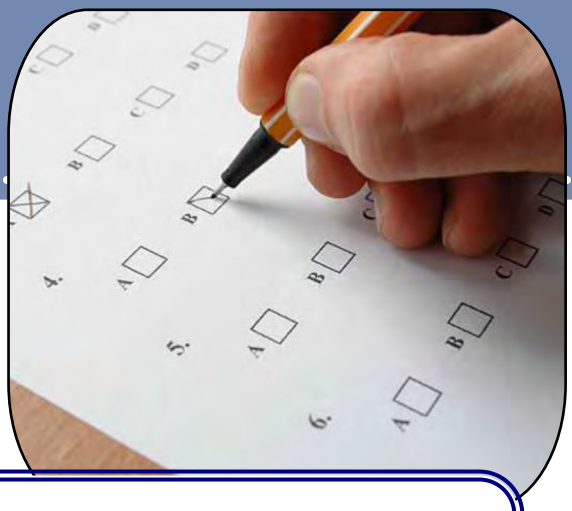
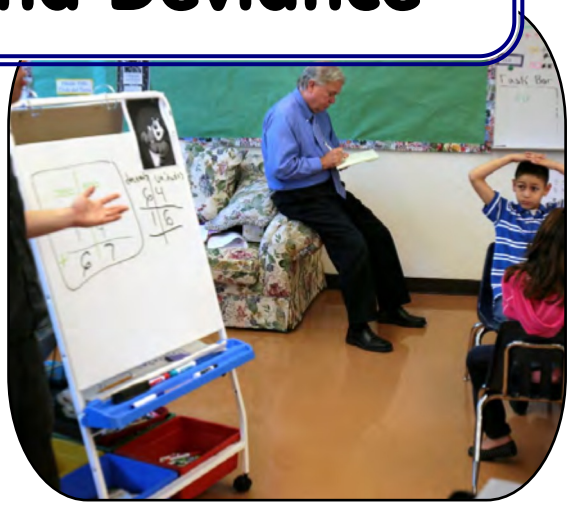
ShortCutstv
www.shortcutstv.com



Crime and Deviance



Situational Crime Prevention

The Theory

SCP: The Theory

Situational Crime Prevention: The Theory

We can examine the theoretical background to situational crime prevention strategies and techniques in a couple of ways:

Firstly, by looking at the broad background in terms of a general "environmental discourse" that encompasses both cultural and physical environments.

Secondly by looking at a couple of specific New Right approaches – **Control Theory** and **Routine Activities Theory** – that flow from this general discourse.

1. Cultural environments

This focuses on the development of general theoretical ideas about the 'nature of criminal behaviour' in terms of thinking about why people offend (a *theoretical analysis* of crime and its causes) and how to prevent offending (a practical analysis that forms the basis of a broadly **New Right** situational analysis of crime prevention). In this respect, Clarke (1980) argues that crime theory should adopt a *realistic* approach to crime prevention and management, one that *rejects* traditional ways of viewing criminal behaviour as **dispositional**.

For Clarke, crime has conventionally been theorised in terms of the idea some people are "predisposed to crime" for a range of bio-genetic, psychological or sociological reasons.

Genetic predispositional theories, for example, focus on biological / genetic imperatives that may predispose some individuals to crime, while *psychological theories* focus on a range of **natural** (genetic) and **nurtural** (environmental) factors that may, individually or in combination, propel some individuals towards crime.

Sociological explanations, on the other hand, have looked to cultural factors (such as poverty, family background / socialisation and social class inequalities) as predispositional factors in crime. While both genetic and psychological

explanations have focused on individual predispostions, *sociological explanations* have tended to favour structural predispositions but each, according to Clarke, suffers from crucial failings that weaken their explanatory powers. Conventional sociological explanations, for example, find it difficult to explain why people in similar social situations may have very different attitudes towards criminal behaviour – why some embrace it, for example, but most do not.

Clarke argues, therefore, that '*Theoretical difficulties can be avoided by seeing crime…as the outcome of immediate choices and decisions made by the offender*' – something that leads neatly into a range of 'preventative options' to either limit the possible choices available to 'potential offenders' or make the consequences of 'choosing to offend' outweigh the possible benefits.

