



## Routine activities and adolescent deviance across 28 cultures

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The current study tested the links between routine activities and deviance across twenty-eight countries, thus, the potential generalizability of the routine activities framework.

**Methods:** Data were collected as part of the Second International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD-2) from 28 cultures, from seventh, eighth, and ninth grade adolescents ( $N = 66,859$ ). Routine activities were operationalized as family, peer, solitary, and community activities. Country-level predictors included unemployment rate, prison population, life expectancy, and educational attainment.

**Results:** Three-level, hierarchical linear modeling (individual, school, and country) was used to test both individual and country-level effects on deviance. Findings supported predictions by the routine activities framework, where routine activities explained 3.1% unique variance in deviance, above and beyond effects by background variables as well as low self-control. Models showed that the effects of family activities, solitary activities, and peer activities were stronger in countries with higher life expectancies. In addition, mean educational attainment increased the effect of solitary activities on deviance, while the effect of family activities on deviance was lower in countries with higher levels of unemployment.

**Conclusions:** The routine activities framework generalized across these 28 countries in how it explains deviance; some unique country-level effects were found that conditioned person-context links.

### 1. Introduction

The routine activities approach is a prominent theoretical framework (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996; Spano & Freilich, 2009) that has been widely used to explain deviant, delinquent, and criminal behaviors (Agnew, 2003; Anderson & Hughes, 2009; Augustyn & McGloin, 2013; Bossler, Holt, & May, 2012; Novak & Crawford, 2010). Different theoretical traditions, focused on both perpetration and victimization, underlie this framework (e.g., Cohen & Felson, 1979; Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978), however, the current study orients itself mostly by the work by Osgood et al. (1996).

Coined by Felson and Cohen (1980), the routine activities approach is rooted in human ecological theory. As such, it emphasizes the role of social and physical space along with associated activities in understanding norm-violating behaviors as opposed to exclusively focusing on individual inclinations or internal motivating factors (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Osgood et al., 1996). Relatedly, a similar notion has been articulated in the developmental literature as the concept of discretionary time (Bohnert, Richards, Kohl, & Randall, 2009), that is, the time adolescents spend outside structured settings such as school or work. It can be structured (e.g., team sports, neighborhood youth

groups, religious groups) or unstructured (e.g. hanging out with friends). Consistent with previous research, adolescents who spend their discretionary time in structured activities may experience more positive adjustment outcomes, including lower rates of externalizing problems, delinquency, aggression, substance use, and fewer criminal arrests (Bohnert et al., 2009; Bohnert & Garber, 2007; Darling, 2005; Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006; Wong, 2005).

Despite considerable evidence for the link between routine activities and crime or deviance, the generalizability of the framework remains unknown as most research was carried out in the United States, with some exceptions (e.g., Steketee, 2012; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Riley, 1987; Svensson & Oberwittler, 2010; Vazsonyi, Pickering, Belliston, Helsing, & Junger, 2002). Certainly, no previous effort has rigorously tested this question with a large enough sample, related to number of cultures or countries, along with the requisite multi-level analytic approach, to more closely assess potential person-context interactions. In addition, notwithstanding a clear recognition of the need for examining theories cross-culturally (Evans, Lagrange, & Willis, 1996; Wikström & Svensson, 2008) related to generalizability (Berry, Dasen, Saraswathi, Poortinga, & Pandey, 1997; Howard, Newman, & Pridemore, 2000), much work has focused on macro-level conditions (Mueller & Alder, 1996; Vazsonyi, 2003) or particular theoretical tests (Howard et al.,

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2000; Stamatel, 2009; Vazsonyi, Pickering, Junger, & Hessing, 2001). The present study examined the extent to which the cultural context conditioned the link between routine activities (family, peer, solitary, and community activities) and adolescent deviance across 28 countries, using a hierarchical linear modeling approach, investigating the effects of a number of known macro or country-level differences.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Routine activities theory

To address the rise in urban crime in the 1960s, Cohen and Felson (1979) developed the routine activities approach. Offering a macro-level perspective on crime, the authors linked patterns of offending and victimization to everyday patterns of social interactions. Closely aligned with perspectives of environmental criminology (e.g., Clarke, 1997), with its emphasis on the importance of opportunity in determining the distribution of crime across time and space, the routine activities theory has had successful practical applications in the prevention of crime (Felson, 2002).

According to Cohen and Felson (1979), the interaction between three factors, namely, a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian, is what determines the increase in chances for crime and deviance. These factors largely constitute the opportunities for the offender (Felson & Clarke, 1998). The definition of routine activities by Cohen and Felson (1979) entails “any recurrent and prevalent activities which provide for basic population and individual needs, whatever their biological or cultural origin” (p. 593), and which may take place at home, at work or in other pursuits away from home. The organization of these activities, the daily routines of people, where they work, the friends they socialize with, their hobbies and leisure activities, and how they spend their time, strongly influence rates of crime (Felson & Cohen, 1980). A substantial amount of research has demonstrated that, consistent with the propositions from the routine activities framework, patterns of behaviors significantly affect the likelihood that motivated offenders will come into contact with suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians, accounting for observed differences in crime rates (Kennedy & Forde, 1990; Miethe, Stafford, & Long, 1987; Spano & Nagy, 2005; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2003).

