

Situational Theory: The Importance of Interactions and Action Mechanisms in the Explanation of Crime

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The idea that human action (such as acts of crime) is fundamentally an outcome of the interaction between kinds of people and kinds of environments is far from new. Kurt Lewin, often regarded as the father of social psychology, argued that this interaction was central to the understanding and explanation of human action. According to Lewin, “every scientific psychology must take into account whole situations, *i.e.*, the state of both person and environment” (1936:12). For Lewin, the *situation*¹ – the combination of a particular person (in a particular state) and a particular environment (in a particular state) – explains why a person acts as he or she does (*ibid.* 30).²

Situational theories of crime focus on explaining *why* crime events happen. They pay particular attention to the explication of *how* interactions between people and environments *move* people to engage in acts of crime. They can be distinguished from *individual and developmental theories* (which focus on why people come to have certain and varying crime propensities) and *environmental theories* (which focus on why environments come to have certain and varying criminogenic inducements).

In this chapter we discuss the importance of situational analysis for the advancement of knowledge about the causes of crime. We argue that situational analysis should, in fact, form the core of criminological theory. And yet proper situational theories are a rarity in criminology; although many criminological theories pay lip-service to the importance of the person–environment interaction, most concentrate on explaining what makes people crime-prone (e.g., a poor ability to exercise self-control) *or* what aspects of environments make them criminogenic (e.g., a poor collective efficacy). This is problematic because compelling developmental and environmental explanations depend on adequate situational analysis. Without accurately understanding what moves people to engage in acts of crime, it is difficult to convincingly identify (and understand the role of) key causally relevant personal and environmental factors implicated in crime causation.

A proper situational explanation of crime requires a well developed *action theory* that details how (the process by which) the interaction between kinds of people and kinds of settings (environments) triggers particular kinds of acts of crime. A situational theory is a theory that specifies which combinations of what personal and environmental factors (*interactions*) initiate what processes (*action mechanisms*) that bring about the crime event; hence a situational analysis is one that investigates and explicates such factors and processes.

We will set the stage by briefly discussing common pitfalls in defining the concept of situation (particularly the conflation of *situation* and *immediate environment*). Most so-called

situational theories ignore the role of individual differences in action and focus only on the influence of the immediate environment. We argue that at the core of a proper situational analysis lies the explication of the *interaction* between kinds of people and kinds of immediate environments and the specification of the *mechanism* that links people and their immediate environment to their actions.

We then turn to discussing *Routine Activity Theory* (RAT), and particularly its interactional model which emphasizes the convergence of people and their immediate environments in crime causation. We will argue that despite its contribution in drawing attention to the role of the person–environment interaction in crime causation, routine activity theory fails to adequately and clearly expound the key concepts of its interactional model (motivated offenders, suitable targets and lack of guardianship) and their relationships, leaving the role of individual differences particularly underdeveloped. Moreover, we argue that routine activity theory fails to provide a properly integrated action mechanism which explains how the convergence materializes in crime, other than (at times) generally alluding to crimes as self-interested and rational. We conclude that routine activity theory is a missed opportunity to address the role and significance of the person–environment interaction in crime causation.

We then move on to introduce *Rational Choice Theory* (RCT) and discuss its application in criminology, specifically the version forwarded by Derek Cornish and Ronald Clarke. We consider whether this version provides an adequate action mechanism for criminological theories such as routine activity theory. We acknowledge the important contribution rational choice theory makes to criminological theorizing in proposing a much-needed action-mechanism. However, we question several of its key features, namely its common assumption that self-interest is the principle driving force behind human action, and its neglect of more automated, habitual action choice processes, as well as its poor treatment of the role of individual differences. We conclude that rational choice theory is not a good enough action theory to adequately explain how the person–environment interaction moves people to engage in acts of crime.

We then consider whether combining routine activity theory’s interactional model with rational choice theory’s proposed action mechanism will provide an adequate situational theory of crime causation. We conclude that these two sets of theories have not yet been properly integrated and question whether this is the best avenue to create a proper situational theory of crime causation, particularly as neither theory adequately addresses individual differences and the interaction of personal propensities and environmental inducements.

Finally, we turn to *Situational Action Theory* (SAT), a theory that aims to integrate into an adequate action theory key insights from criminology and relevant behavioral sciences regarding the role of personal propensities and environmental inducements in human action. Situational action theory proposes that people are essentially rule-guided creatures. The cornerstone of the theory is that people are the source of their actions but the causes (triggers) of their actions are situational; particular combinations of kinds of people (with particular personal propensities) and kinds of settings (with particular environmental inducements) promote the perception and choice of particular action alternatives in response to particular

motivations (temptations or provocations), some of which may result in actions that break the rules of the law. We suggest that situational action theory provides a more realistic and constructive alternative for a situational theory of crime causation than either the interactional model of routine activity theory or rational choice theory, or their combination.

The Ambiguous Concept of Situation: Conflating Immediate Environment and Situation

Birkbeck & LaFree point out that “precise definition and operationalization of the situation is difficult,” but note that the concept of situation “generally refers to the *immediate* setting in which behavior occurs” (1993:115; italics in original). Many scholars, it seems, equate *situation* with the *immediate environment* and make a clear distinction between the actor and the situation (i.e., the immediate environment) in the explanation of behavior. For example, Wortley defines a situation as “a setting in which behaviour occurs” (2012:186).³ As a consequence, *situational analysis* typically refers to analyses of how the immediate environment influences particular actions rather than how the person–environment interaction results in particular actions.

The common practice of defining the situation as the immediate environment means that the concepts of situation and (immediate) environment get conflated. Arguably, a proper *situational analysis of action* requires a clear definition and specification of the relationships between key concepts such as the person, setting (immediate environment), situation and action (Wikström, 2004). To clearly distinguish the immediate environment from the situation, we submit that a situation should be understood as the *outcome* of the interaction between a person and his or her immediate environment: the motivation and the perception of action alternatives (on which basis people make choices) that emerge from the combination of a particular person in a particular environment. The situation is thus neither the person (his or her traits and state) nor the immediate environment (its characteristics and state) but the motivations and perceptions of action alternatives that arise from their particular combination. The *situational mechanism* that brings about action (or inaction) is the perception–choice process that is a result of the person and environment interaction (Wikström, 2006).

Routine Activity Theory: A Missed Opportunity?

... The probability that a violation will occur at any specific time and place might be taken as a function of the convergence of likely offenders and suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians

(Cohen & Felson, 1979).

Situational theory and analysis focuses on how the *person–environment interaction* triggers people to act in one way or another. Person–environment interactions occur as a result of specific person–environment intersections. In the late 1970s and early 1980s a number of influential criminological theories were forwarded suggesting the importance of these

intersections and their relation to broader social conditions and patterns of crime, e.g., routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson & Cohen, 1980), life-style theory (Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978) and crime pattern theory (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981, 1993). Here we will focus on the contribution of routine activity theory.

Routine activity theory (RAT) was originally proposed to explain societal changes in (direct-contact predatory) crime rates. Routine activities refer to regular patterns of human activities in society (e.g., recurrent spatial and temporal patterns in family, work and leisure activities) that “provide for basic population and individual needs” (Cohen & Felson, 1979:593). The main idea of RAT is that changes in societal routine activities impact the rate of convergence of likely offenders, suitable targets and capable guardians – i.e., opportunities for crime – which in turn cause changes in societal crime rates (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson & Cohen, 1980). The argument seems straightforward: more opportunities cause more crime; fewer opportunities cause fewer crimes. It is therefore no great surprise that RAT is often referred to as an *opportunity theory*.

Routine activity theory thus advances two important key ideas:

1. The structure of routine activities in a society influences what kinds of opportunities emerge, and changes in a society’s routine activities cause changes in the kinds of opportunities people confront.
2. People act in response to opportunities (including when they commit acts of crime); therefore the kinds of opportunities they encounter in their daily lives influence their crime involvement (and as a result a society’s crime rate), and changes in people’s exposure to opportunities may lead to changes in their crime involvement (and consequently changes in a society’s crime rate).

The interactional model

The interactional model of RAT proposes that an act of crime occurs as a result of a (crime) opportunity – the convergence of a motivated/likely offender,⁴ a suitable target and a lack of guardianship (supervision) (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson & Cohen, 1980). Cohen & Felson argue that each successful (direct-contact predatory⁵) crime requires “an *offender* with both criminal inclinations and the ability to carry out those inclinations, a person or object providing a *suitable target* for the offender, and the *absence of guardians* capable of preventing violations” (1979:590; italics in original). They also argue that “the lack of any of these elements normally is sufficient to prevent such violations from occurring” (ibid., 590). More recently these elements have been referred to as “almost-always elements of a criminal act” (Felson & Boba, 2010:28).