SCP: The Theory

This reflects a "**rational choice**" analysis based around a *cost-benefit* calculation: potential offenders make decisions about their behaviour on the basis of what they are likely to gain from a crime (the *benefits*) as against any likely *costs* (such as being caught and punished). This, if valid, has clear implications for the effectiveness of crime prevention policies.

Part of the '*realistic approach*' advocated by writers such as Clarke stems from the observation that 'crime' is not an homogeneous category. Criminal behaviour comes in many shapes and sizes – property theft, for example, is very different to rape – and it makes little sense to assume that just because they share a common label (crime) they have similar causes or outcomes. Clarke argues that just as we don't view 'illness' in an undifferentiated way (a doctor would see a heart attack and a cold as having different causalities), we should similarly see crime as being differentiated. If this is the case, different types of crime respond to different forms of 'treatment'. In particular, there are two basic characteristics of crimes, both of which fit neatly with the idea of rational choice, that make them amenable to various forms of prevention:

1. Opportunity: The majority of crimes in our society are those of *opportunity* – as Felson and Clarke (1998) argue, 'no crime can occur without the physical opportunities to carry it out' – and *opportunism*. Many crimes, in other words, are unplanned; offenders don't particularly look to commit crimes, but if an opportunity occurs (a purse left unattended, for example) they may be tempted to offend if the chances of being detected are less than the likely benefits.

2. Territoriality: Most crime, according to Wiles and Costello (2000), is local to the offender and generally occurs as part of an offenders routine activity.

These ideas are linked in two ways.

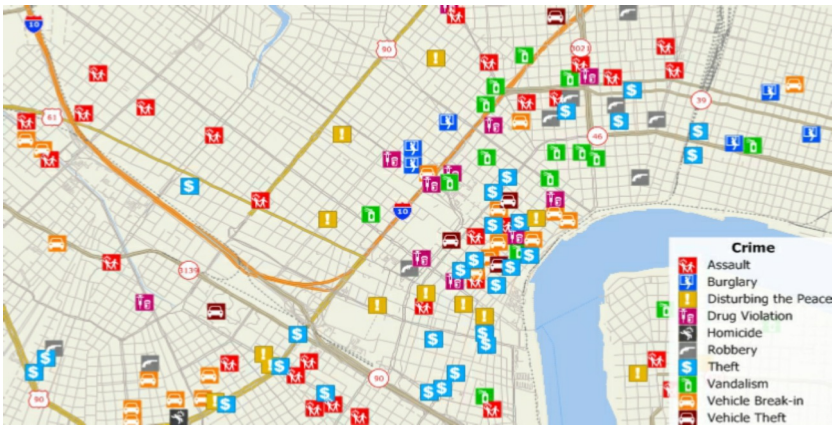
a. Offences committed outside the offender's local area are mainly related, as Wiles and Costello argue, to opportunities presenting themselves 'during normal routines', rather than being consciously planned.

b. If measures are taken to reduce opportunities for crime, rates will fall because the denial of opportunity, allied to territoriality, means the majority of crimes will not be displaced to other areas (there are, however, exceptions – activities like drug smuggling and prostitution, for example, are sensitive to displacement).

A further example of a change to the cultural environment is something like the "decriminalisation" of **white-collar** and **corporate crime.** This involves **redefining** these forms of criminality. Rather than seeing them as police matters, **Bittner** (1974) suggests they could be more-usefully investigated and prosecuted by lawyers, forensic accountants, regulatory authorities and the victims (particularly large business corporations) themselves; this follows because the police have no special competence for such investigations and their time and effort would be better directed at "disorderly crimes" where, so the argument goes, their presence does have an effect.

SCP: The Theory

2. Physical environments



The New Right focus on situational crime prevention involves using **crime pattern analysis** to identify areas, environments and times attractive to criminals; this then forms the basis of action that can be taken to change the social and physical characteristics of areas to make them less attractive to offenders.

• **Social changes** designed to maintain 'community defences' against deviants include community surveillance, such as Neighbourhood Watch in the UK (introduced in 1982), frequently combined with CCTV technological surveillance.

• **Physical changes** include ideas like target hardening, where public and private spaces are made more secure - Flatley et al. (2010) note households with little or no home security were "ten times more likely to have been burgled" than households with 'enhanced' home security'.

