TheCrimAcademy_41_Rowan

📖 Mon, 3/21 11:16AM ⏱ 51:27

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

responsibility, people, diffusion, group, crime, peers, mechanisms, offending, engaging, paper, offense, criminology, gang, matza, neutralization, behavior, examining, important, research, responsible

SPEAKERS

Zach Rowan, Jenn Tostlebe, Jose Sanchez

Jenn Tostlebe 00:14

Hi everyone. Welcome back. My name is Jenn Tostlebe.

Zach Rowan 00:18

And I'm Jose Sanchez.

Jenn Tostlebe 00:20

And we are the hosts of The Criminology Academy podcast, where we are criminally academic. In today's episode, we're speaking with professor Zach Rowan about peers and diffusion of responsibility.

Jenn Tostlebe 00:32

Dr. Zachary Rowan is an assistant professor in the school of criminology at Simon Fraser University. Zach received his PhD from the University of Maryland in 2017. His research includes peer influence, co offending, group behavior, life course, and developmental criminology, intervention evaluation and juvenile justice. Thank you so much for joining us back.

Zach Rowan 00:54

Thank you for having me.

Jenn Tostlebe 00:56

All right. So before we have Jose get started with questions, a brief overview of the episode: We're going to start off by talking about peer delinquency and neutralization techniques, then move into a paper authored by Zach on the role of co-offenders and diffusing responsibility. And then last but not least shift into some of your work on environmental features and co-offending. So Jose, why don't you get us started?

Z   Zach Rowan   01:21

Right. So we've done a couple of episodes on peers and co-offending. I think our latest one was with Jean McGloin, on opting in and opting out, which basically was how many people does it take for someone to join the group? Or how many people does it take for someone to leave the group during an activity? But can you, Zach, maybe give us a refresher on why peers matter for delinquency?

Z   Zach Rowan   01:48

Sure. I mean, first, I applaud you both for having as many of us peer and cooffending scholars on here, because I think it's an important topic. And I think if we just take a minute to think about over the past two years, what we've all lived through and what we've had to sacrifice in terms of our social interactions, right, that demonstrates the kind of the inherently social world that we live in. And so when we think about the fact that, you know, we learn crime the same way we learn other behavior, you know, in many ways, it seems obvious, right? Why peers matter for delinquency, you know, they teach us not only how to engage in it, but also why we should view certain criminal behaviors favorably or unfavorably becomes part of the anticipated or experienced rewards and punishments that are associated with engaging in any kind of criminal act. And certainly peers are important because they can provide us the opportunities to actually engage in crime, which otherwise wouldn't have necessarily happened.

Z   Zach Rowan   02:52

How much do peers actually matter?

Z   Zach Rowan   02:57

I mean, I think it's fair to say that, when we're understanding the decision to engage in crime or opportunities to engage in crime, you know, the role of peers is kind of unquestioned. I think the meta analysis that Pratt et al. did, examining kind of social learning theory, you know, basically said that peers are one of the most robust predictors of crime. But I think it's also important to acknowledge that, you know, the salience of peers, and the importance of peers, definitely changes over the life course, you know, we know that during adolescence, you know, they are extremely important for a variety of different reasons. And that kind of influence tends to wane as people kind of enter young adulthood.

Jenn Tostlebe   03:41

Jenn Tostlebe 03:41

Yeah. And that was going to be our next question. So based off of what you just said, can you elaborate on why we see these differences between adolescence and adulthood as far as the role of peers?

Zach Rowan 03:53

Sure, I mean, part of it is just a function of opportunity. You know, during adolescence, you know, we're spending significantly more time with peers and other people. But it's also kind of from a neuro-developmental perspective. We know that kind of these maturational imbalances of brain systems that support decision making, are at their greatest during adolescence, and, you know, even into young adulthood. And all of these kinds of processes, you know, heighten the propensity to take risks, and elevate the rewards attached to crime and risky and deviant behavior, all of which, in the presence of others and with other friends or peers become even more heightened and more important. And so I think it's an opportunity at the developmental perspective or reason for why peers matter the most during this time period. And then as we age, right, these kind of developmental things become more stable and static, and we're spending less time with peers. So it's a function of a quite a few different processes.

Jenn Tostlebe 05:00

Okay. And obviously, like we mentioned, today, we're primarily going to be talking about the association between peers and diffusion of responsibility. But we haven't talked about diffusion of responsibility really on this podcast yet. And so can you provide our listeners a quick definition of what diffusion of responsibility is?