The key concepts of RAT are vaguely defined and their relationships not very well specified, which causes analytical problems and difficulties for theory-testing (and falsification). Felson & Boba (2010:28) state that “anybody might commit a crime,” and Clarke & Felson (1993:2) define a motivated offender as “anybody who for any reason might commit a crime.” A suitable target is defined as “any person or thing that draws the offender toward a crime,” such as “a

car that invites him to steal it, some money that he could easily take, somebody who provokes him into a fight, or somebody who looks like an easy purse-snatch” (Felson & Boba, 2010:28). According to Felson & Boba, “the most significant guardians in society are ordinary citizens going about their daily routines” and “usually, you are the best guardian for your own property” (ibid., 28). However, in a more recent publication it is argued that “guardianship implies that someone *else* is watching who could assist in the event of attempting a criminal act” and that guardianship “involves the presence of others” (Hollis, Felson, & Welsh, 2013:74; italics in original). Guarding one’s own property is thus not a question of guardianship but of target hardening (ibid., 73–74), which is seen as an aspect of target suitability. As for the relationship between the elements, Felson & Boba say that “the guardian differs from the offender and target, because the absence of a guardian is what counts” (2010:28). Recognizing the definitional problems of what constitute guardianship and how this concept relates to the other elements of the interactional model, Hollis, Felson, and Welsh suggest that “guardianship can be defined as the presence of a human element which acts – whether intentionally or not – to deter the would-be offender from committing a crime against an available target” (2013:76). Whether this definition makes things conceptually clearer can be debated.

This interactional model of RAT presents the embryo of a situational model. It stipulates under what supposedly (almost-always) necessary conditions crime is likely to happen, but does not properly explain how (through what process). Although Felson & Boba (2010:25–27) talk about the chemistry of crime⁶ (indicating that something happens that may cause an act of crime when a motivated offender is mixed with a suitable target without capable guardianship), RAT posits no definite mechanism linking motivated offenders, suitable targets, capable guardians, and acts of crime other than loosely alluding to its being “consistent with the economic notion of individual choice given calculation of costs, risks, benefits, etc.” (Felson & Cohen, 1980:403). More recently, Hollis, Felson, & Welsh have declared that “the theory is based on a rational choice perspective” (2013:66). However, routine activity and rational choice theories have, as far as we know, never been formally integrated. For example, Clarke & Felson point out that the concept of rationality is only implicit in RAT (1993:8–9) and Felson states that “the routine activity approach implied a decisional offender, but did not make the decision process explicit” (2008:73).

Hence, the interactional model of RAT is a primarily predictive, but not a truly explanatory model. It says more about *where* and *when* crimes are likely to occur (i.e., crimes occur at places and times where motivated offenders, suitable targets and a lack of guardianship converge)⁷ than about *why* crime is likely to happen (i.e., why and how the proposed convergence supposedly creates acts of crime). Arguing that if someone is motivated to commit a crime and faces a suitable target lacking adequate guardianship, he or she will commit an act of crime does not take us very far towards understanding what *causes* that crime, or the role of the environment. For example, it does not explain why some people, but not others, commit an act of crime in response to (particular) suitable targets lacking guardianship; why some targets are suitable to some people, but not others; or why some forms of guardianship, but not others, influence some people’s, but not others’, crime involvement.

The neglect of individual differences

The role of individual differences in crime propensity is particularly poorly treated in RAT, which is perhaps understandable considering “the routine activity approach offered a thought experiment: to see how far one could go in explaining crime trends without ever discussing any of the various theories about criminal motivation”⁸ (Clarke & Felson, 1993:2). Cohen & Felson even state in their original formulation of routine activity theory that “unlike many criminological inquires, we do not examine why individuals or groups are inclined criminally, but rather we take criminal inclination as given” (1979:589). Hence, the theory recognizes dispositional differences in the guise of motivated (and presumably unmotivated) offenders,⁹ but pays attention only to those who are responsive to criminal opportunities. Thus RAT can essentially ignore personal differences, make general assumptions about likely offenders (e.g., their preferences), and focus instead on immediate environmental factors.

This basic neglect of the role of individual differences in crime causation may be considered a major shortcoming of RAT which undermines its aim to explain the role of the environment, as there are no environmental features that cause all individuals to act in exactly the same way, nor, as Felson & Boba correctly observe, does “everybody respond exactly the same to any given environmental cue” (2010: 53). Thus, although routine activity theory may at first glance appear to be an interaction theory (stressing the role in crime causation of the intersection of likely offenders and suitable targets lacking capable guardianship), a closer examination reveals that it basically is (and has been applied as) a theory about particular environmental influences (i.e., the presence of suitable targets in the absence of guardianship) on the occurrence of crime events by motivated offenders (i.e., people who for whatever reason might commit a crime).

Rational choice has been suggested as a possible action mechanism which may link opportunities to crime, although so far this has amounted to arguing rational choice and routine activity theory are compatible (e.g., Felson, 2008:73; Felson & Cohen, 1980:403) and therefore might be integrated rather than actually suggesting in any detail how they can be. The question remains whether combining routine activity and rational choice theories would provide a proper situational theory of crime causation.

Rational Choice Theory: A Good-Enough Theory?

The rational choice perspective takes the view that crimes are purposive and deliberate acts, committed with the intention of benefiting the offender

(Cornish & Clarke, 2008).

Situational theory and analysis not only emphasizes the importance of the person–environment interaction in explaining action, but crucially also understanding the *mechanism* (process) that moves people to act in one way or another when confronted with a particular setting. To explain how the interactive process initiated by the person–environment intersection brings about action requires an action theory.

Rational choice theory is a prime example of a theory aiming to specify *what* moves people to action (e.g., Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Simon, 1997; Wittek, Snijders, & Nee, 2013). At the core of rational choice theory is the idea that the action choices people make are aimed at optimizing outcomes in relation to their preferences. To be rational is thus to decide upon a course of action which the actor feels is optimal given the circumstances and his or her preferences. It is often (at least implicitly) assumed that people share a universal preference to maximize personal advantage (particularly material gain). Optimizing outcomes generally means choosing the action alternative with the most favorable balance between costs and benefits. However, the assumption about how elaborate such calculations are differs among rational choice theorists. For example, Simon (1997:17) distinguishes between global (neoclassical) and bounded rationality. Global rationality “assumes that the decision maker has a comprehensive, consistent utility function, knows all the alternatives that are available for choice” and “can compute the expected value of utility associated with each alternative” while bounded rationality “is consistent with our knowledge of actual human choice behavior” and “assumes that the decision maker must search for alternatives, has egregiously incomplete and inaccurate knowledge about the consequences of actions, and chooses actions that are expected to be satisfactory (attain targets while satisfying constraints).”

Clarke and Cornish’s application of rational choice theory

Developed in the early 1980s (e.g., Clarke & Cornish, 1985) as a practical rather than an explanatory tool “specifically intended to assist policy thinking” (Clarke, 2014b:xi) and “to underpin situational prevention” (Clarke, 2012:3), Derek Cornish and Ronald Clarke’s version of rational choice theory (hereafter RCT¹⁰) aspires to be what they designate *good-enough theory*; an explanation which values simplicity over specificity and practicality over precision (Clarke, 2004; Cornish & Clarke, 2008). The main propositions of Cornish & Clarke’s rational choice theory are that people’s action decisions, including their decisions to commit acts of crime, are (1) purposeful, intended to obtain a desired outcome, primarily of hedonistic benefit to the actor; (2) freely chosen based on a utilitarian hierarchy of preferences; and (3) rational, involving at least some calculation of expected cost and benefits with the aim of maximizing the utility of both the desired ends and the chosen means. This means that when a person takes part in a setting, he or she will commit an act of crime if his or her assessment of the circumstances leads him or her to believe it would obtain a desired outcome and the expected gains would outweigh the potential costs. His or her chosen methods are then guided and constrained by rational considerations.