In this way crime can be *limited* and to some degree controlled, by a variety of measures designed to make it:

- more difficult
- less attractive
- more costly.

Examples of crime prevention strategies include:

• Making people more aware of opportunities for (mainly low-level) crime. Advertising campaigns, for example, focus attention on simple ways people can protect their property ('Lock It or Lose It') or be more aware of crime ('Look Out – there's a thief about').

• Community involvement includes initiatives to promote 'self-policing' strategies such as Neighbourhood Watch or Crimestoppers (providing cash rewards to people for informing on offenders) and closer relations between the police and the community. The development of police community safety officers (PCSO's) in the 1990s was designed to help the police develop community linkages (although Gilling (1999) has questioned their effectiveness in this role).

• A central, ecological, idea behind New Right criminology is the management of physical space (the "built environment), an example of which is Wilcox and Augustine's (2001) ideas about how people think about and relate to their physical environment (levels of street lighting, for example).

SCP: The Theory

A significant idea here is defensible space, a concept Newman (1996) defines as '*structuring the physical layout of communities to allow residents to control the areas around their homes*', with the objective being '*to bring an environment under the control of its residents*' using a mix of '*real and symbolic barriers, strongly defined areas of influence, and improved opportunities for surveillance*'.

'Alleygate' projects, for example, have been developed around the UK as a means of limiting access to 'outsiders' on housing estates – gates prevent potential offenders both gaining access to houses and making their escape through a maze of alleyways. A further example is the use of CCTV surveillance.

On another level (quite literally) writers such as Coleman (1985) have criticised the replacement of '*the traditional street of houses-with-gardens by estates of flats*'. The result, she argues, was not the 'instant communities' envisaged by government planners, but rather the reverse - 'problem estates'. She identified two main reasons for this:

• A lack of community ownership of 'common space' (no one took responsibility for corridors, for example).

• The ability of non-residents to move freely – and anonymously – through blocks of flats (something Alleygate projects seek to prevent).

In terms of the impact of the physical environment on crime (and crime prevention) Power and Tunstall's (1995) longitudinal study of 'twenty of the most unpopular council estates in the country' provides evidence that the changes suggested by writers such as Newman and Coleman do have the effect of reducing many forms of offending behaviour.

New Right Criminology

While the idea of changes to cultural and physical environments sketches a broad picture of the relationship between offenders and their offences, it's worth refining the focus slightly to look at a couple of specific theoretical approaches to situational crime prevention grouped loosely under the banner of a New Right criminology that has two main characteristics:

1. A *political conservatism* that focuses on a particular *sub-set* of criminal behaviour; in the main, crimes committed by lower-class individuals (and young men in particular). In general terms, the types of criminal behaviour seen as most significant are "crimes of the street", ranging from petty theft to various forms of interpersonal violence, that repeatedly appear in research that attempts to document and measure "the fear of crime".

2. An *individualistic orientation* that holds the "causes of crime" reside in the individual and the moral choices they make rather than in any wider social context or causation. Once again this reflects and reinforces a generally conservative political worldview, particularly but not exclusively in American society, that allows for no mitigating social context to people's behaviour, particularly if they happen to be located in the aforementioned lower social strata.

While these two ideas represent the underlying theoretical bedrock of SCP two specific approaches to understanding crime have been hugely influential in the development of SCP strategies:

SCP: The Theory

A. Control theory

This general approach broadly involves a range of ideas:

1. Societies are underpinned by a broad value consensus, one that sets broad moral behavioural guidelines – the things "everyone", for example, agrees are right and wrong.

2. Laws are created and enforced for the benefit of the majority of citizens insofar as they maintain a balance between individual freedom and collective safety.

3. People are naturally individualistic and fundamentally self-interested. If societies are to develop and flourish these tendencies have to be held in check "for the common good".

4. People are considered rational actors in the sense general socialisation processes give them an understanding of the difference between "right" and "wrong" behaviour – those who break the law usually understand they are acting illegally.

5. This idea is related to a cost / benefit analysis of crime; those who choose to break the law are motivated by a rational assessment of the likely benefits of their behaviour (money, status, etc.), set against the possible costs (such as being imprisoned and the likely consequences that might follow for their life chances when released).