### 2.2. Routine activities and delinquent behavior

Osgood et al. (1996) extended this work on routine activities to an adolescent population. Their approach sought to understand not only criminal, but also delinquent behaviors. In addition, one of the main contributions that Osgood et al.'s (1996) elaboration has offered to research on adolescent delinquency is the focus on individual behaviors, indicating a shift from Cohen and Felson's routine activities theory, centered on examining aggregate crime rates. Based on the analysis of longitudinal data from approximately 1800 participants of the Monitoring the Future Study (ages 18 through 26), Osgood et al. (1996) found that unstructured activities were significantly associated with various deviant behaviors, showing a particularly strong effect on alcohol and marijuana use, compared to the effect on criminal behavior or dangerous driving. Inspired by Osgood et al. (1996), a number of applications of the routine activities approach to examining deviance among adolescents have followed. In this work, perhaps not surprisingly, peer influence has received particular attention (Hawdon, 1996; Osgood et al., 1996). Rather consistently, research has found that adolescents who engage in unstructured activities with peers, with no authority figures present, are more likely to engage in delinquent acts including substance abuse, vandalism, fighting, violence and property crime (Augustyn & McGloin, 2013; Bernasco, Bruinsma, Pauwels, & Weerman, 2013; Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 2001; Hoeben & Weerman, 2016; Novak & Crawford, 2010; Osgood et al., 1996). Furthermore, patterns of routine activities, including nights out, unstructured

socializing activities with peers, have been linked to higher frequencies of perpetration as well as victimization. This is often the case as such activities expose adolescents to high risk situations, which include alcohol use, for instance, and some forms of violence (Daday, Broidy, Crandall, & Sklar, 2005; Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Leukefeld, 2006; Nofziger & Kurtz, 2005; Schreck & Fisher, 2004). Furthermore, routine activities have been extended to include online activities, providing researchers with notable insights about the mechanisms of cyberbullying and online victimization among youth (Marcum, Higgins, & Ricketts, 2010; Mesch, 2009). These findings further demonstrate the role of routine activities in understanding variability of different forms of general deviance, albeit to varying degrees.

With growing research on routine activities and deviance, the problems, including theoretical indeterminacy (Meier & Miethe, 1993), or conceptual overlap with other theories (e.g., Hirschi, 1969), have become apparent. Theoretical indeterminacy, an issue particularly associated with cross-sectional studies, refers to the difficulty in determining a proper causal sequence between deviance and routine activities. As in many other studies reviewed thus far, the rationale for specifying an explanatory model of deviance informed by routine activities relies on a particular theory. The study tests how adolescents' routine activities are associated with self-reported deviance, however, the reverse is also possible. The model is also based on the assumption that routine activities are more stable, sustained activities that are characteristic of adolescents' daily lives, whereas deviant behaviors, on the other hand, as Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) have pointed out, require little time or preparation. Thus, patterns of routine activities might coexist with risk for deviant behaviors.

Numerous studies have provided evidence supporting the key premises of the routine activities approach with regard to adolescent norm-violating behaviors, including positive links with spending time with peers and negative links with spending time with family, community (including sports), and solitary time (watching TV; Agnew & Petersen, 1989; Anderson & Hughes, 2009; Augustyn & McCloin, 2013; Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2006; Bohnert et al., 2009; Dishion & McMahon, 1998; Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004; Fleming et al., 2008; Schreck & Fisher, 2004), including work conducted outside of the United States (Bernasco et al., 2013; Hoeben & Weerman, 2016; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Riley, 1987; Svensson & Oberwittler, 2010; Wikström & Svensson, 2008; Wong, 2005).

Findings from this work are consistent with the routine activities theoretical framework, across diverse samples. Youth from different socio-cultural backgrounds, in the United States and in other industrialized countries, seem to benefit from greater family involvement and more constrained peer activities. What appears missing from the current literature is a direct test of potential cross-cultural variation, if any, in how routine activities affect deviance, or in other words, does the person-context interaction have effects on this observed link. Only very few studies have tested this question, whether the routine activities framework generalizes across different cultural or national settings (cf., Steketee, 2012; Vazsonyi et al., 2002). In addition, a direct test of country-level effects on the link between routine activities and deviance remains entirely absent, although Vazsonyi, Schwartz, and Chen (2012) tested whether country level effects impacted individual-level deviant behaviors. At a macro or aggregate level, data provide some evidence of positive associations between countries' overall unemployment and income inequality, between income inequality and life expectancy, between mean years of schooling and life expectancy, between crime rates and life expectancy, as well as crime rates and national IQ (Altindag, 2012; De Vogli, Mistry, Gnesotto, & Cornia, 2005; Fajnzylber, Lederman, & Loayza, 2002; Rushton & Templer, 2009); however, it remains an empirical question whether these macro-level or contextual characteristics can explain variance in how adolescent involvement in structured or unstructured leisure activities affects deviant behaviors. It seems possible that negative social indicators, such as high unemployment, along with low life-expectancy, could be

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