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SITUATIONAL PRECIPITATORS OF CRIME

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Introduction

As we saw in the previous chapter, rational choice is the usual way in environmental criminology to explain the way that individuals process and act upon information provided by the immediate environment. According to the rational choice perspective, the immediate environment is the source of data that an individual uses to decide whether or not to commit a contemplated crime. Potential offenders weigh up the likely outcomes of illegal behaviour and commit crime if the benefits are judged to outweigh the costs. In this chapter it is argued that rational choice provides only half the explanation for the role of immediate environments. Immediate environments can also actively encourage or induce individuals to commit crimes that they may not have otherwise contemplated at that time. Consider the following scenario:

Jim arranges to meet his friends at a local nightclub for an evening out. He arrives at the club in good spirits anticipating an enjoyable night. When he arrives at the front door, the door staff are surly and belligerent towards him before eventually allowing him to go inside. When he enters the nightclub he discovers it is packed to capacity. After fighting his way through the crowd he finally locates his friends. There are no tables or chairs left and they are forced stand in the corner with people jostling around them. The music is at full volume and continues without a break, making it impossible to carry on a conversation. The air conditioning cannot cope with the crowd and the room is

hot, dark and oppressive. Jim and his friends drink steadily. However, getting to the bar is an ordeal and it can take half an hour to get served. As Jim struggles back from the bar with the latest round of drinks, another patron bumps him and knocks the drinks all over him. Jim's friends urge him to retaliate and hit the man.

Whether Jim decides to commit assault can certainly be analysed in terms of rational choice. Perhaps Jim sees a security guard out of the corner of his eye and decides it is too risky to fight. Or perhaps the other man is much bigger than Jim, or is surrounded by his friends, and Jim judges that he will come off worse in a physical encounter. Alternatively, Jim might decide that the benefits of restoring his pride outweigh all the risks, and he elects to throw a punch. However, rational choice does not account for all the situational events leading up to this decision. Since he arrived at the nightclub, Jim has experienced a series of stresses and frustrations that have primed him for aggression. This has been compounded by his alcohol intake, which has lowered his inhibitions, and by the pressure not to back down in front of his friends. The spilled drinks were the final straw. If all of these events had not occurred then the confrontation with the other patron would not have arisen, and there would have been no need to make a rational choice about committing assault. Even if the patron had spilled Jim's drinks, but the night up until then had left Jim in a good mood, he would have been much more inclined to accept the spilling as an accident. As it is, the probability of a violent response has been significantly increased by a variety of situational factors – 'precipitators' – that have readied Jim for aggression.

A situational crime precipitator, then, can be defined as any aspect of the immediate environment that creates, triggers or intensifies the motivation to commit crime. In this chapter the role of immediate environments in precipitating crime is examined. The chapter begins by reviewing the way that situational influences are characterised in psychology, contrasting the concept of precipitators with the rational choice perspective. A classification of precipitators is then presented. This is followed by an examination of the role precipitators play in the behaviour of different kinds of offender, different kinds of crime, and different kinds of setting. Finally, the implications of precipitators for crime prevention are considered.

A Broader View of the Person-Situation Interaction

Around the same time that the seminal environmental criminology perspectives were first presented, psychologists were taking a renewed interest in the role immediate environments play in behaviour (Wortley, 2011; see also Wortley & Townsley, chapter 1, this volume). The idea that an individual behaves differently in different situations is embedded in a number of major psychological perspectives, notably behaviourism (or learning theory), cognitive psychology, social psychology and environmental psychology. Two broad research strands have emerged, one focussing on the immediate environment as the dispenser of rewards and punishments – the tradition from which the rational choice perspective emerged – and the other taking a more ‘ecological’ view in which the individual’s current psychological functioning and the immediate environment are intimately connected. It is on this second perspective that the concept of precipitators is based (although the term precipitator

may not have been originally used to describe the processes involved).

A number of famous – indeed infamous – experiments demonstrate the power of situations to alter the psychology of individuals in ways that induce antisocial responses. Beginning in 1963, Stanley Milgram began a series of experiments in obedience to authority (Milgram, 1963; 1974). In the prototype experiment, participants assigned the role of ‘teacher’ were told they were taking part in a learning experiment and were instructed by the experimenter to deliver an electric shock to another participant (the ‘learner’) strapped to a chair. In fact the machine supposedly delivering the electric shocks was phoney and the learner was a confederate who was instructed to scream in agony when the ‘shocks’ were delivered. Milgram found that, under the urging of the experimenter when the learner gave an incorrect answer, two-thirds of participants delivered the maximum 450 volts, clearly labelled on the machine as ‘Danger – severe shock’. Milgram argued that participants were able to shift the moral culpability for their actions onto a third party enabling them to engage in what they would normally recognise as reprehensible behaviour. In subsequent studies, Milgram (1974) found that the pressure on participants to obey could be manipulated in a number of ways. For example, obedience increased the closer the experimenter was to the teacher and the more distant the learner was from the teacher.