6. The key to keeping crime "in check" is social control: it's not something that can ever be eliminated, only controlled to varying extents. These controls are both formal, in the shape of agents such as the police and courts and, most importantly, informal: the behavioural checks and balances that influence individual behaviour through family, friends and the like. In broad terms, people offend when controls are loose or lacking and they conform when controls are strong and pervasive – although this general observation needs to be qualified by an understanding of the subtleties of social control.

Nye (1958), for example, identified 4 basic types of social control:

1. External: Deviant behaviour is punished and conformity is rewarded by a range of social control agents and agencies, both formal and informal.

2. Internal: People conform to social and legal norms because they believe it is morally right to do so – a form of self-control.

3. Indirect: People conform because they closely identify with others – both in society generally and their family / friends specifically – and refrain from behaviour that might cause them pain, disappointment, etc.

4. Needs satisfaction: If the individual's needs – whatever they may actually turn out to be – are met they are unlikely to deviate because there is nothing to gain from such behaviour.

In terms of the above, informal social controls are seen to be the most effective way of deterring crime, mainly because they involve policing by those closest to the criminal. For informal controls to work effectively, a sense of community has to be maintained. This requires social order and one role of the police is to maintain the orderly social relationships which will allow informal controls to operate effectively.

These ideas, in slightly different ways and contexts have been expressed through a range of "control theories", such as:

- Sutherland's Differential Association
- Matza's Delinquency and Drift
- Hirschi's Bonds of Attachment.

SCP: The Theory

B. Routine Activities Theory

This theoretical contribution to the development of SCP broadly sees crime as the outcome of both “opportunity” (Mayhew, 1976; Clarke, 1988) and “routine activities” (Cohen and Felson 1979). It represents, for Felson and Boba (2010):

“*A theory of how crime changes in response to larger shifts in society*".

As with broader Control theories, there is nothing particularly different, psychologically or socially, about a criminal. Rather, anyone is potentially capable of criminal behaviour, given the “right conditions”, something that relates to three ideas:

1. Suitable targets

Assessments about the suitability of a target, such as an object, place or person, will differ from individual to individual – something that helps to explain differences in crime rates between class, age, gender and ethnic groups because differentially-placed individuals have different opportunities for crime.

One dimension of RAT is that what people consider “accessible targets” will differ in terms of their daily routines: a young women with dependent children will have a different routine to a young employed man who, in turn, will have a different routine to an elderly retired man. The same potential target will, therefore, have different levels of accessibility.

The suitability of targets is also related to a second idea:

2. Capable guardians

The level of protection surrounding a target is a factor in whether a crime takes place, particularly for opportunistic crimes where “protected” or “guarded” targets are far less attractive to a potential offender. In the case of crimes requiring greater planning and risk, such as burglary, Hearnden and Magill (2004) found some – but not all – long-term burglars in their sample avoided targeting blocks of flats because there were fewer escape routes and more chance of being observed by other residents during and after the burglary.

Guardians take a range of forms – from police officers, security guards, friends and neighbours to CCTV. Guardianship, particularly as it relates to informal control agents, is also related to notions of victimhood within RAT. Just as offenders choose to commit deviant acts, victims are also seen to be responsible for the choices they make or don’t make, such as making it difficult for someone to victimise them.