Zach Rowan 05:21

Sure. I mean, the idea is kind of simple in the sense that it reflects the notion that, you know, individual's kind of overall sense of responsibility for their actions or behaviors kind of decline, or at least are shared among other actors who are present in a given situation. You know, the beginning of the paper title that we're going to talk about is not entirely guilty, right. It captures this idea that, you know, the burden of responsibility and guilt that often deters people from engaging in crime becomes, you know, a shared property or experience, and it makes it feel like somebody isn't entirely burdened by the consequences or the harm or the moral guilt, right, that is attached to engaging in criminal behavior.

Zach Rowan 06:10

So on that note, I think most of the people that listen to this podcast will be familiar or at least have heard of Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralization. But just a real quick rundown for those that may not be familiar with them. They talk about one of the things that we'll be talking about today, or primarily that we'll be talking about today is the denial of responsibility or diffusion of responsibility. But there's also the denial of injury. So like, nobody got hurt. So what's the big deal? There's the denial of the victim, well, they had it coming, they deserved it, there's the condemnation of condemners, basically, don't be a hypocrite, like, how can you

judge me when you do stuff as well, you know, and there's more to them. But so specifically talking about this denial of responsibility, and you mentioned this, in your paper, that Sykes and Matza basically focus it or at least in their work, it's mostly on an individual level? How does this concept then tie into the group?

Zach Rowan 07:11

I mean, I think Sykes and Matza would not discount the fact that denial of responsibility, you know, could be caused by the group as kind of an outside force, right, that would be consistent with their notion that individuals are able to deny responsibility, because they feel like somebody else kind of contributed to why the situation happened, or why they got involved in it in the first place. And so I think the presence of other people is certainly part of probably why Sykes and Matza emphasized denial of responsibility. But I also think they're, you know, in that denial of responsibility kind of technique, Sykes and Matza might also include kind of other situational factors, right? Perhaps say, somebody was acting out in self defense, right. So they're not taking responsibility for the act. And so there might be other things that aren't necessarily tied to the presence of other offenders that could go into that denial of responsibility. But I think the group context, so to speak, could certainly be fit into their framework of that technique.

Jenn Tostlebe 08:17

So in a way their idea is like, broader, and then when you get to groups, it's a more specific phenomenon.

Zach Rowan 08:23

Yes, I would agree with that. And I think, you know, a lot of you know, their attention was placed on kind of adolescents and youth in some capacity. And so I imagined right, the group played a primary role right, in thinking about that denial of responsibility technique.

Zach Rowan 08:39

And does the research support this concept of diffusion of responsibility?

Zach Rowan 08:44

So I mean, that was kind of part of what led to the interest in the paper. But in general, there is some research on this topic, but I would classify it as mostly kind of indirect in the sense that a lot of existing research either has been done kind of in, you know, a laboratory setting or kind of of a very controlled environment, trying to observe whether or not people act in riskier ways when they're with others versus when they're alone, and making the inference that as a result of some kind of more severe outcome happening, that diffusion of responsibility or denial of responsibility had to occur. So for example, some early work looked at trick or treaters, these kids who were trick or treating, and allow them the opportunity to steal candy or money. And

they vary the condition of whether the trick or treaters were alone or with others, and they-not surprisingly-observed more debauchery, you know, when the kids were with other people, and then largely inferred, okay, yeah, there's likely this kind of diffusion of responsibility happening. Some more recent work by Jean McGloin and Kyle Thomas, you know, looks specifically at these kinds of incentives for group based deviance and how they change over group size. And they included anticipated responsibility as a measure of kind of these anticipated informal social costs, and find, you know, consistent with what we might expect, right? That as more people join in a group, you know, or take part in destruction of property, the people who were responding to these hypothetical scenarios perceive themselves to be less responsible. And so in both cases, you know, there's, you know, these hypothetical scenarios and laboratory kind of setting research that shows that this is likely happening. But there hasn't yet up until I think, arguably, you know, the paper that I worked on, been kind of direct evidence among youth in particular, speaking about their involvement in crime and how they perceive their responsibility.

Jenn Tostlebe 10:52

You talked about trick or treating, and it just made me think, I don't know if this is the thing like in other places, but in Iowa, it was like, super common for groups of kids to like smash pumpkins, which was super annoying, but it always made me wonder, like, what made them decide to do that? And I'm assuming it has to do with a group context? And maybe some of these elements we're talking about?

Zach Rowan 11:15

Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, obviously, we're focusing on diffusion of responsibility in this paper and this component of the group context, but we know that there are so many other exchanges, right? Weerman calls them these social exchanges around the role that co-offenders of the group plays in the pumpkin smashing, right kids may feel more anonymous as well, right on top of feeling less responsible. And you know, all the other research we know about the presence of others makes us more likely to engage in risky behavior because it activates these parts of our brains that are responsive to that. So there's a number of reasons and examples, trivial and not, on how the group can change the way in which we act.