In 1971, Philip Zimbardo and colleagues (Haney, Banks and Zimbardo, 1973) carried out the equally notorious Stanford Prison Experiment. Twenty-four male college students were randomly assigned to play the roles of guard and prisoner in a simulated prison in a basement at Stanford University. Originally scheduled to run for two

weeks, the experiment was aborted after six days as the behaviour of the participants became increasingly pathological. The guards became brutal and authoritarian, subjecting the prisoners to harsh and arbitrary punishment; for example, waking them up every hour to make them do push-ups. For their part, many prisoners became passive and servile, and one was released after 36 hours after apparently suffering an emotional breakdown. Zimbardo argued that the guards and prisoners submerged their individual identities – deindividuated – and became absorbed in their respective roles. In later writing, Zimbardo drew parallels between the Stanford Prison Experiment and the abuses perpetrated on prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in 2003 during the Iraqi war (Zimbardo, 2007). He coined the term Lucifer Effect – a reference to the fallen angel who became the Devil – to describe the collection of situational processes, such as obedience to authority and deindividuation, that had the capacity to make good people to do bad things.

The role of situations in the Zimbardo and Milgram experiments is very different to that portrayed in rational choice. In rational choice the situation is merely the provider of data that potential offenders may accept or reject, a process that remains under rational control. The underlying propensity to commit crime is portrayed as a fixed attribute, unaffected by situational factors; only the decision to act on that propensity changes. Compare this with the profound psychological impact on participants in the Stanford prison experiment, where the participants' very sense of themselves was redefined. Studies such as those by Zimbardo and Milgram suggest that the desire to commit crime at any given time may itself be situationally dependent. Thus, while rational choice explains why criminally-motivated individuals might commit crime on

some occasions but not on others, psychological processes such as deindividuation and obedience to authority can help explain changes in criminal propensity within an individual – why, for example, normally law-abiding individuals might sometimes commit crime.

Table 3.1 contrasts the rational choice and situational-precipitator approaches to crime along a number of dimensions. First, precipitators are concerned with situational effects across multiple psychological domains – moral, affective, perceptual and cognitive; rational choice is concerned only with the individual's 'cold' cognitions. Returning to the example of Jim at the nightclub, as events change during the night Jim experienced a range of psychological states including happiness, frustration and humiliation; rational choice is exclusively interested in the decision whether or not to fight. Second, precipitators are events and influences that occur prior to the contemplated behaviour; rational choices concern the events that are likely to follow the contemplated behaviour. The stresses and pressures Jim experienced are antecedents of action; consideration of whether the security staff will swoop if he throws a punch is to do with the consequences of that action. Third, the function of situational precipitators is to initiate behaviour; in rational choice the immediate environment need only enable the performance of the behaviour. Stress and frustration activate Jim's feelings of aggression; whether he carries through with an aggressive course of action is regulated by opportunity. Fourth, precipitating events can supply or intensify the motivation for individuals to commit crime; rational choice assumes that individuals already possess criminal motivations. Jim became aggressive as a direct consequence of his experiences in the nightclub; rational choice is only

activated once the motivation to commit assault is present. Fifth, precipitators often (although not always) operate below conscious awareness; rational choices are conscious processes. Jim's rising aggression levels involve physiological reactions to environmental stressors of which Jim may not be fully aware; Jim is quite aware of the possible consequences of getting into a fight. And finally, sixth, individuals may have limited control over the effects of precipitators; rational choices are seen as deliberate acts. Jim may feel his stress levels rising but not have the capacity to override the physiological effects; the decision whether or not to proceed with an assault is seen as an active choice.

(Table 3.1 about here)

It should be stressed that Cornish and Clarke never intended the rational choice perspective to be a complete and theoretically rigorous account of offender decision-making (Wortley, 2013; see also Cornish and Clarke, chapter 2, this volume). They advanced rational choice perspective as merely 'good enough' to inform crime prevention policy and practice. The bare-boned psychological portrayal of the offender – 'without any defects such as lack of self control that might get in the way of rational action' (Cornish and Clarke, p. XXX, chapter 2, this volume – was deliberate. However, a number of authors from within the environment criminology field have argued that it is time to move beyond 'good enough' theory and to provide a more fully fleshed-out account of the offender (Bouhana, 2013; Ekblom, 2007; Laycock and Pease, 2012; Nee and Ward, 2014; Tilley and Sidebottom, 2015; van Gelder, Elffers, Reynald and Nagin, 2014; Wortley, 1997, 2001, 2012, 2013). It is in

this spirit that the concept of situational crime precipitators is proposed. Situational precipitators and rational choice are not contradictory explanations for crime but can be seen as complementary stages of the offending process (Wortley 1990; 2001; 2002). The first stage of offending involves situational forces that ready the potential offender for crime (precipitators); the second stage involves an assessment of the criminal opportunities (rational choice). (See figure 3.1.) Crime may be avoided at either stage if the necessary precipitators or opportunities are absent. The inclusion of precipitators in the situational model provides for a more dynamic picture of criminal behaviour, one that more completely captures the complexity and subtlety of the person-situation interaction as it is understood in psychology.