The application of this decision making framework to the explanation of criminal events has made a significant contribution to the study of crime by taking into account the cognitive process through which personal and environmental factors directly influence criminal action. At the point of action (the *event decision*) Cornish & Clarke see this process as being driven primarily by features of the setting and circumstances, which determine, through rational processes, if and by what means an act of crime is carried out. Personal characteristics are more implicated in *involvement decisions* which occur prior to a person’s entrance into a particular setting and determine, again through rational processes, whether or not a person

recognizes an act of crime as a means of satisfying his or her needs or desires.

This two step process of criminal decision making – involvement decisions through which a person rationally decides he or she would commit a crime given the right conditions, and event decisions through which a person rationally decides the conditions are right to commit an act of crime and how to go about doing so – is consistent with Cornish & Clarke’s depiction of criminal activity as a step-by-step process requiring rational choices at each decision point (Leclerc & Wortley, 2014). Once a person decides he or she is ready to commit a crime and the conditions for doing so manifest, criminal behavior often follows a *crime script* – a step-by-step procedure which guides the action process from rational decision to rational decision through crime commission (and its aftermath) (Cornish & Clarke, 2008).

Clarke & Cornish not only see individual acts of crime as comprised of sequential stages, but likewise criminal careers, and suggest that different explanatory models may be required for each of three stages: initiation, through which the would-be offender acquires a *readiness* to offend (comes to see crime as a solution to his or her needs given the right circumstances); habituation, during which the repercussions of successful crime involvement (e.g., increasing crime-relevant knowledge and skills, and changes in lifestyle and values) bolster offending as the rational choice for action; and desistance, during which the repercussions of unsuccessful crime involvement, as well as changes in life circumstances, make crime commission less appealing. Cornish & Clarke seem to confuse content with mechanism, however (Cornish & Clarke, 2008); while the *content* (e.g. relevant skills, experiences and consequences) driving action decisions during initiation, habituation, and desistance may differ, the proposed decision making *process* itself does not change – according to RCT it remains rational.

Cornish & Clarke likewise suggest that different types of crime may require different explanations, i.e., that criminal decision-making is crime-specific (2008:26). But, although the factors which influence, for example, a person’s readiness to rape and the settings and circumstances amenable to rape are significantly different from those associated with tax evasion, the difference is again one of content, not process. Rape and tax evasion, according to RCT, have at least one thing in common – they are rationally chosen.

Key assumptions

Cornish & Clarke’s model of rational decision making relies on a number of assumptions. The first set of assumptions relates to the desired outcome of the decision process. Generally, this is seen to be something of benefit to the actor (often material gain, but also more visceral rewards like positive emotions and the gratification of physical appetites). Self-interested motives are taken for granted, although a rational choice framework does not require them (see e.g., Elster, 2007 :193). Preferences are also presumed to be broadly universal (presumably everybody desires money, status, sexual gratification, etc.). To what extent these preferences are equal in magnitude as well as valence is not always specified, but often presumed to also be at least roughly generalizable.

The second set of assumptions relates to the costs–benefits calculation at the heart of RCT. Like preferences, costs and benefits are generally presumed, in themselves, to be universally

valued (although different costs and benefits may be relevant to different actors, and different actors may stand to gain or lose more than others). Hence, RCT implies that the nature and outcomes of these calculations can be specified based on information about the setting and circumstances, and therefore predicted, and potentially manipulated.

A third set of assumptions relates to the bounded nature of rationality. Actors do not usually (if ever), possess perfect knowledge regarding outcomes, or perfect evaluative capacities; rather, they tend to work with limited and sometimes distorted information (Simon, 1997). However, regardless of the extent and reliability of the knowledge informing the decision process, much of the process itself is seen to be rational (Clarke & Cornish, 1985:164).

A final set of assumptions has to do with involvement decisions, i.e., how people select an act of crime as an action they are ready to pursue once they encounter the right circumstances (i.e., opportunity). This decision, according to RCT, takes place before the person enters the setting in which the crime actually happens, and is influenced by personal background factors (such as sex, temperament, and broken homes), which influence his or her generalized needs (e.g., money, sex, or excitement), and previous experiences and learning (which include, for example, moral attitudes and experiences of crime), which, in turn, influence whether or not he or she recognizes an act of crime as a means of satisfying those needs (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Cornish & Clarke, 2014).

This means that at the point of action the decision process is merely concerned with the practical considerations of carrying out the action and reaping its rewards (or costs). It also implies that people take their criminal motivation¹¹ with them, monitoring their environments for the right conditions (opportunity) to offend. Cornish & Clarke (e.g., 2003:56) describe such people as predatory offenders, opportunity theories' "model or ideal" offender type. All told, "the rational choice perspective has little to say about the construction of motives, desire and preferences" (Cornish & Clarke, 2003:87) and "the nature of the offender" (Cornish & Clarke, 2008:39). Instead, it remains focused on decision processes at the point of action, when settings and circumstances signal to the would-be offender "the existence of opportunities to carry out the offense he or she... has already decided to do once the circumstances are right" (Cornish & Clarke, 2003:59). The costs–benefits analyses concerning how to carry out the action (event decisions) are therefore free from "questions of needs and motives, moral scruples and readiness" which "have already been addressed" (Cornish & Clarke, 2008:31)¹² in a *standing decision* to engage in the particular type of crime.

An inadequate action mechanism

The rational choice perspective has been instrumental in drawing the attention of criminologists to decision-making and its importance in linking people and environments to acts of crime. However, there are several fundamental problems with RCT's specification which mean that it is questionable whether it is, as Clarke & Cornish suggest, a good-enough theory.

The first of these problems is rational choice theory's assumption that the main orienting force behind human action is self-interest. Growing evidence suggests that human social behavior is

too complex to be governed by this simplistic principle. Rather, social behavior is to a large extent rule-guided (e.g., Bunge & Wallis, 2008 ; Lyons, Young, & Keil, 2007; Wellmans & Miller, 2008) and, therefore, best explained and analyzed as such.

RCT does not see rules of conduct as particularly relevant to the offending of its default predatory offenders, but it does not completely overlook their influence on at least some offenders, in particular those it dubs *mundane offenders*. Moral scruples may destabilize the readiness of this less ideal type of offender to offend, causing them to be “more selective, revisable and tentative” (Cornish & Clarke, 2003:63), primarily through the association of rule-breaking with negative consequences, including shame and guilt. “It is not immediately apparent” to Cornish & Clarke (ibid., 67) “how moral considerations could be brought to bear with much force at any later point” in criminal decision-making, but they do acknowledge that establishing codes of behavior may signal, through perceptible changes in the setting (e.g., notices, interventions), that actions are less permissible or excusable, potentially affecting moral inhibitions or neutralizations (ibid., 68). Generally, however, as noted previously, Cornish & Clarke see issues of morality as something which is dealt with prior to the point of action and part of one’s criminal disposition (Cornish & Clarke, 2008). Hence the mundane offender may represent “merely a rather more complex version of the predatory one” (Cornish & Clarke, 2003:65) which does not offend as prolifically, tends to commit “ambiguously criminal acts” (ibid., 62) and is therefore not nearly as gratifying to study from an RCT perspective.

Rational choice theory’s second major shortcoming is its failure to take into account more automatic processes of choice which do not follow a rational design. RCT’s version of habituation refers to the continuation of crime involvement and the inclusion of previous experience with crime in the rational calculus; in other words, the entrenchment of the standing decision to offend (criminal readiness) as well as the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills (Cornish & Clarke, 2008). This expands the conditions which a motivated offender sees as opportunities to offend, but does not change the rational nature by which he or she chooses when, where and how to carry out the offence. Traditionally, habituation refers to the automation of action decisions such that the person skips over rational deliberation regarding potential interference and consequences and dives straight into the action. While this automaticity may be acquired subsequent to rational calculations in previous situations, once it is triggered those considerations do not influence the action until interferences or consequences manifest, typically after the action is initiated.

One major difference between habitual and rational choices is that when people make habitual choices, they perceive only one potent alternative for action, which is then automatically chosen. Rationality, on the other hand, requires the perception of more than one potent action alternative because to choose the best alternative requires making a genuine choice between more than one alternative. Habits draw on past actions and experienced outcomes, while rational deliberation focuses on the future and expected outcomes. The latter involves more uncertainty and requires more cognitive effort, but is bespoke; the former is faster and more efficient, but lacks reflective flexibility (see further, Wikström, 2006). Thus, habituation (in the traditional sense) avoids the heavy demands of rationality. There is good reason to believe that

habitual processes underlie much of human action (e.g., Bargh, 1997; Wood & Quinn, 2005; Verplanken & Wood, 2006), and that much crime (for example, many instances of violent crimes, minor thefts, and traffic violations) may be a result of habitual responses rather than rational decision-making. Moreover, there are good reasons to believe that persistent offending may include strong elements of habit.