Zach Rowan 11:57

Yeah. Okay. So I think that sets us up nicely to start talking about your paper, which is titled, "Not (entirely) guilty: The Role of Co-Offenders in Diffusing Responsibility for Crimeâ€ authored by Zach, along with his colleagues, Emily Kan, Paul J. Frick, and Elizabeth Cauffman and published in the Journal of Research on Crime and Delinquency in 2021. And the study was developed to explore whether group context and the composition of the group can explain diffusion of responsibility as it relates to offending. The study uses data from the Crossroads Study, a longitudinal study of 1,216 male adolescents who were arrested for the first time. The study included whether co-offenders were present, number of co-offenders, and the participantsâ€™ role in the crime. Is that a fair summary, you know, without getting into the results?

Zach Rowan 13:01

Yes, that sounds like an accurate depiction of what we sought out to do.

Zach Rowan 13:06

Awesome. Okay. And you've kind of already touched on this. But so what was the impetus for this study and this paper?

Zach Rowan 13:17

I think, you know, this paper, and this idea fits into kind of my efforts as a scholar to develop a research agenda that generally kind of expands our understanding of the role of groups in crime and deviance. But I think the primary reason for it was, you know, as somebody who kind of dives into this literature all the time, and I'm sure in both of your respective areas, you're aware of this, you know, oftentimes scholars will invoke or reference certain mechanisms, or say, of course, this is an explanation. And sometimes, you know, there's empirical support to back that up, and others, you know, there isn't, or the research is quite dated, or not as specific as it should be to the topic that we're studying. And I think I was very much interested in identifying a way to provide more direct evidence to suggest that this mechanism is actually occurring, and that it's occurring during a time period where we're saying it's a primary motivator, right, or part of, you know, why youth might be involved not only in crime, but group crime specifically. And then the other kind of piece of it is just timing. I was working as a postdoc in a psychology lab, whose interests kind of intersected with the law. And there was some developmental ideas and work going on there, you know, trying to evaluate, you know, how youth understand their justice system experiences. And so all of that kind of converged on an interesting and amazing dataset that, you know, enabled the consideration of this research question.

Jenn Tostlebe 14:56

I bet it was interesting working on peer and decision amongst a bunch of psychologists, assuming that you were surrounded by a bunch of psychologists, but having that influence on you, too.

Zach Rowan 15:08

Yeah, I mean, I think on the one hand, it was interesting because the lab that I was working on or working in, you know, they were very much interested in the developmental intersection of psychology and the law. And I come from a much more theoretical background, you know, understanding why peers are important and the mechanisms that go into that. And so it created some interesting, sometimes controversial, tension between us. But I think in the end, it was a productive kind of exploration of kind of the two worlds in this research paper.

Jenn Tostlebe 15:42

Yeah. So as Jose mentioned, giving the summary of your paper, you're looking at group context and group composition to explain the diffusion of responsibility. And so when we're talking about group context and group composition, what exactly do we mean by these terms?

Zach Rowan 16:01

No, that's an interesting question, because I don't know if I had previously thought of a distinction between group context and group composition. But I do think it is relevant to the paper as well as relevant to the broader peer/co-offending literature in the sense that, you know, in the paper, you know, we were obviously able to examine the differences between youth who participated in a group offense versus those who committed crime alone. And I would argue that that's kind of in the bulk of co-offending literature generally, right? Does the group context-period-matter? Right, does the presence of others-regardless of anything else that we can speak on with respect to the nature of the group-does that matter? And then group composition, I guess, would be more reflective of, you know, are there elements of the characteristics of the group that also seem to be important in understanding mechanisms. And so in the paper, we're obviously examining the number of other people who are present in the group as well as the role that individuals play in the particular group offense and actually think Brendan Lantz's work examining, you know, color offending, and how kind of the age, gender composition of co-offending groups can impact the severity of certain outcomes, right gets at this composition idea as well.

Zach Rowan 17:26

So during the setup of your paper, the front end, you discuss how Sykes and Matza argued that diffusion or this neutralization occurs before the crime is committed. That sounds like something that might be a little hard to study. So have researchers been able to study this pre crime diffusion?

Zach Rowan 17:48

Not necessarily, I mean, there have been efforts to explore kind of longitudinally, the impact that some of these techniques or diffusion of--not necessary diffusion of responsibility, but-- techniques of neutralization, and these rationalizations have, like on subsequent offending. I know Kyle Thomas has done some work looking at the relationship between guilt and future offending. But I would say there's kind of a general consensus that there's limited empirical support, that can isolate, you know, especially if we think about the fact that, you know, these techniques are argued to happen kind of right before a crime is committed, there's been very limited evidence to kind of explicitly identify that apart from, you know, kind of the hypothetical vignettes, right, that kind of enable a more real time assessment of or hypothetical real time assessment of the kind of direction of the technique versus the offense.