(figure 3.1 about here)

A classification of situational crime precipitators

Wortley (1997, 1998, 2001) reviewed psychological perspectives that incorporate the idea the situations can affect an individual's motivation to behave in a certain way. Drawing across these perspectives, he proposed four basic ways that situations can precipitate crime: situations can present cues that *prompt* a criminal response; they can exert social *pressure* on an individual to offend; they can weaken usual moral prohibitions and *permit* an individual to offend; and they can produce emotional arousal and *provoke* a criminal response. Within each of these categories four sub-categories were proposed. The full classification of precipitators is shown in Table 3.2 and described below.

(Table 3.2 about here)

Prompts

Prompts are aspects of the immediate environment that bring to the surface thoughts, feelings, and desires that may be lying dormant. In everyday language, prompts can tempt us, jog our memories, create expectations, evoke moods, stimulate us, warn us, and set examples for us to follow. The role of prompts in precipitating behaviour is described in learning and cognitive theories, although these perspectives propose very different explanations of the process. Learning theory holds that for behaviour to be produced on any given occasion it needs to be evoked by an appropriate environmental stimulus. The bell that caused Pavlov's dogs to salivate is an example from learning theory. The parallel concept in cognitive psychology is priming. Primes are stimuli in the environment that facilitate the retrieval of stored information from implicit (subconscious) memory. Primes allow us to react to situations on the basis of minimal information and without the need for deliberative thought – for example, reacting to a person we have just met on the basis of an existing stored stereotype. Four kinds of environmental prompts are discussed here in relation to criminal behaviour – triggers, signals, models and expectancies.

Triggers

Some environmental prompts elicit involuntary, or reflex, physiological responses.

The salivation by Pavlov's dogs is an example of a reflex response. So too in humans the sight of food can make people hungry, viewing erotic images can produce sexual arousal, the sight of blood may make people feel nauseous, the smell of cigarette smoke can make a smoker crave nicotine, listening to a familiar piece of music can arouse feelings of nostalgia, and so on. These physiological reactions can sometimes lead to criminal behaviour. For example, Carlson, Marcus-Newham and Miller (1990) found that the sight of objects and images associated with violence – guns, knives, violent pictures, vengeance themed bumper stickers, Ku Klux Klan clothing, aggressive films and so on – could prime feelings of aggression and facilitate violence, a phenomenon often referred to as the weapons effect. Triggers may be particularly important in repetitive behaviours such as sex offending and drug and alcohol abuse. For example, Marshall (1988) reported that one-third of rapists and child-molesters surveyed claimed to have been incited to offend by viewing pornography immediately prior to offending.

Signals

Environmental cues can provide information about what is appropriate behaviour in a given context. For example, we learn that it is appropriate to drive through an intersection when the traffic light is green but not when it is red. Offenders rely on such signals all of the time to alert them to when crime is 'appropriate'. Uncollected newspapers on the front lawn are signals to a burglar, outward displays of homosexuality are signals to a 'gay-basher', an open curtain is a signal for a peeping-Tom, and so on. With repetition, such signals can prime automatic responses that

require no conscious thought. For example, research on the decision-making of burglars indicates that experienced offenders – compared with inexperienced burglars and non-offenders – make rapid-fire judgements about likely targets based on a few salient cues (Garcia-Retamero & Dhami, 2009; Nee & Meenaghan, 2006). Nee and Meenaghan (2006) reported that three-quarters of their sample of experienced burglars actually used terms such as ‘automatic’, ‘routine’, ‘second nature’ and ‘instinctive’ when describing their burglary strategies.

Models

The observation of someone performing a behaviour can prompt imitation. Children who watch other children play aggressively also play aggressively (Bandura, 1965); if one pedestrian crosses the street against a red light others follow (Lefkowitz, Blake and Mouton, 1955); students emulate teachers who engage in illegal computer activity (Skinner and Fream, 1997); workers are more likely to engage in theft from the company if they observe their supervisors doing it (Hollinger, 1989; Snyder *et al*, 1991). Models for imitation do not have to appear in person but can be represented symbolically in the mass media. Suicides increase immediately following the portrayal of suicide in popular television programs (Phillips, 1989; Phillips and Carstein, 1990); children become more aggressive immediately after viewing violence on television (Leyens *et al*, 1975; Rosenthal, 1990); delinquent homicides surge following the televising of major boxing matches (Phillips, 1983).

