

MicroCase exercise #8:
A brief look at routine activities theory

INTRODUCTION

In this data analysis exercise, we will use Wave VII data from the National Youth Survey to explore routine activities theory, which is discussed in Part VIII.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DATASET

See the MicroCase exercise #3 for a description of the NYS dataset. Before we start our analyses, we'll need to load up the second version of our dataset, which is 'NYSCRIM2.'

BRIEFLY EXPLORING ROUTINE ACTIVITIES THEORY: GETTING A HANDLE ON THE DATA AND USING CROSSTABULATION TABLES

Part VIII presents a number of relatively recently minted theories, one of which is routine activities theory. Posed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson, this theory is common-sensical and appears to be quite helpful in explaining otherwise bizarre crime rates. Routine activities theory, for example, asserts that property crimes should actually go down with unemployment because unemployed people are more likely to be at home, where they can serve as effective guardians over their property. However, while crimes between strangers go down, crimes among intimates may actually increase due to the parties spending more time in one another's proximity.

These changes are due to variations in the convergence in time and place of the three essential elements to any predatory offense. First, one needs a motivated offender (e.g., Joe Common Thief), then one needs a suitable target (e.g., Fred Citizen's new stereo). The third requirement is an absence of capable guardians that could prevent the offense. Neighbors, for example, can often serve as effective guardians of their co-residents' property. Routine activities such as work and school serve to prevent people from protecting their own property and also serve to bring together individuals in the workplace/school where they can engage in violence against one another. The mere reality of employment, then, can increase crime.

Testing routine activities theory will require us to find suitable measures as we have done for the previous theories. Among the questions in the NYS survey were several that will work for our purposes. The respondents were asked to estimate how many hours they worked and how many hours they spent with friends. Under routine activities theory, we would posit that those who spent more hours at work or with their friends would be more likely to be out where they could become victims of violent crimes and less likely to be at home where they could protect their possessions (thus, they would also be more likely to be property crime victims, too). Along these lines, I created a variable (TOTHR) that represented the total number of hours the respondents spent at work and with friends, then recoded the variable into three categories: (1) those who spent 10 or fewer hours a week engaged in these activities; (2) those who spent 11 to 30 hours a week at work or with their friends; and (3) those who spent 31 or more hours a week in these activities. While there was also a question about how many hours a week the respondent spent studying, the answers were not broken down into the number of hours spent studying at home versus in other locations. For this reason, I relied only on the two questions that were most appropriate for routine activities theory.

We will look at the effect of our new measure on whether the respondent was a victim of a property crime (VICTPROP), leaving victimization in violent offense (VICTVIO) for you to examine in the "further explorations" questions. To see if the theory holds, run a frequency table for TOTHR, then run a crosstabulation table with VICTPROP as the dependent variable and TOTHR as the

independent variable.

What do you notice about the TOTHRS --> VICTPROP table? Which respondents were most likely to have been the victims of a property crime? What is the strength of the relationship shown in the table? Is it statistically significant? How can we summarize this table? Does this table support routine activities theory?

EXPLORING ROUTINE ACTIVITIES THEORY: USING CONTROL VARIABLES

You might be wondering if routine activities theory applies to all types of neighborhoods, including those in which unemployment is (or is not) a problem. Let's find out by running a crosstabulation table with VICTPROP as the dependent variable, TOTHRS as the independent variable, and UNEMP as the control variable (just pop it into the first control variable box, see MicroCase assignment #7 for more on control variables). Look within the rows for UNEMP. You'll see that the relationship between victimization in a property crime and time spent outside the home (working or with friends) and victimization is not statistically significant for any of the three categories of unemployment. The cell sizes are all adequate, and the percentages increase in the predicted direction, but the findings are not significant and so we cannot use them to support our theory. Does this mean routine activities theory is bunk? Since we would never throw out a theory based on any one study (especially given that our data increases in the predicted direction), our finding doesn't disprove the theory. The finding does, however, pique my interests regarding what's going on and I'm assuming it piques yours, too.

