

Modeling Social Interaction: New Directions in Affect Control Theory Extended Abstract

CONCEPTIONS OF STATUS AND PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME

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The sentencing literature shows that criminal sentences for the same or similar offenses vary by extra-legal offender characteristics, like age, race, citizenship status, education, occupation, socioeconomic status, and others (e.g., Albonetti 1997, 1999; Bontrager, Bales, and Chiricos 2005; Brennan 2006; Bridges and Steen 1998; Demuth and Steffensmeier 2004; Johnson 2003, 2005; Johnson, Ulmer, and Kramer 2008; Light, Massoglia, and King 2014; Kramer and Steffensmeier 1993; Kramer and Ulmer 2002; Spohn and Holleran 2000; Steen, Engen, and Gainey 2005; Steffensmeier and Demuth 2000; Ulmer 1997; van Wingerden, Wilsem, and Johnson 2014; Warren, Chiricos, and Bales 2012; Wheeler, Weisburd, and Bode 1982; Wooldredge 2010). Theoretical work on offender characteristics and sentencing explains that offender characteristics shape sentencing recommendations and outcomes because of how certain offender characteristics are more closely linked to stereotyped perceptions of criminality (Albonetti 1991; Steffensmeier, Ulmer and Kramer 1998). For instance, research consistently shows that young black and Hispanic males face stiffer penalties than other offenders who commit the same or similar offenses (Steffensmeier and Demuth 2000; Warren, Chiricos and Bales 2012).

Although certain extra-legal factors, such as race and age, consistently affect sentencing in the same way, with racial minorities and younger individuals consistently punished more harshly than whites and older offenders (Steffensmeier and Demuth 2000; Warren, Chiricos and Bales 2012), other offender characteristics do not consistently affect sentencing outcomes. For instance, both occupation and gender affect sentencing outcomes, but empirical patterns do not consistently show how these offender attributes affect sentencing outcomes. Furthermore, theoretical explanations for why extra-legal factors affect sentencing outcomes do not clearly explain why or how all offender characteristics impact sentencing outcomes, even though the theories are designed to do so.

I use affect control theory and status characteristics theory to clarify the judicial processes that may result in differential treatment for criminal offenders. Affect control theory and status characteristics theory both account for how cultural understandings of offender attributes shape expectations and outcomes in social situations. Affect control theory (ACT) asserts that all elements of a situation have affective meanings tied to them that shape observers' impressions of an event (Heise 1979, 2007; Mackinnon 1994). Similarly, status characteristics theory (SCT) connects culturally specific beliefs about social categories to an individual's own and others' expectations of behavior and performance, including perceptions of competency, intelligence, and morality (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972; Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch 1980; Berger and Webster 2006; Humphreys and Berger 1981). Using these two theories as theoretical frameworks allows me to generate and test specific hypotheses for how occupation, gender, and the word used to describe a crime affect sentencing. Although the theories both account for how cultural considerations of offender characteristics are likely to shape sentencing outcomes they offer different predictions for the same processes and I test these competing hypotheses. I use vignette experiments that allow me to test the independent effects of occupational status, crime description, and gender on sentencing outcomes. And, I collect data from both a convenience sample of college students and an online quota sample of Mechanical Turk users. In doing so this research addresses gaps in the literature on perceptions and criminal sentencing, and it provides an opportunity to further apply, test, and refine two major theories from the social psychology literature, which should also better explain the underlying judicial processes that shape sentencing outcomes than theories from the sentencing literature.