Expectancies

Expectancy refers to the tendency for individuals to respond to their preconceived ideas about a situation. In the classic demonstration of expectancy effects, subjects who were told that they had consumed vodka and tonic water, but who in fact had only been given tonic water, became more aggressive than subjects who had actually consumed vodka and tonic water but who had been told they had been given tonic water (Lang et al, 1975). Individuals can derive expectancies from situational cues. For example, Graham and Homel (2008) argued that nightclubs developed reputations as violent or non-violent establishments based on their physical characteristics, such as level of cleanliness, standard of furnishings and so forth. Patrons visited certain nightclubs anticipating that they would be involved in fights and this expectation acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Similarly, in the wider community signs of environmental decay and neglect – litter, vandalism, dilapidated housing and so forth – convey a message of lawlessness that invites criminal activity (Wagers, Sousa and Kelling, this volume; Wilson and Kelling, 1982). Urban renewal and other environmental beautification programs may reduce crime in these areas by altering the expectations of potential offenders.

Pressures

Situations may exert social pressure on individuals to perform inappropriate behaviour. Social psychology is concerned with the effects of others on an individual's internal psychological processes and overt behaviour. Human beings are

social animals who are profoundly influenced by the expectations and demands that are placed upon them in the course of their interactions and affiliations with other members of the species. Social influences have a crucial role in the development of an individual's core attitudes, beliefs and values. More importantly for current purposes, a great deal of behaviour is governed by immediate social settings. We act differently when we are with others than when we are alone. In particular, individuals are subject to pressures to conform to group norms, to obey the instructions of authority figures, to comply with or defy requests, and to submerge their identity within the group.

Conformity

Conformity is the tendency for individuals in groups to adopt group norms and standards of behaviour, even when these contradict personally held beliefs and values. We have all experienced the pressure to go along with the crowd, and offenders may commit crimes in order to avoid social disapproval and to gain group acceptance. In particular, most delinquent behaviour is performed in groups, and peer pressure to conform to sub-cultural norms is commonly agreed to be an important factor (Harkins and Dixon, 2010; McGloin and Piquero, 2009). Conformity is particularly strong within gangs and may be strengthened by the use of gang insignia (Quinn and Forsyth, 2009). Similarly, corruption within organisations demonstrates the power of conformity to induce illegal behaviour in otherwise law-abiding adults. A new employee entering an organisation in which corrupt practices are common faces social pressures from co-workers to also engage in those practices (Clark and Hollinger, 1983).

Obedience

Obedience is the following of a direct command issued by someone perceived to possess legitimate authority. Of particular interest in psychology is the tendency for individuals to comply with unreasonable commands and to perpetrate all manner of cruelty in the process of following orders, as demonstrated in the Milgram (1974) studies described earlier. Obedience to authority has been widely used to explain atrocities perpetrated by military regimes, such as the extermination of Jews by the Nazis (Milgram, 1974) and the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989). Likewise, corruption within bureaucracies often involves subordinates who act illegally on the orders of superiors, motivated by a misguided loyalty to the organisation. Examples of crimes of authority include cases of governmental abuses of power (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989), corporate crime (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989), police corruption (Fitzgerald, 1989) and prison officer brutality (Nagle, 1978).

Compliance/Defiance

Compliance refers to the acquiescence to the direct request of others. Encouraging compliance is an important factor in face-to-face interactions between potential offenders and official guardians such as police, security guards, nightclub crowd controllers, and correctional officers. Requests and commands are more likely to be

followed if they are perceived as fair, consistent and legitimate (Bottoms *et al*, 1995; Lombardo, 1989; Sparks *et al*, 1996). However, when attempts to control behaviour are seen as heavy-handed, manipulative or unreasonable, people may fail to comply or may even behave defiantly in the opposite direction (Brehm, 1966; Goodstein *et al* 1984; Sherman 1993). For example, Bensley and Wu (1991) found that high-threat anti-alcohol messages resulted in increased alcohol consumption. Vandalism of public notices (e.g., ‘No Skateboarding’) is a classic expression of defiance.

Anonymity

Anonymity has a disinhibiting effect that allows individuals to perform behaviours they would not consider in other circumstances. Anonymity can be created in a number of ways. Silke (2003) found that attacks perpetrated by the IRA in Northern Ireland were more violent if the attacker was wearing some form of disguise.