To further explore this finding, let's control for TOTHRS instead. Our reasoning is that we know from the exercises for Marxist theory that high neighborhood unemployment is tied to victimization. It's possible that neighborhood unemployment and hours spent by respondents at work or with friends are related in some unexpected way that negates our relationship. To find out, run a crosstabulation table with VICTPROP as the dependent variable, UNEMP as the independent variable, and TOTHRS as the control variable.

Isn't the resulting table interesting? When we look within the rows for TOTHRS, we see that the relationship between neighborhood unemployment and victimization is not statistically significant for the first two categories of TOTHRS (those who spent 10 or fewer hours a week at work or with friends and those who spent 11 to 30 hours a week at those activities). But, when we look at the respondents who spent more than 30 hours a week at work (and/or with friends), we see that victimization is more likely for respondents who live in neighborhoods in which unemployment is more of a problem. It appears, then, that living in a high unemployment area isn't statistically related to victimization unless the respondent spends a greater amount of time outside the home, where s/he is presumably less able to protect his/her belongings. Routine activities theory is supported by our data, and we can also add to the theory by specifying that hours spent outside the home may interact with level of unemployment in one's neighborhood to produce crime. This addition makes sense, too. Remember that we need a motivated offender, a suitable target, and an absence of guardians in order to have a predatory violation. Potential offenders who are motivated by unemployment are unable to act on their motivations if their potential victims stay at home where they can protect their belongings. When the capable guardians are at work or out with friends, however, motivated offenders may commit their crimes. Similarly, just because a person is outside his or her home doesn't mean that s/he will be the victim of a property crime; if there are no motivated offenders, no crime will take place. Together, we have contributed a theory to make it more useful in predicting crime. This is exciting!

FURTHER EXPLORATION OF ROUTINE ACTIVITIES THEORY

We have now explored an idea relevant to routine activities theory as it apply to victimization in a property crime. To see if the theory applies to victimization in violent offense, you will apply it to VICTVIO for the "further exploration" questions.

ROUTINE ACTIVITIES THEORY ON YOUR OWN

Now that we have briefly examined routine activities theory and added a control variable, you could include other control variables. By now, you should have ideas of important variables to include (e.g., victimization may vary by income level or gender of respondents, etc). While you are choosing variables, you'll be learning a lot about theory-building as well. Make sure you write down why you think they are important before trying them out, tying them to the articles you've read. Now, to go on to our final data analysis exercise, which looks at low self-control theory.

[PLEASE DO NOT TURN IN THESE PRECEDING SHEETS WITH YOUR ASSIGNMENT- THEY ARE FOR YOU TO KEEP]

Homework for MicroCase #8: General questions
(routine activities theory)

Name: _____

Date: _____

Directions: Answer the following questions by filling in the blanks or circling the appropriate responses. A couple of answers have been filled in for you to make sure you're on the right track.

Exploring routine activities theory:

Getting a handle on the data and using crosstabulation tables:

1. In Wave VII of the NYS dataset, _____% of the sample said they spent 10 or fewer hours at work or with friends, _____% spent between 11 and 30 hours engaged in those activities, and _____% spent 31 or more hours at work or with friends.

2. In the TOTHR5 --> VICTPROP crosstabulation, _____ (_____%) of the respondents who spent 31 or more hours at work or with their friends were also victims of property crimes, compared to 70 (_____%) who spent 11 to 30 hours engaged in those activities, and _____ (_____%) of those who spent 10 or fewer hours at work or with friends. It appears that as number of hours spent outside the home goes up, risk of victimization goes *up* / *down*. This relationship is *weak* / *moderate* / *strong*. This relationship *is* / *is not* statistically significant.

The relationship between victimization in a property crime and time spent outside the home (as measured by time spent at work or with friends) found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to* / *differs greatly from* the findings expected under routine activities theory.