Zach Rowan 17:57

So is asking people after the fact is that a viable way to study the techniques of neutralization?

Zach Rowan 19:01

You know, this is a sticky point, I think for theoretical purists, right, who would be very critical, right, of the fact that if you're not measuring the technique before the offense, you know, you're not necessarily capturing the theoretical arguments of what Sykes and Matza claimed to be the case. But I do think, and I acknowledge that, and I think it's important though, to consider other perspectives, such as Sutherland or Cressy, who would argue that these techniques and rationalizations will be learned in the process of engaging in acts with others. So in the context of diffused responsibility, such a technique should be learned through the experience of feeling that shared responsibility. And, you know, Hirshi, you know, in doing kind of some research on this Hirschi actually made the argument that both can be true in the sense that an after the fact act rationalization in kind of one instance, could have a causal neutralization effect in another. And I think in general, what I would argue is that this idea of neutralization is more of a much broader dynamic kind of cognitive process. And obviously, after the fact, rationalizations could be different, but I still think they're implicitly part of understanding why somebody might participate in a group offense. And so I think kind of when the neutralization is expressed, is less problematic, although I am certainly open to somebody identifying a way to really isolate that direction of that relationship.

Jenn Tostlebe 20:50

That's supposed to be you. *laughter*

Zach Rowan 20:54

You find me the data to do that. We'll go follow people just about to engage in crime.

Jenn Tostlebe 20:59

In the moment. That'd be fun. I feel like there's probably some issues with that, but you know. All right. So in Episode 27, we talked with Jean McGloin, who you've co authored with quite a few times. And during that episode, we talked about how group size plays into this decision for someone to get into and out of criminal behavior. You were on this paper too, aren't you?

Zach Rowan 21:12

Yes, I was.

Jenn Tostlebe 21:23

Okay. So, theoretically, does group size impact the diffusion of responsibility? And if so, how?

Zach Rowan 21:32

Yes, I mean, I think one of the interesting things is the idea of diffusion of responsibility and kind of its historical intellectual origins came from scholars studying kind of crowd behaviors in the 1800s. Right, it was 1896. Lavonne. And I probably butchered that name. But and basically, the idea was, you know, in these large group settings, right, there was some kind of takeover of your conscious and people felt less restrained, right. And so I think in the context of group size, right, we can anticipate that as more people are involved, this shared responsibility for whatever happens in that event, gets kind of distributed across individuals in kind of smaller and smaller pieces, potentially, Kyle Thomas and Jean McGloin's work provides evidence to that right that as more people are hypothetically thinking about, you know, destroying property, the perception of their anticipated responsibility goes down.

Jenn Tostlebe 22:38

Yeah. Do you think, like, from a theoretical point that it could hit this tipping point where there's too many people involved, and it's no longer the responsibilities, like the diffusion isn't acting in the same way?

Zach Rowan 22:51

That raises an interesting point, especially when you think about the paper that you talked to Jean about, which I was also on, in terms of the opting out, right, at some point, you know, all of these mechanisms, which we assume are important and attached to the group context, we often assume they operate linearly, right? Like, it's, you know, how many different ways can we slice responsibility, right. And maybe, actually, as you suggest, right, at some point, it becomes, you know, the consequences of an action could become so problematic, that, you know, responsibility either kind of gets refocused on because people are now concerned about, you know, the outcome of the event, if something really Bad's about to happen, but it does, it just raises some interesting questions around the functional form, right, of these mechanisms, right?

Zach Rowan 23:45

Yeah, I think I was thinking about that paper too, when thinking about this, because I think one of the things we talked about is, like, say, what was the example one of the examples Jim gave, I think is like, if four people are beating up a person, that might be not, you know, okay, like justification wise for the people engaging in that act. But if it then becomes eight or 10 people, then one of them might say, like, okay, like, this is not cool anymore, like, this is getting out of hand. So I wonder if, yeah, like some of that guilt started to kind of creep back in, or some of that feeling of responsibility starting to creep back in to where they say, like, I don't want to be a part of this anymore.

Zach Rowan 24:26

Yeah, I mean, I think it as I was reflecting on this paper, you know, and we'll talk about this in the findings. But, you know, in general, one of the things that comes up in the literature, you

know, we often talk about these social exchanges or these mechanisms attached to the group is independent, and operating kind of linearly. And I imagine, right at some point, you know, denial of the victim, right? It's kind of hard to deny that this person's a victim, if everyone is attacking this person, right? And the same could be said about responsibility, or any kind of moral feelings, right? that could be attached to particular offense that may have initially been overcome by the presence of others. But if too many get involved, or, you know, certain situational dynamics change, that could disrupt the kind of flow of how these mechanisms are operating.