Rule-guidance does not preclude rationality from all decision processes, but much human action is guided by automated rule-following which saves the decision maker much of the cognitive time and effort required by consistently applying rational choices in everyday life. As Davidson (2004:107) observes, “most of our actions are not preceded by any conscious reasoning and deliberation. We don’t usually ‘form’ intentions, we just come to have them.” Not only does this have implications for predicting decision-making outcomes, but also for practical efforts to influence those outcomes (i.e., crime prevention), the purported focus of Cornish & Clarke’s rational choice theory.

RCT likes to invoke the concept of bounded rationality to account for aspects of decision making which lie beyond its presumably rational core, but its “focus remains on the vestiges of rationality that remain” (Wortley, 2012:245). However, Smith & Clarke (2012:294) argue that “undue attention” to irrational aspects of behavior may lead to the neglect of important rational elements. Until we fully understand the extent to which criminal decision-making is rational or irrational (i.e., non-deliberative), however, we cannot say where that attention is best placed.

The situational model

Essentially, RCT argues that when a person engages with an action setting, if he or she is ready (motivated) to commit an act of crime, he or she decides through a (bounded) rational process whether that act can be successfully carried out given the setting and circumstances. Cornish & Clarke (2003 :50) interpret this interaction between offenders and their environments as that of motivation and opportunity, motivation being something a person brings to the setting (a readiness),¹³ and opportunity something which the setting presents to the person. This explains why RCT divides criminal decision-making into involvement decisions (those determining criminal readiness) and event decisions (those determining in which settings and circumstances crimes occur). Yet there is a sound argument for the proposition that motivation (understood as goal-directed attention) and (perceived) opportunity are situational concepts, outcomes of the interaction between a person and a setting at the point of action, and not intrinsic features of the person (propensities) and setting (inducements) respectively.

Cornish & Clarke developed RCT as “a heuristic device or conceptual tool rather than conventional criminological theory” (2008:24). Despite its name, the question of whether or not people make rational decisions is not (according to Cornish & Clarke, 2008:41) the main focus of RCT. To them, even if it lacks rigor in its specification, RCT is a good-enough theory if it achieves its practical aims: if crime events can be effectively prevented through methods aimed at offenders who are presumed to be making rational choices, then RCT is good enough.

We believe, however, that Herbert Simon, the father of bounded rationality, is correct in positing that if we want to adequately explain and predict behavior, a theory like Cornish &

Clarke's version of rational choice theory which primarily focuses on substantive (instrumental) rationality¹⁴ "will not do the job" (Simon, 1997:19). "It is, of course, a great pity," Simon notes; "if it would, we would be spared a tiresome inquiry into the sociology and psychology of human decision making" (ibid., 19). Such an inquiry is, however, necessary in regards to "most situations of practical interest" (ibid., 19).

Opportunity theory: Combining routine activity and rational choice theories

In 1993, Clarke & Felson made the marriage of routine activity and rational choice theory official, stating that rationality is implicit in RAT and arguing they are "compatible and, indeed, mutually supportive" despite "differing in scope and purpose" (Clarke & Felson, 1993 :1). Key differences which they highlight include the efforts of RCT to explain criminal dispositions (motivated offenders) and particularly the fact that RAT takes a macro perspective, looking at crime events from population level, while RCT takes a micro perspective, looking at crime events from the personal level (i.e., the perspective of the motivated offender). Subsequently, Felson & Clarke adopted the slogan "*opportunity makes the thief*" (e.g., Felson & Clarke, 1998), although a scrutiny of their reasoning suggests that "*thieves take opportunities*" would probably be more fitting.

Although never formally integrated, routine activity theory, bolstered by rational choice, represents the closest criminological theorists have traditionally come to a situational analysis of crime. We have highlighted routine activity theory's interactional model, which emphasizes the convergence of people and settings, and its contribution to criminological theorizing by drawing attention to the importance of the person–environment interaction, but we have also highlighted serious weaknesses in the model, particularly its lack of attention to, and interest in, the role of the actor and his or her personal characteristics, and its failure to clearly define and explain how the interaction of the key components – motivated offenders, suitable targets, and lack of guardianship – lead to crime involvement, except by falling back upon notions of rational choice. We have gone on to describe Cornish & Clarke's version of rational choice theory, highlighting its significant contribution of drawing attention to the need for an action mechanism – proposed as a rational choice process – linking people and their environments to their actions, but questioned several of its key assumptions, namely those relating to human nature as self-interested, which we argue overlooks our social tendencies, and human action as characteristically considered and effortful, which we argue overlooks more automated decision processes. Considering that RAT is founded on the notion of routine activities (i.e., common habits), and routines have been argued to arise from constraining rules and resources (e.g., Wikström & Sampson, 2003) it is surprising that deliberation-heavy, self-interested rational calculations have been highlighted as the most appropriate action mechanism for routine activity theory.

Situational Action Theory: A Better Alternative?

Acts of crime happen because people perceive them as a morally acceptable action alternative given the circumstances (and there is no relevant and strong enough deterrent) or fail to adhere to personal morals (i.e., fail to exercise self-control) in circumstances when they are externally incited to act otherwise. (Wikström & Treiber, forthcoming).

Situational action theory (SAT) is a dynamic theory of crime causation. It stresses the importance of the person–environment interaction and the need to properly understand and explicate the action mechanism that links people and their immediate environments to their actions (including their acts of crime). The theory aims to overcome the fragmentation and poor integration of key criminological (and supporting behavioral science) insights about the role and interplay of relevant personal propensities and environmental inducements in crime causation and its dependence on the wider social context. SAT was initially presented in the early 2000s (e.g., Wikström, 2004, 2005, 2006) and has been further developed and refined ever since (e.g., Wikström, 2010, 2011, 2014; Wikström *et al.*, 2012:3–43; specifically about the neuroscientific basis of SAT, see Treiber, 2011).

Situational action theory is based on four key propositions about the sources of human action:

1. Action is ultimately an outcome of a perception–choice process.
2. This perception–choice process is initiated and guided by relevant aspects of the person–environment interaction.
3. Processes of social and self-selection place kinds of people in kinds of settings (creating particular kinds of interactions).
4. What kinds of people and what kinds of environments are present (and to what extent) in a jurisdiction is the result of historical processes of personal and social emergence (setting the stage for the potential personal and environmental input into human interactions).

Propositions 1 and 2 refer to the *situational model* of SAT, while propositions 3 and 4 refer to the *social model* of SAT. How the situational and social models are linked is illustrated in [Figure 22.1](#).¹⁵ In this chapter we focus on the situational model at the core of SAT's explanation of human action and crime, and contrast it with the previously discussed opportunity theories (i.e., Cohen & Felson's routine activity theory and Cornish & Clarke's version of rational choice theory).