3. In the TOTHR5 --> VICTPROP crosstabulation with UNEMP as a control variable, 53 (_____%) of the respondents who both lived in neighborhoods where unemployment was a big problem and who spent 31 or more hours at work or with friends were the victims of property crimes, compared to 3 (_____%) of those who spent 10 or fewer hours at work

or with friends. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*, and *is / is not* statistically significant. Among those who lived in neighborhoods where unemployment was somewhat of a problem, _____ (_____%) of the respondents who spent 31 or more hours at work or with friends were the victims of property crimes, compared to _____ (_____%) of those who spent 10 or fewer hours at work or with friends. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*, and *is / is not* statistically significant. Among those who lived in neighborhoods where unemployment was not a problem, _____ (_____%) of the respondents who spent 31 or more hours at work or with friends were the victims of property crimes, compared to _____ (_____%) of those who spent 10 or fewer hours at work or with friends. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*, and *is / is not* statistically significant.

The relationship between victimization in a property crime and time spent outside the home (as measured by time spent at work or with friends) found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to / differs from* the findings expected under routine activities theory.

4. In the UNEMP --> VICTPROP crosstabulation with TOTHR5 as a control variable, 53 (_____%) of the respondents who both spent 31 or more hours at work or with friends and who lived in neighborhoods where unemployment was a big problem were the victims of property crimes, compared to 204 (_____%) of those who lived in neighborhoods where unemployment was less of a problem. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*, and *is / is not* statistically significant. Among those who spent between 11 and 30 hours at work or with friends, _____ (_____%) of the respondents who lived in neighborhoods where unemployment was a big problem were the victims of property crimes, compared to _____ (_____%) of those who lived in neighborhoods where unemployment was not a problem. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*, and *is / is not* statistically significant. Among those who spent 10 or fewer hours at work or with friends, _____ (_____%) of the

respondents who lived in neighborhoods where unemployment was a big problem were the victims of property crimes, compared to _____ (_____%) of those who lived in neighborhoods where unemployment was not a problem. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*, and *is / is not* statistically significant.

The relationship revealed by this table demonstrates that unemployment and time spent outside the home (as measured by time spent at work or with friends) *are / are not* related in such a way that our findings support routine activities theory.

5. What does all of this mean? Please answer in essay form, summarizing what you have learned about routine activities theory from this part of the MicroCase.

Homework for MicroCase #8: "Further exploration" questions
(routine activities theory)

Name: _____

Date: _____

TASK: See if the time spent away from home measure we developed for routine activities theory helps us predict victimization in a violent offense (VICTVIO).

Answer the following questions by filling in the blanks or circling the appropriate responses. A couple of answers have been filled in for you to make sure you're on the right track.

1. In Wave VII of the NYS dataset, _____% of the sample had been the victim of a violent offense during the previous year.

2. In the TOTHR5 --> VICTVIO crosstabulation, _____ (_____%) of the respondents who spent 31 or more hours at work or with their friends were also victims of violent offenses, compared to 36 (_____%) who spent 11 to 30 hours engaged in those activities, and _____ (_____%) of those who spent 10 or fewer hours at work or with friends. It appears that as number of hours spent outside the home goes up, risk of victimization in violent offenses goes *up* / *down*. This relationship is *weak* / *moderate* / *strong*. This relationship *is* / *is not* statistically significant.

The relationship between violent victimization and time spent outside the home (as measured by time spent at work or with friends) found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to* / *differs greatly from* the findings expected under routine activities theory.

3. What does all of this mean? Please answer in essay form, summarizing what you have learned about routine activities theory from this part of the MicroCase.

Affirmation of Independent Work

Submission of this assignment constitutes a statement on your part that apart from technical help, you completed this assignment on your own. Plagiarism will be reported to University authorities and can result in expulsion from the University.

Your Name: _____ *Signature:* _____

Homework for MicroCase #8: "On your own" questions
(routine activities theory)

Name: _____

Date: _____

TASK: Include some control variables of your own in your test of routine activities theory. For example, does victimization in a property or violent crime vary by income level or gender of the respondents?

Directions: Answer the following questions.

Routine Activities theory on your own:

1. Which control variable did you choose and why did you choose to control that factor?
2. What was the relationship between the independent and dependent variables before the addition of the control variable?
3. Did the control variable include change the relationship between the independent and dependent variables; that is, did the relationship between the two variables vary by control variable subcategory?
4. Based on your findings, what modifications or additions would you make to routine activities theory?
5. Can you say your testing supports routine activities theory? Why/why not?

If you included more than one control variable, you may summarize the findings on the back of this sheet for future reference.