Anonymity also helps explain why individuals may behave more outrageously online than in person (Joinson, 2007). Anonymity can lead to the deindividuating effects associated with crowd or group membership, as described earlier in connection with Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 2007). Most people have experienced the sensation of becoming immersed in a crowd and experiencing a decreased ability to monitor their own behaviour. Deindividuation does not necessarily lead to antisocial behaviour – it depends on the mood and intentions of the group. An extreme example of deindividuation unleashing violence is the herd mentality and frenzied behaviour displayed by members of a ‘lynch-mob’ (Colman, 1991). Countering anonymity effects is an important consideration in the policing of crowds. Provocative methods

of control can galvanise crowd members and incite collective disorder (Reicher, 1987; Shellow and Roemer, 1987).

Permissions

Situational factors can help distort moral reasoning processes and so permit individuals to engage in normally forbidden behaviour. According to social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977; Bandura et al, 1996), one of the most powerful constraints on behaviour is self-condemnation. However, on occasions, individuals may make excuses for their bad behaviour and succeed in convincing themselves that their actions are justified. This process is similar to neutralisation theory in criminology (Sykes and Matza, 1957). According to neutralisation theory, many offenders do not hold anti-social values, but ‘drift’ in and out of crime by periodically redefining their behaviour in ways that minimizes to themselves their own criminality. Social cognitive theory extends neutralisation theory by proposing that situational conditions may facilitate this drift. The human conscience is sensitive to feedback from the environment and immediate social groups, and distorted feedback may assist offenders to may make excuses. Bandura (1977) suggested that neutralisations can be grouped into four broad categories – minimisation of the legitimacy of the moral rule, minimisation of the degree of personal responsibility for the behaviour, minimisation of the negative consequences of the behaviour, and minimisation of the worth of the victim (see also Wortley, 1996).

Minimizing the rule

Offenders may avoid self-blame for their actions by denying the essential wrongness of their actions. Individuals rely on the feedback from peers for guidelines for correct behaviour and may find support for neutralising beliefs from those around them. For example, an individual immersed within a corrupt organisational culture may come to accept corrupt practices as normal, endorsing sentiments such as ‘everybody does it’ and ‘it goes with the job’ (Clark and Hollinger, 1983; Greenberg 1997). Human beings are also adept at exploiting ambiguity in their own favour when rules are not clear (‘I didn’t know it was wrong’). The presence of formal codes of conduct can reduce company thefts (Parilla *et al*, 1988), bullying in schools (Elliot, 1991) and workplace aggression (Randall, 1997).

Minimizing responsibility

Offenders may deny their role in the behaviour or blame others. Some people may use alcohol precisely in order to provide an excuse for intended anti-social actions (‘I couldn’t help it’) (Lang *et al*, 1975). Clarke and Homel (1997) suggested thefts from libraries may be related to inefficient book check-out systems that allow thieves to blame the library for causing them steal (‘I wouldn’t have to steal if they were quicker’). Bandura (1977) argued that the division of labour within organisations facilitates corruption by allowing individuals to hide behind a collective responsibility. One of the common defences of Nazi prisoners at the Nuremberg trials was that, while they might have played a minor role in the deportation of Jews to the

concentration camps, they were not personally responsible for any deaths.

Minimizing the consequences

Offenders may deny causing any harm. Greenberg (1997) noted that often people are unable to appreciate the cumulative effect of small offences. For example, when they steal from employers they may comfort themselves with excuses that 'the company can afford it' or 'they will never miss it'. Carter *et al* (1988) found that posting a graph of theft levels in the employee lunchroom increased awareness of the impact on the company and resulted in a reduction of theft. Sometimes, people are simply ignorant of the full effect of their behaviour. Oliver *et al* (1985) found providing campers with information on the ecological impact of certain camping practices resulted in a 50% reduction in vandalism. Similarly, Vander Stoep and Gramann (1988) achieved significant reductions in vandalism at historic sites by providing information on the consequences to the environment of destructive behaviour.

Minimizing the victims

People find it easier to victimise those who can be stereotyped as sub-human or unworthy. Silbert and Pines (1984) found that rape victims who had attempted to placate their attacker by telling him that she was a prostitute found instead that he became even more aggressive and brutal. Indermaur (1996) found that the offering of resistance by victims during a robbery often had the effect of arousing 'righteous

indignation' in the offender and escalating the violence. Olweus (1978) found that schoolyard victims of bullying tended to have distinctive signs of weakness or oddness such as deviations in stature, personal hygiene, and dress. When employees feel that they have been badly treated by their company, they may steal, become aggressive, or engage in destructive behaviour as an act of revenge (Greenberg, 1990).