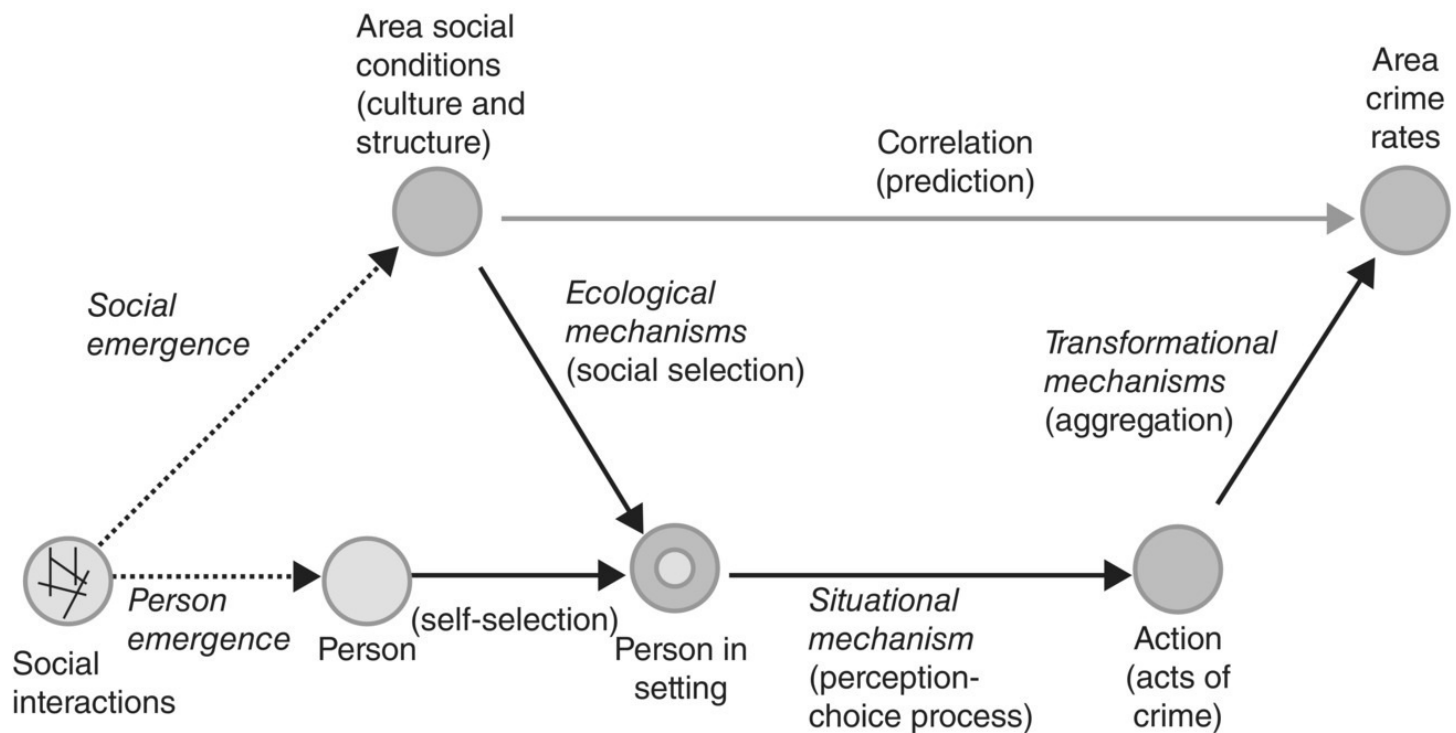


Figure 22.1 Situational Action Theory: Key proposed mechanisms.

Source: Wikström P-O H. (2011). "Does Everything Matter? Addressing the Problem of Causation and Explanation in the Study of Crime." In J. McGloin, C. J. Sullivan, and L. W. Kennedy (Eds.), *When Crime Appears. The Role of Emergence*. London. Routledge.

The concepts of *situation* and *situational mechanism*

SAT insists that people are the *source* of their actions (people perceive, choose, and execute their actions) but that the *causes* of their actions are situational (people's particular perception of action alternatives, process of choice and execution of action are triggered and guided by the relevant input from the person–environment interaction).

A *situation* is defined as "the perception of action alternatives in response to a certain motivation." What motivations (temptations or provocations) arise and what action alternatives a particular person perceives in response to those motivations is a result of his or her active engagement with the particular setting (immediate environment). Importantly, the situation represents neither the person nor the setting but the outcome of their combination; a person's particular action propensities are triggered by specific features of a setting, and a setting's particular action inducements are made relevant by a person's specific propensities.

People make action choices on the basis of their motivations and perception of action alternatives. The *situational mechanism* that links people and their settings (immediate environments) to their actions is the *perception–choice process*. This is the process that brings about action (or inaction); particular kinds of people in particular settings perceive particular action alternatives and make particular choices in response to the motivations they experience. Factors that (directly as *causes*, or indirectly as *causes of the causes*) influence the perception–choice process are those that have causal relevance in the explanation of human action (see further Wikström, 2011).

The situational model: The PEA hypothesis

The core hypothesis of SAT’s situational model for the explanation of action (including acts of crime) is as follows: for any particular motivation (temptation or provocation), the resulting action (*A*) is an outcome of a perception–choice process (\rightarrow) that results from the interaction (\times) between relevant personal propensities (*P*) and exposure to relevant setting inducements (*E*).

$$P \times E \rightarrow A$$

The perception–choice process (\rightarrow) may be more or less automated depending on the circumstances (as discussed further below). Changes in people’s action are a result of changes in their propensities or exposure, or both. The key elements of the PEA hypothesis are defined in [Table 22.1](#).

Table 22.1 Definitions of key elements of the PEA hypothesis.

Person	A body with a biological and psychological make-up, experiences and agency (powers to make things happen intentionally)
Setting	The part of the environment (the configuration of objects, people and events) a person can access with his or her senses (e.g., see, hear, feel) at a particular moment in time, including any media present (e.g., internet)
Motivation	Goal-directed attention (e.g., temptation, provocation)
Personal propensities	A person’s (somewhat stable) tendencies to act in certain ways in response to particular environmental incitements
Setting	Particular environmental conditions and events that tend to activate inducements – particular propensities
Exposure	A person in a setting
Action	Bodily movements under a person’s guidance (e.g., speaking, hitting)

Few criminological theories (including routine activity¹⁶ and Cornish & Clarke’s version of rational choice theory) pay much attention to what it is they aim to explain (i.e., crime). This is problematic because to explain something we first need to be clear about what it is we aim to explain. A cause has to be a cause of *something* and an explanation has to explain *something*. Clearly, defining what it is we aim to explain when we theorize about the causes of crime helps delimit what personal and environmental factors and what interactional action processes may be causally relevant.

Situational action theory asserts that humans are essentially rule-guided creatures, and society (social order) is based on shared rules of conduct (see further Wikström, 2010). SAT defines and analyzes acts of crime as *moral actions*, that is, “actions which are guided by value-based rules of conduct specifying what is the right or wrong thing to do (or not do) in response to particular motivations in particular circumstances.” Acts of *crime* are defined as “breaches of rules of conduct stated in law,” and this is what all acts of crime, in all places, at all times,

have in common. SAT asserts that there is no principle difference between explaining acts of crime and rule-breaking more generally; the same process which explains why people follow or break the rules of law should also explain why people break other kinds of moral rules (e.g., informal social norms). To explain acts of crime is to explain why people break rules of conduct stated in law.

Against this background (crime as rule-breaking behavior), SAT proposes that people's *crime propensity* is largely dependent on their law-relevant *personal morals* (internalized rules of conduct including supporting moral emotions such as shame and guilt) and their *ability to exercise self-control* (their ability to withstand external pressure to act against their own personal morals). People are seen as varying from highly crime averse (for whom few if any acts of crime are regarded as morally acceptable) to highly crime prone (for whom many if not most acts of crime are seen as morally acceptable). The closer a person's personal morals are to the rules of conduct stated in law, the less prone he or she is to violate these rules. The stronger a person's ability to exercise self-control, the less likely he or she is to be enticed to act contrary to his or her own personal morals.

Settings vary strongly in their criminogenic features. SAT proposes that the criminogeneity of a setting depends on the moral context (the moral norms and their enforcement) of the opportunities it provides and/or the frictions it generates. Settings are *criminogenic* to the extent that their (perceived) moral norms, and their level of enforcement, encourage (or do not discourage) acts of crime in response to the opportunities they provide and/or the frictions they create.¹⁷ A *criminogenic setting* is thus a setting in which the (perceived) moral context encourages (or at least does not discourage) particular acts of crime in response to its particular opportunities or frictions. Acts of crime are most likely to occur when a crime prone person intersects with a criminogenic setting.

The key elements and steps of the action process in crime causation

SAT's action process of crime causation and its key elements are illustrated in [Figure 22.2](#). Motivation is what initiates the action process. *Motivation* is a situational concept and may be defined as "goal-directed attention." Two main kinds of motivation are temptation and provocation. *Temptation* occurs when there is an opportunity to satisfy a desire (want, need) or to honor a commitment. *Provocation* occurs when people encounter frictions (unwanted interferences) that cause upset or anger.