Z   Zach Rowan 25:17

Okay, and so without getting into the results just yet, so one of the things that again, in the setup of the paper that you talked about is the role that the person plays in the offense. So, for example, you use instigator versus a follower. And so I guess, in a theoretical sense, how might the role of someone in the offense impact diffusion of responsibility?

Z   Zach Rowan 25:42

First, I think it's important here to kind of just go back a little to your question around group composition, right, and acknowledging that we often don't have a lot of information about what's going on in the group offense, and it was interesting to be able to think about and obviously have data to support it, you know, what differences might there be between somebody who instigates versus follows in the way in which they experience these social exchanges, and particularly diffusion of responsibility. And so if you think about it, just kind of naturally, you know, somebody instigating an offense, you know, they either are going to take full responsibility, or at least have more responsibility because they instigated it, they let it, they did it. There may be other reasons why they would take responsibility, you know, it might come across as cool, right, that they can say they did this. It gives them status, perhaps respect. Whereas if you compare it to someone who follows, you know, you could think theoretically that they are only in it at the kind of behest or push or pressure of others. And maybe they don't do as much, right, they're not as actively involved in whatever unfolds. And so their kind of idea about their responsibility for their behavior should be potentially less. But then the other thing, I think, which is important to point out is, you know, because this hasn't yet been explored, if the group context matters for everyone, regardless of their role, right? It's also possible that even instigators right could potentially feel less responsible, right as part of that process.

Jenn Tostlebe 27:28

Alright, so now that we've kind of set this groundwork, can you hit us with the main findings of your paper?

Z   Zach Rowan 27:35

Sure, I think the main findings are that youth who engage in a group offense are substantially less likely to indicate that they are responsible for that behavior. And then we kind of look at the group composition, and observe essentially, that as group size increases, the likelihood that

the group composition, and observe essentially, that as group size increases, the likelihood that individuals are accepting responsibility or feel that they're responsible declines. And then when we examine the role that people took in the offense, those individuals who identified as being followers also indicated right, that they were substantially less responsible than those who identified as the instigator of the offense. And importantly, we then combined everything into a joint model, or at least looked at the role of group size and the role in the offense together, and both were still statistically significant. And the same direction suggesting that, you know, both of these parts of the group independently seem to contribute to perceptions of responsibility in a way that's consistent with the kind of diffusion of responsibility hypothesis.

Jenn Tostlebe 28:54

Did you find any support for the notion that still being an instigator would diffuse your responsibility? Or did you look at that at all?

Zach Rowan 29:02

That idea actually came up after we submitted it for publication and it was approved and it came up, I think, after some conference presentation, people were asking questions, and I think I have it on my to do list to examine, for example, instigators of group offenses is their perception of their responsibility different from solo offenders, right, because they're also instigators, and it would be interesting to compare those two. I haven't yet done that. But I do think that's an interesting kind of way to tap into this idea that Yeah, even though followers are less likely to perceive themselves as responsible in a group offense, the instigators in group offenses, perhaps view themselves still as less responsible than the solo instigators.

Jenn Tostlebe 29:48

Especially with this group context element together. Yeah, I'll be looking for that so...

Zach Rowan 30:00

So one of the findings that I saw that I found interesting was that the probability of those who would say, Yes, I'm responsible, seemed to be pretty stable, almost no matter what size the group was. Could you tell us a little bit more about that finding?

Zach Rowan 30:16

Well, I mean, we did find that relative to the probability of participants saying that they were not responsible, right? There was a decline in the likelihood that they do say, yes, they're responsible, and an increase in the likelihood that they do say they're not responsible. But if you do look kind of incrementally across group size, you know, it's not substantial kind of differences, right, in the probability that or declines in the probability of saying, yes, they're responsible as group size increases. So it raises some interesting points around whether group size alone, right, is the sole determinant of why or how someone would come to interpret their responsibility. You know, maybe for some youth, the fact that they are present in an offense is

enough, right, to contribute to them saying that they're responsible, you know, maybe they don't need and Sykes and Matza and others have talked about how some youth or some people may not necessarily need neutralizations or rationalizations to understand their behavior. Keep in mind, too, the sample is a sample of adolescent males, and this is their first time having contact with the juvenile justice system. So, you know, for some people, they may be like, no, no, I didn't do any of that. But for others, they may kind of view their behavior differently as a result of this first experience. And the other kind of point related to that is, it may have something to do with the nature of the data in the sense that, you know, majority of these kids, almost all of them really, I believe, pled guilty, right? And so, you know, the fact that they pled guilty, could have some impact potentially, on how they view kind of their responsibility.

Z **Zach Rowan** 32:10

Something else that I saw, so and I think I'd be remiss if I didn't ask that, given what I do, but so you control for gang membership, and this study, and I'll be I think only about 5% of your sample had gang membership, is there reason to believe that being a gang member or part of a gang would impact the diffusion of responsibility a little differently?