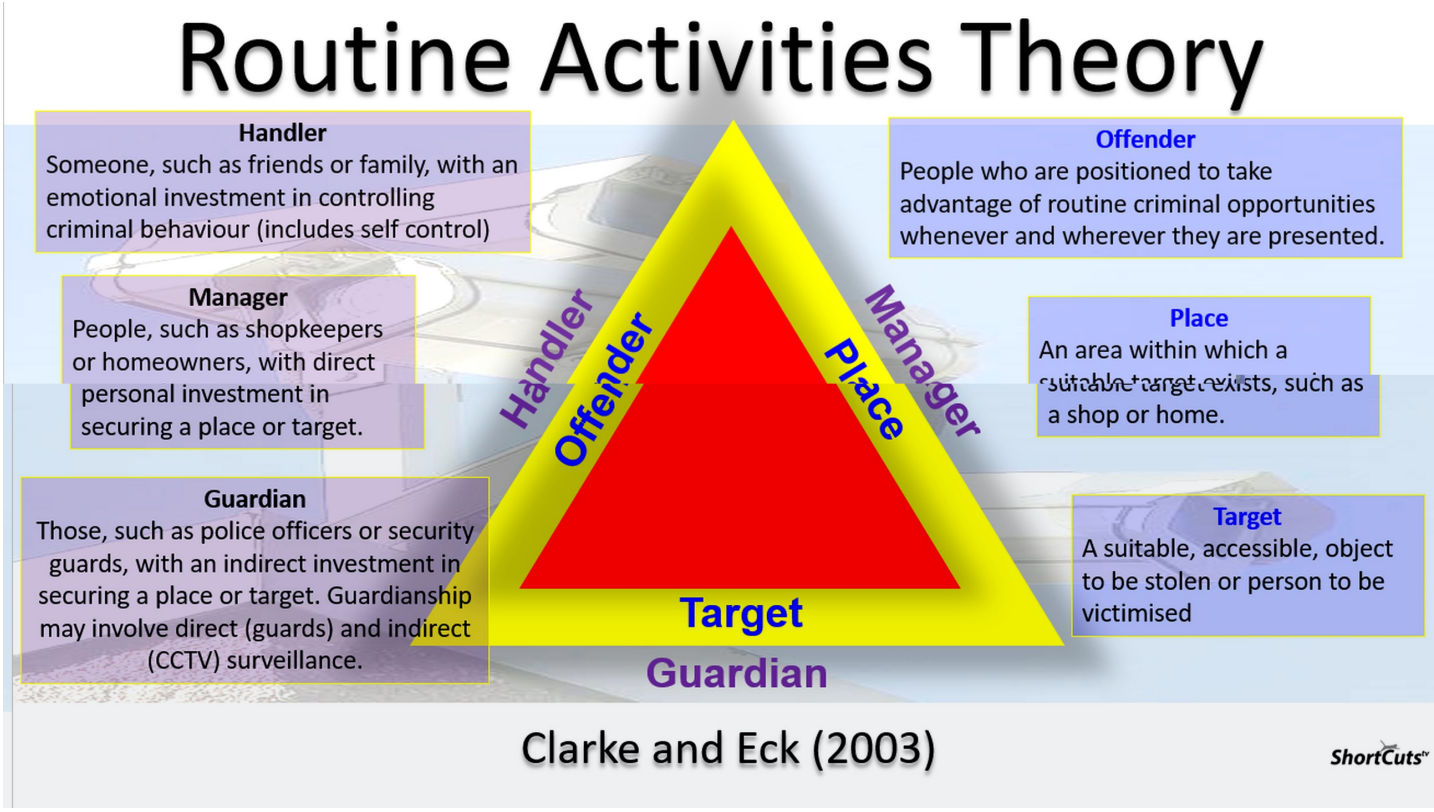
These ideas start to link into the notion of situational crime control in the sense they suggest that by developing a range of “target hardening” strategies and techniques – from frequent police patrols through vigilant neighbours to locks, barriers and fences – levels of criminal behaviour can be managed and controlled.

SCP: The Theory

3. Motivated offenders

This refers to people who, for whatever reason, are willing and able to take advantage of routine criminal opportunities whenever and wherever they present themselves. As with broader Control theories motivation to crime is affected by a range of factors both inside (various forms of informal social control) and outside the individual (accessible targets and weak or non-existent guardians). The choice of whether to commit an offence or ignore the opportunity is down to the individual, although this choice may be motivated by a range of intervening factors that are many and varied: from simple greed through necessity (such as feeding a drug habit) to beliefs about right and wrong behaviour (the victim, if indeed one is actually perceived, deserved it because of their behaviour).

While this provides a general – and probably sufficient – overview of RAT if you want to investigate it further Clarke and Eck's (1999) "double triangle" provides a more-detailed breakdown, particularly in terms of widening the definition of "guardians" to include both handlers and managers.



Related Documents To Explore

Visualising Routine Activities Theory

Categorising Situational Crime Prevention Strategies

Categorising Situational Crime Prevention: Techniques and Examples

Situational Crime Prevention and the Craving for Hot Products

ShortCutstv

www.shortcutstv.com