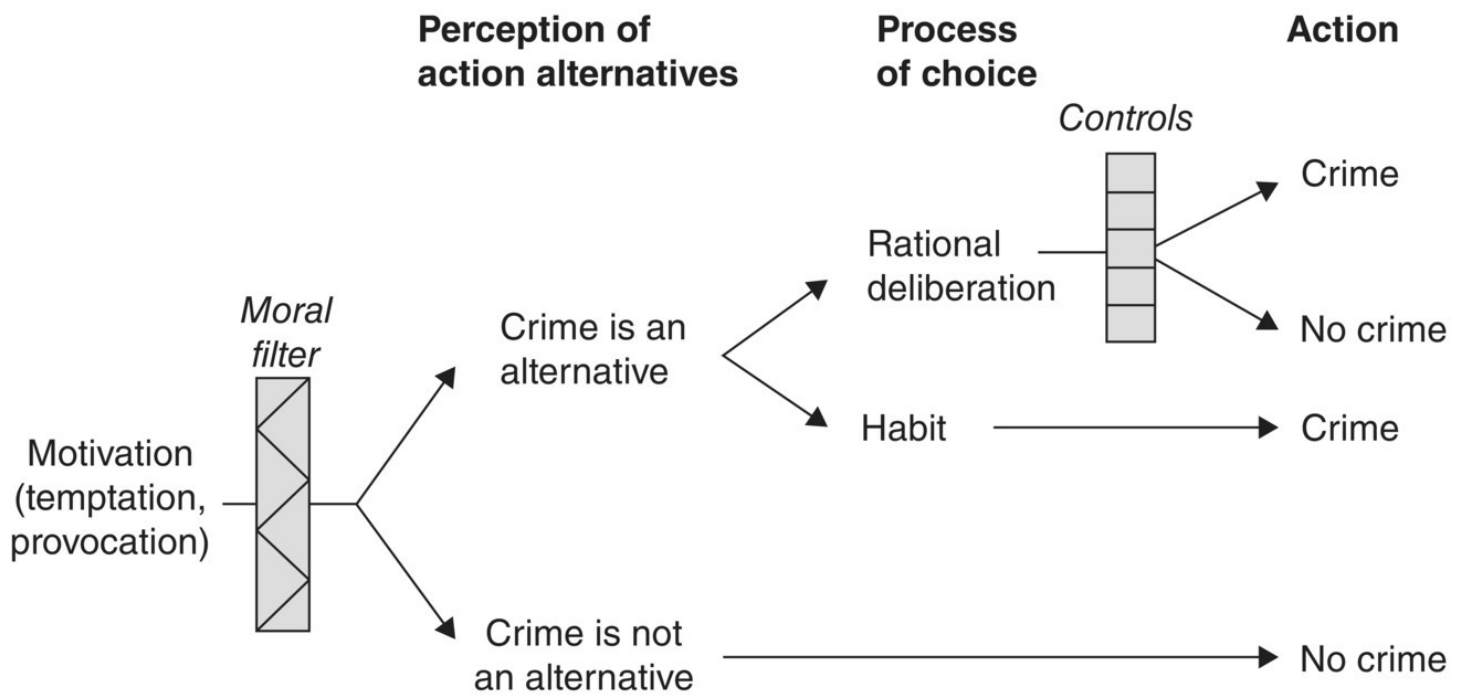


Figure 22.2 Key elements and steps in the situational process of SAT.

Source: Wikström P-O H. (2011). "Does Everything Matter? Addressing the Problem of Causation and Explanation in the Study of Crime." In J. McGloin, C. J. Sullivan, and L. W. Kennedy (Eds.), *When Crime Appears. The Role of Emergence*. London. Routledge.

What kind of desires a person has (which in some cases may show short-term temporal variation due to saturation effects) depends on his or her biological needs and socially developed preferences. What kinds of commitments a person has entered into depends on his or her social circumstances (e.g., the kind and content of his or her social network and the activities they are engaged in). What kinds of frictions cause upset and anger depends on socially developed and biologically grounded sensitivities. A person's preferences, commitments and sensitivities determine what kinds of opportunities and frictions are relevant for creating temptations and provocations. Motivation is the reason for action; we act because we are tempted or provoked to do so.

However, there are many different possible action alternatives in response to a particular motivation (of which one is inaction). What *action alternatives* a person perceives in relation to a specific temptation or provocation (and whether or not these alternatives include an act of crime) depends on his or her relevant personal morals and the (perceived) relevant moral norms of the setting in which he or she takes part. People vary in their relevant personal morals, settings vary in their (perceived) relevant moral norms, and their interaction will guide what kinds of action alternatives a person perceives as potential responses to a temptation or provocation. The application of relevant personal morals and perceived relevant moral norms of the setting to a particular motivation (temptation or provocation) is referred to in SAT as *the moral filter* (defined as "the moral rule-induced selective perception of action alternatives in relation to a particular motivation").

People make *choices* ("form intentions to act in a certain way") among the action alternatives they perceive in relation to a particular motivation (temptation or provocation). The process of

choice is *only* relevant in crime causation if at least one of the perceived action alternatives involves an act of crime. If the person does not see crime as an action alternative there will be no crime and the process of choice and controls (the ability to exercise self-control and deterrence) will lack explanatory relevance. In this case the person does not choose not to commit an act of crime, nor does he or she refrain from crime because of the influence of controls. He or she just does not see an act of crime as an option.¹⁸

People's process of choice is predominantly habitual or deliberate (on dual thought-processes generally see, e.g., Evans & Frankish, 2009; Kahneman, 2003).¹⁹ Sometimes, people commit crimes out of habit; at other times their crimes are an outcome of a (more or less elaborate) rational deliberation. When people commit crime out of habit, controls play no role in the process of choice.

Habitual (or automated) *choices* are based on the application of a person's moral habits (automated rules of conduct) to a temptation or provocation. When acting out of habit, a person acts as he or she normally does in response to a particular motivation in a particular kind of setting without giving it much thought. Habitual choices are likely when people act in familiar circumstances where there is a close correspondence between their personal morals and the (perceived) moral norms of the setting. Habitual choices may also be likely in highly stressful and emotionally charged circumstances (even if the setting is unfamiliar). A habitual choice involves seeing only *one* potent alternative for action (although the actor may be loosely aware in the back of his or her mind that there are other alternatives). Habitual choices are oriented towards the past; "the control of action is outsourced to the environment so that sequences of prior action are triggered automatically by the appropriate circumstance" (Verplanken & Wood, 2006:93).

Deliberate (or reasoned) *choices* involve some assessment of the pros and cons of *more than one* potent alternative for action (which may include the choice to do nothing) and may also involve elements of problem-solving. People apply *free will* when they deliberate because there is no predetermined alternative for action. However, and importantly, it is free will constrained by the action alternatives a person perceives. Deliberation is future-oriented; "deliberation does not refer to the past but only to the future and what is possible" (Aristotle, 1999:149). Deliberate choices are most likely in unfamiliar circumstances and circumstances in which personal morals and the perceived moral norms of the setting provide conflicting or unclear rule-guidance (e.g., the person is uncertain what moral norms apply in the setting). They are *rational* in the sense that the person aims to select the best out of the action alternatives perceived. However, SAT does not view personal advantage as the basis for making a rational choice. Rather, what the actor regards as the "best alternative" is fundamentally a question of what he or she sees as *a morally acceptable means* to best satisfy a particular temptation or respond to a specific provocation given the circumstances (i.e., the most beneficial, pleasing or proportionate alternative within the constraints of what he or she regards as morally acceptable given the circumstances). SAT thus asserts that people's action choices are essentially rule-guided and not primarily driven by self-interest (i.e., by a wish to optimize personal advantage).²⁰ Whether or not a crime will occur is dependent on the

outcome of the actor's assessment of the pros and cons of different perceived criminal and other action alternatives.

Only when people deliberate may *controls* play a role in the process of choice. *Control* is conceptualized in SAT as a situational process and is defined as "the process by which a person manages conflicting rule-guidance in his or her choice of action in relation to a particular motivation." Control processes may be internal (self-control) or external (deterrence) in origin. When people deliberate, self-control helps people comply with their own personal moral rules, while deterrence impels people to comply with the moral norms of a setting.

Self-control is defined as "the process by which a person succeeds in adhering to a personal moral rule when it conflicts with the (perceived) moral norms of a setting."²¹ The typical example here is withstanding peer pressure when challenged to act against one's own personal morals.

Deterrence is defined as "the process by which the (perceived) enforcement of a setting's (perceived) moral norms (by creating concern or fear of consequences) succeeds in making a person adhere to the moral norms of the setting even though they conflict with his or her personal moral rules." The typical example here is when people who find a particular crime acceptable refrain from crime because environmental cues (such as the presence of police officers, guard dogs, or CCTV cameras) create concern or fear of the consequences. If the moral norms of the setting are in conflict with the rules of conduct stated in law, a high level of deterrence may be criminogenic (as may be the case, for example, in gangland settings when gang members enforce certain norms that conflict with the law).

