uses rational choice as a micro-foundation, drawing an analogy between the values and aspirations of Mertonian strain and desires and preferences in the economic model. He then fits generalized structural equations to panel survey data from the Pathways to Desistance study and finds associations consistent with the theoretical model. The measurement and structural models are well-aligned with the theory, and the data have measures that capture the key explanatory variables (with one caveat noted later). This work responds to the call of analytical criminologists to focus on macro-to-micro transitions by attempting to specify a mechanism for the effect of neighborhood disadvantage on offending behavior. This is an important avenue of research, as identifying macro-to-micro mechanisms has major implications for criminological theory and public policy (Matsueda 2017).

With these strengths of Thomas (2025) noted, I dedicate the remaining space to raising selected critiques that I believe could motivate future work taking a similar approach. The first of these, and the only theoretical point I raise here, is that the economic model already accommodates constrained legitimate opportunities (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita & Cohen 1995). To make a contribution to this area, this theory would need to produce testable propositions that differ from established economic approaches. While not explored here, in Baumer's (2007) multi-level strain theory of instrumental crime, the conventional subjective utility model emerges as a special case occurring under high anomie. A parallel may be drawn here to Situational Action Theory (Wikstrom et al. 2012) or Matsueda et al.'s (2020) pragmatist symbolic interaction theory where rational choice occurs only situationally, after other cognitive processes (e.g., the moral filter) or in specific contexts (e.g., problematic situations). In contrast, it is not clear what predictions from the present anomie and choice theory would differ from prior economic approaches that also cover a wider array of inputs (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita and Cohen 1995; Becker 1998).

On methodological grounds, I raise set of related points about model specification, theory testing, and neighborhood effects. First, with regard to specification, the analysis in Thomas (2025) rests on assumptions about causal ordering because the

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structural model is recursive and all explanatory variables are measured at the same time point. There are plausible competing causal orderings compatible with the observed data, e.g., those less uncommitted to conventional goals perceive fewer legitimate opportunities for success, or those with a lower tolerance for risk or who derive less excitement from crime are more likely to adhere to pro-social orientations—particularly given that pro-social orientations includes an indicator of risk aversion: importance in staying out of trouble with the law. We may also consider the analysis in Thomas (2025) to be a constrained (though not fully nested) version of the more elaborate model Thomas et al. (2022) fit to the same Pathways data. If Thomas et al.'s (2022) model—which makes similar causal ordering assumptions—is correctly specified, then the model in the present work is misspecified. Provided sufficient intertemporal variation in the Pathways data, it may be possible to adjudicate between these explanations using methods for panel data that address simultaneity (e.g., Allison et al. 2017).

Second, there is a related and more general point that may be made about theory testing: any set of associations may be consistent with many explanations. Scientific progress occurs mainly by ruling out existing incorrect explanations rather than adding new plausible explanations, particularly in the discipline of criminology where we are overburdened with imprecise and unfalsifiable theories (Bernard 1990). Assuming a precise theory, this requires tests that can falsify theories and adjudicate between competing ones. Because scientific theories are causal statements, tests of theories are causal research (Wikstrom and Kronberg 2022). Thomas (2025) notes in the closing of the paper that the findings are "correlational in nature, and do not reflect causal effects at any of the proposed links." While this is a common refrain in published criminology, if the analysis here "does not reflect causal effects" then it is not a test of the theory as the title indicates.[1] A stronger approach would be to state the assumptions under which the analysis—or each part of the analysis—has a causal interpretation or to narrow the analysis to a key proposition that can plausibly be tested.

Finally, I raise two points about the study of neighborhood effects, an area I am more familiar with than the substantive topics of Thomas (2025). The first point is that testing (multi-level) ecological theories of crime is difficult (Lanfear et al. 2020). Disadvantage is correlated with other consequential neighborhood characteristics (e.g., criminal opportunity), so it is not plausible that effects are identified when disadvantage is the only ecological measure included; Thomas et al. (2022), for example, included disorder perceptions in their structural model. Even experiments and quasi-experiments that induce residential mobility (e.g., Kirk 2020) do not guarantee we can isolate effects of individual neighborhood characteristics because they are received in bundles as a compound treatment. It is more difficult if researchers hope to identify the specific mechanism by which a neighborhood characteristic affects an outcome rather than only a total effect, i.e., they are interested in mediation (Sobel 2008; VanderWeele 2015). Addressing

[1] Consider that if the primary effects of interest are not identified, then associations inconsistent with the theory could be observed even when the theory is correct.

these challenges is vital but requires aligning theory, data collection, and methods of analysis (Matsueda 2017; Wikstrom and Kroneberg 2022), e.g., embedding an employment experiment in a longitudinal study to manipulate legitimate opportunity while observing changes in strain-relevant perceptions and criminal behavior. Qualitative and mixed-methods designs are also promising for testing macro-to-micro links in ecological theories of crime (e.g., St. Jean 2008).

The second point about neighborhood effects regards measurement. The perceived opportunity measure used by Thomas (2025) is an ecological one (e.g., "In my neighborhood…") but the theory specifies individual legitimate opportunities as the causal factor. Due to the design of Pathways, all study respondents have criminal records, and criminal records constrain access to legitimate opportunities (Kirk and Wakefield 2018). This raises the empirical question of how close the correspondence is between their perceptions of their own access to legitimate opportunities (the causal variable) and their perceptions of opportunities available to others around them (the measured variable). This is separate from the point noted by Thomas that the internal validity may be compromised due to selection bias from sampling on justice involvement resulting from a serious offense. That is, a relationship between the explanatory variable(s) and offending may be induced by implicitly conditioning on a variable that is causally descended from both, i.e., a collider (Elwert and Winship 2014). Together these issues limit the applicability of the Pathways data to the present theory.

As the reader has likely gathered, most of the issues raised here are not specific to Thomas (2025) but rather endemic to criminological research (Bernard 1990; Wikstrom and Kronberg 2022). Convincingly addressing even some of these issues—most critically regarding causal ordering and theory testing—while maintaining the attention to theory-guided measurement and modelling displayed by Thomas (2025) would result in a significant advancement in many substantive areas of the discipline.

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