Provocations

Situations can create stress and provoke an antisocial response, particularly some form of aggression. The link between situational stress and crime is addressed in environmental psychology. Environmental psychology is concerned with the effects on behaviour of the natural and built environment. Some environmental elements, such as climatic extremes and the correlates of urbanization, can be sources of stress. According to the environmental stress model (Baum et al, 1981), when an organism is under stress it responds in ways to manage or adapt to the aversive conditions and events – the so-called fight or flight response. Responses to environmental stressors may be physiological (e.g., arousal, increased adrenaline activity, physical illness), emotional (e.g., irritability, anxiety, depression) and behavioural (e.g., aggression, withdrawal, suicide). Stress-related crimes can be generated by environmental frustrations, crowding, invasions of territorial boundaries, and environmental irritants such as adverse weather conditions.

Frustration

Frustration is the emotional state produced when an individual is thwarted in their pursuit of a goal. Harding *et al* (1998) found that incidents of road rage correlated with high traffic volume and were initiated by factors such as encounters with slow drivers, other drivers cutting in, and competition for parking spaces. Frustration and stress at work have also been found to be related to increased workplace vandalism and sabotage (Spector, 1997). Nightclub violence has been found to be related to levels of patron boredom, lack of seating, unavailability of food, provocative behaviour of security staff, and queuing (Cozens and Grieve, 2014; Graham and Homel, 2008; Homel and Clark, 1994). Boulton (1994) found that school yard bullying increased during wet playtimes and recommended improvements the quality of play facilities to reduce frustration levels of students.

Crowding

Crowding is the psychological experience of high-density conditions. The distinction can be made between outside density and inside density. Outside density refers to broad population trends at the city or neighbourhood level. Research has shown that urban population density is associated with a range of physical, psychological and behavioural problems, including increased crime rates (Gove, Hughs and Galle, 1977). Inside density refers to the occupancy of primary living areas. Again, a range of antisocial behaviours have been reported in field studies of specific crowded settings such as prisons (Paulus, 1988; Steiner and Wooldredge, 2009), college

dormitories (Baum and Valins, 1977), naval ships (Dean, Pugh and Gunderson, 1978), inside licenced premises (Graham and Homel, 2008; Macintyre and Homel, 1996), and immediately outside of licenced premises (Townesley and Grimshaw, 2013). The effects of inside density are generally more acute than those of outside density.

Territoriality

Territoriality is the tendency to lay claim to an area and to defend it against intruders. There are two opposing ways that territorial possession might relate to anti-social behaviour. On the one hand, invasion of territory can incite an aggressive response. For example, gang warfare is often caused by aggressive reactions to territorial invasion (Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974). On the other hand, possessing territory can inhibit aggression and promote pro-social behaviours. ‘Home turf’ is a place where people can relax and feel in control over their lives. O’Neill and Paluck (1973) reported a drop in the level of aggression among institutionalised intellectually-disabled boys when they were given identifiable territories to call their own. Greater care is taken of housing estates when tenants are given greater involvement in their management (Foster and Hope, 1993).

Environmental irritants

Many factors in the environment influence behaviour because of their aversive nature and the threat they pose to human wellbeing. Correlations have been reported between

temperature and violent crime (Harries and Stadler, 1988). Goranson and King (1970) showed that riots were more likely to occur during heat waves. LeBeau (1994) reported a relationship between domestic disputes and the temperature-humidity index. Atlas (1982, 1984) reported that assault rates in prison are lower for air-conditioned areas and areas with easy access to showers than for areas where no relief from high temperatures is provided. Rotton and Frey (1986) reported an association between air pollution levels and violent crime. Banzinger and Owens (1978) found a correlation between wind speed and delinquency. Laboratory studies have also shown that aversive noise intensifies aggression (Donnerstein and Wilson, 1976).

In what circumstances do precipitators operate?

Arguably, both precipitators and rational choice play a part of every crime. However, the relative importance of each may vary from case to case. In this section the role played by precipitators is examined in terms of the type of offender, the type of offence, and the type of crime setting. Circumstances in which precipitators may be particularly important are identified.

Types of Offender

While the situational approach is conceptually underpinned by psychological theories of behaviour, individual differences among offenders have generally played little role in environmental criminology. However, the concept of crime precipitators suggests

that the default position in the rational choice perspective of the offender as predator needs to be reconsidered. Cornish and Clarke (2003) proposed an offender typology based on the strength of the offender's criminal disposition and the role that precipitators and rational choice play in his/her offending. Three offender types were suggested – anti-social predators, mundane offenders, and provoked offenders:

- *Anti-social predators* are stereotypical, calculating criminals. These offenders possess ingrained criminal dispositions and their offences involve premeditation and at least some rudimentary planning. They will typically enter the crime scene with pre-existing motivation to commit the crime, and their crimes are carried out intentionally and with a purpose. Their motivations for offending derive from the intrinsically rewarding nature of the crimes they commit. They utilize situational data to make rational choices about the relative costs and benefits of criminal involvement and will actively seek out or create criminal opportunities. Predators may specialize in a particular type of crime or may be criminally versatile, but in any event all will have developed 'knowledge, skills and experience enough to minimize risk and effort, and maximize payoffs' (Cornish and Clarke, 2003, p. 57).
- *Mundane offenders* are ambivalent in their criminal commitment and opportunistic in their offending. They engage in occasional, low level criminality and may possess generalised impulse-control problems. Typically they will commit crime more or less on the spur of the moment with minimal forethought. Like predatory offenders, they seek to derive benefits from their crimes, but they have a greater stake in conformity and are therefore subject to stronger personal and social constraints on their behaviour. These constraints, however, weaken from time to time, and mundane offenders are susceptible to

precipitating events that engage their criminal motivations. In particular, to facilitate their performance of morally proscribed behaviour, they may invoke neutralizations for their crimes, especially where situational factors serve to obscure personal responsibility. Mundane offenders vary in their vulnerability to temptation, and hence in the extent of their criminal involvement, but overall both the seriousness and frequency of their offending is less than for predatory offenders.

- *Provoked offenders* are reacting to a particular set of environmental circumstances – situational frustrations, irritations, social pressures and the like – that induce them to commit crimes they would not have otherwise committed. Their crimes include ‘crimes of violence that erupt in the heat of the moment; or impulsive ones committed by offenders overcome by temptation, or a temporary failure of self control’ (Cornish and Clarke, 2003, p. 70). Provoked offenders may have conventional value systems and lead otherwise law-abiding lives. Their involvement in crime may represent an aberration and would not have occurred if it were not for the precipitating events.

The offender typology suggests that different types of offenders may require different types of prevention strategies. According to the typology, the stronger the individual’s antisocial commitment, the more likely he/she is to be an active manipulator of – rather than a passive responder to – criminogenic situations (see table 3.3). For predatory offenders, situational data primarily informs target selection. They are opportunity-seekers and, if necessary, opportunity-makers. Obstacles to offending are

challenges to be overcome and prevention may require ‘hard’ opportunity reduction. For mundane offenders, situations offer temptations to be seized. They are opportunity-takers. Because of the moral ambivalence of the mundane offender, in the absence of easy opportunity they may not be sufficiently motivated to seek out crime targets. For the provoked offender, situations provide the impetus to offend. They are reactors to the immediate environment. Their engagement in crime requires a kick-start, and relieving the precipitating conditions may be sufficient to prevent offending.

(table 3.3 about here)

A word of caution is warranted when interpreting the interaction between offender type and situational influence. The distinction must be made between predatory, opportunistic and provoked *offenders* and predatory, opportunistic and provoked *offending*. It would be a mistake to assume that precipitators are only relevant for provoked offenders – predatory and opportunistic offenders also commit provoked crimes. Indeed, the stronger the individual’s criminal propensity the more easily provoked they are likely to be (Wortley, 2012). Thus, as table 3.3 indicates, an offender type subsumes the offending patterns of the types below it.

Types of Offence

One of the criticisms often levelled against rational choice is that it only applies to prudent crimes, that is, offences for which the offender is able to calculate a clear

benefit (Hayward, 2007; Tunnell, 2002). It is less applicable, the critics contend, to emotionally-based or pathological behaviour such as violence and sex offending. These behaviours are widely seen to be the product of psychological deficits rather than situational factors. While this criticism of rational choice has been challenged (Clarke, 1997; Cornish and Clarke, this volume), it is true that traditionally there was a disproportionate focus in the situational literature on property crime over interpersonal crime. The inclusion of precipitators broadens the scope of the situational approach and provides the basis for a more comprehensive analysis of so-called 'irrational' crimes. Two examples are discussed here – interpersonal violence and child sexual abuse.

Interpersonal violence

Researchers have classically distinguished between instrumental violence – a planned attack with a clearly formulated purpose (e.g., financial gain) – and expressive violence – an impulsive reaction to events carried out in the heat of the moment (e.g., Bowker, 1985). Rational choice can clearly help explain instrumental violence but arguably has less to offer in the case of expressive violence (Lowenstein and Lerner, 2003; van Gelder et al, 2014). While it has been shown that the distinction between instrumental and expressive violence is not clear-cut – Tedeschi and Felson (1994), for example, have argued that even expressive violence involves some element of rationality – a great deal of violence undoubtedly has its genesis in interpersonal conflicts and other environmental precipitators, and involves little premeditation. For example, in an analysis of Australian homicide statistics, just 19% of cases were

classified as instrumental (Davies and Mousas, 2007). Overall, 60% of victims and perpetrators knew one another; around half of all perpetrators were affected by alcohol at the time of the offence; and 35% of cases involving male perpetrators and 58% involving female perpetrators occurred in the course of domestic disputes or other arguments. Even if one retains a role for rational choice in these cases, the situational events leading up to the homicide have demonstrably impaired the perpetrators' capacity to make a clear-headed decision.