The extent to which people commit crime (or different types of crime) out of habit or after some deliberation is largely unknown. However, since human actions to a large extent are habitual it would be surprising if there were not important elements of habit in peoples' criminality (particularly in their persistent criminality).

Contrasting key assumptions of SAT and opportunity theory (RAT + RCT)

Situational action theory posits that all people share a natural inclination to be rule-guided and therefore to act in accordance with personal rules of conduct and the behavioral norms of the settings in which they take part. This rule-guided behavior may not accord with the optimization of self-interested action outcomes through the maximization of personal gains and the minimization of personal costs, which is the hallmark of rational choice theory and theories like routine activity theory which rely on it as an action mechanism (Clarke, 2005, 2014a; Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Felson, 2006). While SAT does not deny that people at times may act to achieve gains and avoid costs, it posits they do so within the context of rule-guided choice.

SAT questions the assumption that human action is fundamentally self-interested. Human behavioral goals, especially in the social domain, are far more complicated, as are human perceptions of the value and relevance of expected outcomes. Ultimately, assuming people are

generally self-interested, coupled with the additional assumption that people share similar preferences, does not contribute much to the understanding of differences in behavior. It is also an assumption that is almost impossible to falsify; “no example of an altruistic action can refute the view that there was an egoistic motive hidden behind it” (Popper [1956]1985:xx).

Because RAT and RCT assume self-interest and construe crimes as acts which provide quick, easy means of satisfying normal human desires or needs, they automatically presume, like control theories (e.g., Hirschi, 1969:34), that people have a relatively constant incentive to break rules of conduct, and hence find rule-breaking “unproblematic” (Clarke, 2005). SAT, on the other hand, assumes that because people are naturally inclined to follow rules of conduct, most people, most of the time, prefer to abide by them. Of course, not all people will agree with and care equally about following different rules; in fact, disagreeing with or not caring much about a particular rule is one major reason why people break rules of conduct (such as the law).

This does not mean SAT thinks controls (i.e., self-control and deterrence) are unimportant for crime causation. On the contrary, SAT highlights controls as key factors which may influence the process of choice. However, SAT emphasizes the fact that the relevance of controls is conditional: controls are relevant to crime involvement only when personal and environmental rule-guidance conflicts and people deliberate over whether or not to choose rule-breaking as their response to a particular motivator.

If people are naturally rule-guided, it makes sense that societies (communities) are based on shared rules of conduct. Such societal or community structures make less sense from a rational, self-interested perspective; why would we create a social structure at odds with our nature? Shared rules of conduct help members of a society or community predict others’ behaviors, and responses to their own behaviors, and to act pro-socially. Crucially, societal *patterns* of human activities (routine activities) are much more easily explained by the assumption that people are rule-following creatures, than that their actions are primarily undertaken in pursuit of their self-interest.

Criminological theories rarely address the choice process, and those which do focus on the choice between alternatives and neglect the important first step of perceiving alternatives amongst which to choose. RAT does so because, for the most part, it ignores individual differences by focusing only on “likely” or “motivated offenders,” who, it assumes, will perceive crime as an alternative whenever an opportunity presents itself. RCT provides more background, suggesting “motivated offenders” have already chosen crime as an alternative via a rational decision process prior to the point of action (made a standing decision to commit some kind of crime), but maintain that at the point of action the actor simply decides whether the circumstances are right.

Both of these perspectives seem to conflate motivation (goal-directed attention) and propensity (a personal tendency to behave in certain ways in response to particular motivations). SAT sees motivation as a situational concept, arising from the interaction between people’s desires, commitments, and sensitivities, and settings’ opportunities and frictions; and initiating the perception–choice process leading to action. Therefore, different people will respond

differently to different motivators in different settings, and their goal-directed attention in a given situation cannot be predicted purely from their personal characteristics and experiences prior to their intersection with the action setting.

Because RAT presupposes criminal motivation as a precondition of criminal opportunities (the convergence of a motivated offender with suitable targets and a lack of guardianship) it sees the role of the setting in crime involvement as instrumental, setting the scene, as it were, for the act of crime to unfold. It is not interested in how settings influence different kinds of people (i.e., those who are not “motivated offenders”). SAT sees settings as playing a much more active role in people’s perceptions and choice of preferred action, and emphasizes the critical importance of people’s differential susceptibility to particular crime inducements, which lies at the core of the person–environment interaction.

Consequently, RAT and SAT focus on different key features of the setting. SAT focuses on the moral context of opportunities and frictions – the action-relevant moral norms of the setting and their level of enforcement – and how it influences the perception–choice process. Weak law-relevant moral norms may encourage, or at least not discourage, people to see crime as an action alternative. Weak enforcement of the rules of law means that if a person sees crime as an alternative, the setting may not exhibit strong enough external controls to deter him or her from choosing that alternative.

RAT focuses on suitable targets and (the absence of) capable guardians as key environmental influences, but these are poorly conceptualized (e.g., Madero-Hernandez & Fisher, 2012:7–8), especially in regards to their role in the action process. Essentially, suitable targets represent motivators (opportunities that may cause temptation or even sources of friction causing provocation), and capable guardians represent sources of supervision (deterrents). RAT implicitly, and sometimes even explicitly, assumes they exert a similar influence on all people (or even all motivated offenders), in line with the opportunity theory slogan “opportunity makes the thief.” SAT, on the other hand, highlights the fact that in many situations, motivators or controls may be irrelevant because people have different desires, commitments and sensitivities, won’t perceive crime as an alternative because of their personal morality and/or the moral norms of the setting, or make habitual choices.

The inclusion of habitual choices in the action decision process also sets SAT apart from RAT and RCT. Although RCT discusses habituation, as described above, as standing decisions, it does not fully engage with the idea of automatic, involuntary processes of choice. SAT, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of these processes for guiding everyday decisions and potentially many decisions relating to crime involvement.

Testability

According to Popper (1963) “the criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability.” To be assessed and refined, theories must be testable. To be testable, a theory must have unambiguous predictions (testable consequences) that can be derived and empirically investigated. We argue that routine activity theory suffers from a lack of clear testable implications due to a lack of specificity in its key concepts and their

relationships. Cornish & Clarke's RCT is explicitly uninterested in testability as it is more concerned with practical rather than scientific merit.

Most empirical studies of routine activity theory have analyzed the macro-level relationship between routine activities and crime rates. To operationalize routine activities, these studies tend to rely on crude proxy measures, such as sociodemographic features (e.g., indices of household characteristics to indicate levels of guardianship; see Cohen, Felson & Land, 1980) or land-use variables (e.g., to indicate place routine activities; see Rhodes & Conly, 1981; Felson, 1987), typically at the aggregate level (e.g., national, regional or neighborhood). A meta-analysis reports moderate empirical support for routine activities as a macro-level predictor of crime rates (Pratt & Cullen, 2005). However, aggregate level data may not be appropriate for testing RAT as micro-level processes lie at the core of its explanation of crime (Eck, 1995); hence, a true test of RAT would need to investigate the interaction of its key elements.

Bursik & Grasmick (1993) pointed out some time ago that the interactional model of RAT (i.e., the proposition that the *convergence* of a motivated offender and a suitable target in the absence of a capable guardian *creates* acts of crime) has never been convincingly tested (see also Eck, 1995). As far as we are aware, this statement still holds true. While this may seem surprising considering RAT's popularity, it is less surprising when you consider that RAT research suffers from a number of limitations, in particular loosely defined concepts (and consequently poor empirical indicators) and a lack of specification of the relationships between factors (and consequently a lack of explicit predictions) (see, e.g., Madero-Hernandez & Fisher, 2012:7). How does one empirically test a theory which argues that crime events ("any identifiable behavior that an appreciable number of governments has specifically prohibited and formally punished") are an outcome of the convergence of a motivated offender ("anybody who for any reason might commit a crime"), a suitable target ("any person or thing that draws the offender toward a crime") in the absence of a capable guardian ("a human element which acts... to deter the would-be offender from committing a crime against an available target")? Each of its key concepts not only lacks specificity, but is also in part defined by its effects on the actor or action. For example, a target is suitable *because* it draws a person towards committing a crime. This suggests that a target may be suitable for some people but not others – how do we then specify (and operationalize) what characterizes a suitable targets without better specifying what characterizes motivated (and, by contrast, unmotivated) offenders?