Z **Zach Rowan** 32:33

It's possible. It could operate in either the same or in a different way. In the same capacity, you know, if we take a gang as a form of a group, right, it's possible, right, that the way in which that gang context if the offense was committed with fellow gang members, or as a kind of result of being in a gang, you know, would operate in the same way that they feel like they're less responsible for the act? It may be why some people participate or join gangs, right, because they're in these group settings where these mechanisms may be active. It could also go the other way, right? Where if taking responsibility for an act as a result of being in a gang, demonstrates your loyalty, your you know, it's related to these other mechanisms, then it would be interesting to kind of unpack, you know, how responsibility for criminal behavior operates within a gang context.

Z **Zach Rowan** 33:30

Yeah, I think it'd be super interesting, mostly, because I don't know that it's a hot debate at this point. But people have debated, where exactly do we put gangs? You know, some people like Walter Miller argue that they're just the most extreme manifestation of a delinquent peer group. But other people like I believe, was Joan Moore, who said, like, we can't put gangs on the delinquent peer group spectrum, like there might be more suited to be on a spectrum with, like, terrorist organizations or organized crime. So I guess, depending on who you ask, it might behave a little differently.

Z **Zach Rowan** 34:05

Yeah, no, I mean, I think it would be interesting to explore that, you know, I know you guys had Martin Bouchard on here. Right. And his idea about all of this is that, you know, there's kind of this scale of collaboration, right, criminal collaboration, and so viewed from that way, you know,

the youth that were in the data that I examined, you know, as you mentioned, many of them weren't part of gangs, but the ones who were may have committed crimes with other people, right. They may have been a part of gang, they may have just been other co offenders. And so I also think it depends on who people are collaborating with, right? If they're just engaging in crime with gang members, is that different than gang members or people affiliated with gangs who are engaging in cooffenses with non-gang members, which is something that I know in some of Martin Bouchard's recent work going on up here in BC, they've been finding, you know, that many gang members I'm sure you're familiar with this right. Our participants aiding in color fences, right with non gang members. Right? What does that mean? You know? And is that collaboration different, are different mechanisms invoked there? But I agree, I think it raises some insightful opportunities for research.

Jenn Tostlebe 35:13

One other thing that came up while we were talking about like this from a theoretical perspective, so I don't think you've tested this since your sample is all adolescent males. But is there a reason from a theoretical standpoint that this diffusion of responsibility could work different for females? Or should it work the same?

Zach Rowan 35:35

That is a good question and one that I don't know enough about, but I can give a little insight into something I've learned recently, this is separate from this project. But we've been working on a project here with an honor student examining the role of diffusion of responsibility in these online student chat groups that students create at universities, and how it plays into whether or not academic dishonesty is going on in these online chat groups. And one of the things that came out is that, depending on the group size condition that we manipulated, females seem to be more responsive to be willing to participate in academic dishonesty, when the group size was larger. And I if I recall, their perceptions of their responsibility kind of changed more dramatically than males. And so I think there could be some gender based differences. But up until this point, you know, I don't necessarily have access to that information.

Jenn Tostlebe 36:40

And my guess is there hasn't been a whole lot of theoretical attention devoted to separating it out. So I was just curious, though, given your sample. It's interesting. All right. So our last question regarding your paper is on the implications front, so what impact does your study and your findings have for research and then policy and practice?

Zach Rowan 37:01

So I think as we continue to explore the kind of group nature of crime, it's important to, for scholars to understand, you know, how engaging in group behavior, you know, impacts these rationalizations and these other mechanisms, and social exchanges that we've talked about, but often haven't necessarily empirically tested. And so, you know, from a theoretical perspective, you know, one thing that I've been thinking about is, you know, is this diffusion of

responsibility, just a situational interpretation? Or does this kind of rationalization carry forward? So psychologists like Bandura, and others have basically said, or included diffused responsibility as part of moral disengagement, right, which is this psychological construct that people evolve on over time? And so the question I have is, you know, does involvement in group of bending shift this larger compass of perceived responsibility for our behavior, such that if someone were to engage in a group offense, perceive themselves as less responsible? Would they also be more apt in the future, regardless of whether or not they engage in group events to feel like they're less responsible for their behavior? So I think, theoretically, there's some interesting research opportunities there.