As for Cornish & Clarke's rational choice theory, Clarke even argues that the theory "was never intended to be 'tested' in the way criminologists routinely attempt to test a theory's validity by making predictions from the theory and seeing whether these predictions can be falsified by empirical data" (2014:xii). In fact, Clarke goes as far as to claim that "it is self-evidently true that offenders commit crimes in order to obtain some benefits" and therefore the theory "cannot be falsified by being 'tested to destruction'"²² (ibid., xii). We agree with Popper (1963) that "irrefutability is not a virtue of a theory (as people often think) but a vice"; "a theory which is not refutable by any conceivable event is non-scientific."

Testability is a core aim of situational action theory, which has been developed alongside an in-depth longitudinal study specifically designed to test it (e.g., Wikström *et al.*, 2012). Thus SAT posits clear definitions for its key concepts and explicitly models how they are interrelated in explaining acts of crime. As a consequence, SAT has clear testable implications, and is thus more open to refutation, but also refinement.

Conclusion

Criminological research has two well-documented and frequently replicated core findings:

1. The distribution of crime in the population is highly skewed – a small minority of people are responsible for a majority of crimes (e.g., Piquero, Farrington & Blumstein, 2007 :17–19; Wikström, 1990; Wikström *et al.*, 2012:113–117; Wolfgang, Figlio & Sellin, 1972).
2. Crime events (and particular types of crime events) tend to be concentrated in space and time – sometimes referred to as hotspots (Baldwin & Bottoms, 1976; Sherman, Gartin, & Buerger, 1989; Weisburd, Morris, & Groff, 2009; Wikström, 1991; Wikström *et al.*, 2012:192).

Criminological theories tend to focus on explaining one or the other of these findings; rarely do they consider how both may be explained within a common theoretical framework. And yet, arguably, neither can be explained without taking the other into consideration. For example, the particular crime distribution in a population is dependent on how people's crime propensities and exposure to criminogenic settings are distributed in that population, and, crucially, how they combine.

Criminology has for some time lacked a truly situational theory of crime causation, evidenced by its confused usage of the term “situation” and its failure to address the two major foci of a situational theory: the interaction between people and settings, and the situational mechanism which links them to action. We have suggested that opportunity theory (a combination of routine activity theory and Cornish & Clarke's version of rational choice theory) is the closest criminologists in past decades have come to a situational theory, and considered the contributions and shortcomings of both theories' situational analysis of the causes of crime. We have highlighted RAT's contribution to criminological theory through its emphasis on the convergence of people and place, but criticized its lack of conceptual clarity, especially in regards to individual differences, and its failure to posit a situational mechanism explaining how the convergence it describes leads to crime. We have likewise highlighted RCT's contribution to criminological theory through its emphasis on (rational) decision-making as a situational mechanism linking people and settings to action, but criticized a number of the assumptions upon which RCT relies, including the assumption that people are self-interested, and the fact that RCT tacitly overlooks more automated decision processes.

Both RAT and RCT have criticized criminological theorizing for focusing on the distribution of crime in the population (crime propensity) and used this as a rationale for focusing on the distribution of crime in space and time (criminogenic features of the environment), though it is difficult to see any strong rationale for why either of these two key insights should be ignored.

As a consequence, situational theories have become synonymous with opportunity theories in criminology, despite the fact that the latter are essentially concerned with how the immediate environment incites people (motivated offenders) to engage in acts of crime, and say little to nothing about the role of the offender and the person–environment interaction.

Arguably, a proper explanation of the causes of crime needs to take both differential crime propensity and differential criminogeneity of places into account. SAT aims to provide a detailed, testable framework explaining crime as the outcome of a perception–choice process guided by the interaction of personal moral rules and the moral rules of the setting and their levels of enforcement (controls). We have argued that it provides an alternative situational theory to opportunity theory, offering greater conceptual and analytical clarity in regards to the interaction between people and settings and the action mechanism which links them to acts of crime.

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Notes

- 1 Lewin distinguishes between momentary and life situations, the latter referring to the social context of the person in question (e.g., his or her family and work circumstances) and serving as the “background” to the momentary situation, i.e., the combination of the states of a person and of his or her environment that brings about particular actions (see Lewin, 1936:22–23).
- 2 This was famously captured in the formula $B = f(S)$, where B stands for *behavior* and S for *situation*, and where Lewin defined situation (S) as $f(P,E)$, where P stands for *person* and E for *environment* (Lewin, 1936:12).
- 3 He specifies that “situations have both spatial and temporal dimensions: they are specific locations at particular points in time. Situational factors include tangible elements such as the physical aspects of the immediate environment and the behaviour of the people who are present. Somewhat less tangibly, situations can also refer to a state of affairs or set of circumstances at a given moment” (Wortley, 2012:186).
- 4 The concepts of *likely* and *motivated offender* seems to be used interchangeably by authors writing in the routine activity tradition. In this chapter we will also use the two concepts interchangeably.
- 5 The scope of the theory has subsequently been extended to include all kinds of crime (e.g., Felson & Boba, 2010).
- 6 However, in an earlier publication Felson argues that viewing crime in terms of physical science concepts such as chemistry is “too mechanical” and that he now prefers to think about crime in terms of life sciences because “it does allow choices and alternatives, basic to our concept of life itself” (2008:76). The concepts of choices and alternatives are central to Situational Action Theory (e.g., Wikström, 2004, 2006), which is discussed later in this chapter.
- 7 As a predictive model, we would argue that Brantingham & Brantingham’s (1993) Crime Pattern Theory is conceptually much clearer and analytically stronger when it comes to explicating the reasons for where and when crime will occur.
- 8 Which probably more adequately should read “theories of criminal propensity” rather than “theories of criminal motivation.”
- 9 “Without denying the importance of factors motivating offenders to engage in crime, we have focused specific attention upon violations themselves and the prerequisites for their occurrence” (Cohen & Felson, 1979:605).
- 10 Cornish & Clarke prefer *perspective* to *theory* but we feel the latter is more appropriate

considering its general applications.

- 11 Which may more adequately be labeled *propensity* (a somewhat stable tendency to react in particular ways to particular environmental inducements).
- 12 In response to criticism, RCT has considered the role of *precipitators* which may influence motivation at the point of action, as well as moral features of environments, such as *permissibility* and *excusability*, although Cornish & Clarke argue that these complications of the original RCT framework may be limited in their applicability and hence general relevance (Cornish & Clarke, 2003).
- 13 Again, which may be more adequately labeled propensity (i.e., a somewhat stable tendency to act in a certain way in response to particular environmental inducements).
- 14 Substantive rationality “is a theory of decision environments (and utility functions), but not of decision-makers” and ignores “*how* the decision-maker generates alternatives and compares them” (Simon, 1997:18; italics in original).
- 15 The figure is a version of what is sometimes called a Coleman diagram (or a “Coleman boat” or “bath tub”). However, the terminology and content is very different from that used by Coleman (1990:1–23).
- 16 Felson does define crime as “any identifiable behavior that an appreciable number of governments has specifically prohibited and formally punished” (2006:35), but this definition does not give much guidance to what a theory of crime causation should explain. For example, it is hardly helpful to assert that an identifiable behavior that an appreciable number of governments has specifically prohibited and formally punished will occur when a motivated offender and a suitable target converge in the absence of a capable guardian. In other words, Felson’s definition of crime is pointless even in relation to his own theory.
- 17 If a setting has a high level of enforcement of moral norms promoting acts of crime in response to its particular opportunities or frictions, this enforcement is criminogenic.
- 18 Based on the assumption that people are essentially rule-guided creatures and social order is based on shared rules of conduct, SAT proposes that most people in most circumstances (in most societies at most times) do not see crime as an action alternative in response to the motivations they experience. This assumption is supported by the fact that most studies show that the distribution of crime in the population is highly skewed; the overwhelming majority of the population rarely gets involved in crime.
- 19 Although in longer action sequences it may drift between habitual and deliberate influences.
- 20 Whether or not people aim to maximize personal advantage in their deliberate choices of action alternatives in a particular circumstance is a question of moral judgment (dependent on the actor’s relevant personal morals and the perceived relevant moral norms of the setting in which he or she takes part).

- [21](#) Self-control is generally defined in criminological theory as an individual characteristic (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). SAT differentiates between “the ability to exercise self-control” (as part of what determines a person’s crime propensity) and “exercising self-control” (as a situational process).
- [22](#) In the original the quote includes the word “being” twice: “cannot be falsified by being ‘being tested to destruction.’ ” Assuming this to be a mistake, we have deleted one “being” from the quote.