Z **Zach Rowan** 38:26

And then, you know, from a policy perspective, I think one of the motivations for the paper was, you know, in reading about responsibility, often what comes up is, you know, the legal systems, you know, interpretation of responsibility, and even intervention programs that exist that either expect or worse push, right, individuals towards accepting responsibility. And so, you know, I think it introduces some ideas around, you know, as I mentioned before, what does it mean that of the 1216 youth, you know, majority of them pled guilty, but a non trivial amount said they were not responsible for the behavior. And obviously, we found this is particularly the case for group offenses. And so, if taking ownership over behavior and responsibility is something that we deem to be important, and maybe related to deterrence of kind of from engaging in crime in the future. You know, are there ways that the justice system or interventions can better support youth who, you know, engaged in some illegal act with other people and helping them understand right, their responsibility assuming, right, that they actually did the offense that they are accused of engaging in and so I think there are a number of different kind of policy avenues that this kind of research to explore.

Z **Zach Rowan** 38:39

Yeah, that group that pled guilty, but says that they're not responsible is definitely an interesting group because it's like, Did you plead guilty then to get a lesser sentence? or whatever it may be, or what was happening there? Yeah.

Z **Zach Rowan** 40:03

So I can speak to that a little bit. In the data there's actually some qualitative pieces. It's minimal, and it doesn't cover all respondents. But one of the things that came up was, well, I was charged with this. Right. But I don't think I did that. And so I imagine that some youth were willing to accept, right, a reduced charge to avoid certain consequences.

Z **Zach Rowan** 40:29

It'd be interesting to see more into because I think that's just how I took it, like, Oh, they got offered a deal. And just like, cool. I'm getting out of here.

Zach Rowan 40:38

Yeah. And then just to add one more thing, you know, one of the next steps for my colleagues on this front is, is thinking about, hey, what does it mean, if I believe that I'm not responsible? And how does that impact my future offending? Right? If I am not responsible for something? You know, I theoretically may not necessarily be deterred from doing it again, right? If I am not kind of accepting the blame or harm, right, that came from engaging in it.

Jenn Tostlebe 41:09

Yeah, it makes me think of, I mean, it's different, but it makes me think of updating like your risk perceptions. So yeah, kind of that same idea.

Jenn Tostlebe 41:17

Alright, so from here, we're going to pivot slightly to something else that you've been working on, which is looking at environmental features and co-offending. In particular, we kind of want to talk a little bit about this paper called "Situating crime pattern theory into the explanation of co-offending: Considering area-level convergence spaces.â€ Authored by Zach, Sarah Appleby, and Jean McGloin in The British Journal of Criminology in 2021. And so without going like super in depth, can you tell us a bit about the background, and then the goals of this paper?

Zach Rowan 41:51

Sure, when you said working on that's an understatement because this was a paper that started when I was a graduate student. And as sometimes, that happens, and intellectually, this paper was happening at the same time, as I was working on my dissertation and conversations with Jean McGloin and Sarah Appleby trying to kind of zoom out and think about the micro or macro micro link between social economic and environmental conditions and group behavior. And we wanted to kind of move the primary consideration of, you know, individual level predictors of co-offending and patterns of co-offending, to move beyond that, because a lot of work has been focused there. And Marcus Felson had introduced and speculated in like 1993, I think, a theoretical link between routine activities frameworks, and the notion of convergence spaces in our environment that would basically explain why individuals come together, potentially identify other co offenders and engage in color funding as a result of that. And so the goal was to try to test some of these environmental crime pattern theories within the framework of co-offending, right? To explore how features of our environment predict differences in where co-offending occurs.

Zach Rowan 43:21

And what did you end up finding about how environmental features influence the likelihood of group crime?

Zach Rowan 43:27

So we examined a few things just to set it up, which were the degree to which Census Block Groups in Baltimore City could be characterized by pedestrian oriented connectivity and auto oriented connectivity. And then we also included a number of what they call activity nodes, bars, transit stations, schools, there's probably a few others. And we wanted to see you know, how those kind of factors which have been used to explore crime distribution in general predicted crime. And we found essentially that those census block groups which had a high degree of pedestrian oriented connectivity, and transit stations were those that had the greatest rates of group crime incidents, which we argued was consistent with this idea that, you know, the degree to which the environment facilitates interactions and creates these convergence spaces, plays an important role in facilitating kind of when and where co-offending and co-offending interactions are likely to occur.

Jenn Tostlebe 44:33

Makes me think of like the New York City like subway system, like I was there. I mean, I had to have been like 14 or something. And I actually got pushed, like there was a group of people who were in a fight and I somehow got roped into the middle of it and thrown onto the tracks. That was terrifying. But there was like, like, people were helping me out but someone did not make out in time and it was just like crazy, but yeah, they were all coming together because it was like a central hub. Right?

Zach Rowan 45:04

Yeah, I mean, you think I mean, the subway is kind of an extreme example of how a transit station can facilitate convergence. But even just thinking about just outside of that subway station, right, these transit locations usually are in places of high connectivity, and can facilitate, you know, spontaneous criminal acts from happening, as well as more coordinated, right, types of behavior.

Jenn Tostlebe 45:29

And so, to attempt to tie this back to our previous discussion, and I don't know if this is possible, so if it's not just let us know. But do you think that environmental features could somehow impact the diffusion of responsibility?

Zach Rowan 45:45

To the extent that, you know, what we observed in this paper, which is, you know, preliminary test in a lot of ways of these ideas, but that, if our environment can promote interactions among, you know, would be or potential offenders, then yes, you know, an indirect consequence of convergence spaces, is the initiation or setting of these important psychological mechanisms that would include diffusion of responsibility. But I would also argue, it probably, it's not just diffusion of responsibility that's likely informed by kind of the environment or as an indirect consequence, right, anonymity, all these other kind of mechanisms might be happening there. But I also think it would be interesting to to even take it a step further, and explore whether, you know, certain features of the environment, like the

lack of lighting, or characteristics of certain activity nodes that don't have a capable guardian, right, if those features inherently kind of promote a diffused sense of responsibility, because people anticipate that they either won't be caught or held responsible. And so, you know, it's possible that, you know, the convergence of people, right creates this diffusion of responsibility. But the features of the environment themselves might carry, you know, different properties of responsibilities, so to speak. I mean, it's, it's all speculative, and I'm kind of throwing that out there. But I think it could be an interesting way to think about the environment.

Jenn Tostlebe 47:21

Yeah, it just makes me think of the whole, like, well a person's walking down this road, and there's no streetlights, but they could have gone to the next road over where there is. So maybe, you know, it's not the offender, the person could do like a denial of the victim or something like that, in that case, but

Zach Rowan 47:40

Yeah, and I mean, I think, you know, one of the things that I think is important to point out with diffusion of responsibility is that, you know, this is a mechanism, which has been talked about in, you know, psychology and criminology, but in some cases, it could be subsumed, right, under, you know, the cost of crime, right. And so I think a lot of the times, we're often talking about similar concepts, and just thinking about different ways to measure them and study them. And so a lot of kind of the interpretations of this finding could be nicely integrated with what we already know, and some capacity on decision making in general, and how, you know, these mechanisms are operating.

Zach Rowan 48:19

Right. That's all, like the main questions that we have for you today. Is there anything else you'd like to add to our discussion of peers and diffusion of responsibility?

Zach Rowan 48:29

No, I mean, I think I would just continue to urge scholars and and myself included to unpack these kind of mechanisms that are part of peer dynamics, of co-offending dynamics, and as we discussed earlier, really think about the ways in which we can bridge different types of groups and explore whether there are similarities or differences and how these mechanisms are operating across the spectrum. You know, I think, you know, in hearing the podcasts and some of the people, you know, that you've had on as well as your own research interest in, you know, gangs, and then you have peer people on and sometimes we're, you know, we're talking past each other on issues that I think there probably is more similarities or at least convergence, right of ideas that could help us just reinforce the importance of some of these mechanisms or processes that we're all generally interested in.

Zach Rowan 49:27

Well, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today. We really appreciate it. Is there anything that we should be on the lookout for in the future, anything you'd like to plug?

Zach Rowan 49:36

There is my dissertation paper, which is also connected to the kind of examining the macro micro link that I mentioned earlier, specifically thinking about how the role of economic hardship at a macro level facilitates the emergence of group crime. And that will be coming out this year in The British Journal of Criminology

Jenn Tostlebe 50:01

Congrats.

Jose Sanchez 50:02

Yeah. Congratulations.

Jenn Tostlebe 50:04

Been a few years in the making.

Zach Rowan 50:07

Don't remind me.

Jose Sanchez 50:09

And when can people find you Twitter, Google Scholar? ResearchGate, things like that.

Zach Rowan 50:14

Yeah. So I am on Twitter at ZRRowan, r o w a n. And then my email is zrohan@sfu.ca. You can also just go to the Simon Fraser criminology webpage and you can find it there. Happy to respond to any questions that people may have.

Jose Sanchez 50:36

Awesome. Thank you again, we really enjoy talking to you.

Jenn Tostlebe 50:40
Thank you, Zach!

Zach Rowan 50:40
Thank you both so much.

Jenn Tostlebe 50:42
Hey! Thanks for listening.

Jose Sanchez 50:44
Don't forget to leave us a review on Apple podcasts or iTunes or let us know what you think of the episode by leaving us a comment on our website, thecriminologyacademy.com.

Jenn Tostlebe 50:54
You can also follow us on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook @thecrimacademy. That's THECRIMACADEMY.

Jose Sanchez 51:05
Or email us at thecrimacademy@gmail.com.

Jenn Tostlebe 51:10
See you next time!

Jose Sanchez 51:10
See you next time.