Child sexual abuse

The stereotypical image of a child sex offender is of a cunning predator, driven to offend by irresistible psychological urges. In fact, research indicates that many child sex offenders do not possess an entrenched sexual attraction to children. The recidivism rate for child sex offenders is surprisingly low, just 13% after five years at risk (Hanson and Bussiere, 1998). Smallbone and Wortley (2001) found that the vast majority (94%) of child sex offenders in their sample abused a child that they already knew, less than a quarter had previous convictions for sexual offenses, and almost half had abused just one victim. At the same time, the potential for non-paedophilic adult males, on occasion, to become sexually aroused by children is more widespread than is usually assumed (Barbaree and Marshall, 1989; Laws and Marshall, 1990), while Wortley and Smallbone (2014) found that only 40% of a sample of convicted child sex offenders professed a sexual attraction to children. In the absence of strong deviant motivations, immediate environments play an important role in precipitating child sexual abuse (Smallbone, Marshall and Wortley, 2008; Wortley and Smallbone,

2006; Wortley and Smallbone, 2014). The sexual impulse is often triggered during intimate care-giving activities – bathing, dressing, comforting, tucking into bed, roughhousing, and so on – which the offender experiences as stimulating. The role of such situational precipitators has been recognized for some time in the sex offender treatment field. In relapse prevention, offenders are taught to avoid or manage situations that they might find sexually stimulating and which might set in train an offending cycle (Pithers, Marques, Gibat and Marlatt, 1983).

Types of Setting

Precipitators may have a particular salience in ‘capsule’ environments – bounded locations where people are brought or come together for a specific purpose, such as residential institutions such as prisons, orphanages and boarding schools, and entertainment venues such as nightclubs and sporting arenas. The press of people combined with the enclosed nature of these environments can create pressure-cooker conditions. With limited options of escaping the capsule, the potential for situational precipitators to generate aberrant behaviour is intensified. Two locations where the role of precipitators has been examined in some detail are nightclubs and prisons.

Nightclubs

The scenario involving nightclub violence that opened this chapter is far from fanciful. Research into nightclub and pub violence clearly points to the crucial role

that situational precipitators play. Homel and colleagues (Homel and Clark, 1994; Homel, Hauritz, Wortley, McIlwain, and Carvolth, 1997; Macintyre and Homel, 1997) investigated chronic levels of violence in the nightclub district of a popular Australian tourist resort. Violence was related to the physical conditions of the premises and the alcohol serving policies of management. Homel and Clark (1994) found that violence correlated with a range of aggravating environmental features such as amount of cigarette smoke, lack of ventilation, poor lighting, and the demeanour of security staff. Macintyre and Homel (1997) analysed the floor plans of various premises. They found that designs in which the pathway to the toilets intersected the pathway to the bar, thereby increasing the level of jostling, were associated with significantly higher levels of violence. Homel et al (1997) found that irresponsible alcohol serving practices – excessive discounting, drinking competitions, serving intoxicated patrons, failing to provide alternatives to alcohol – significantly contributed to patron violence. The implementation of a Code of Practice by the licensed premises to encourage responsible serving, and strengthening external regulation to enforce liquor licensing laws, resulted in a significant decrease in alcohol-related violence around the nightclubs.

Prisons

The capacity for ‘total’ institutions such as prisons to engender pathological behaviour among their residents is well documented (Goffman, 1961). The prison environment contains frustrating and aversive experiences for prisoners at every turn (Wortley, 2002). Prisons are often crowded and prisoners are forced to live with

people they would never socialise with in other circumstances. The architecture is typically drab and Spartan, the routine is dull and repetitive, and regime is controlling and sometimes oppressive. In most prisons, prisoners do not have control over the simplest aspects of the environment such as turning their cells lights on and off, and regulating their heating. It is little wonder that prisoners commit twice as many assaults (Cooley, 1993) and are more than four times more likely to commit suicide (Ramsay, Tanney and Searle, 1987) in prison than on the outside. The traditional way to control prisoner behaviour is through overt security measures, a strategy consistent with rational choice. However, it is clear that consideration of the consequences is not the sole determinant of prison disorder. For example, Allard, Wortley and Stewart (2008) found that CCTV in prison reduced instrumental assaults but not expressive assaults. An alternative strategy is to reduce the situational pressures that precipitate prison disorder.

Implications and Conclusions

The role of situations in crime as presented in this chapter differs from the usual way that situations are conceptualised in environmental criminology. It has been argued that situations not only supply opportunities for motivated offenders they can play a role in supplying criminal motivations as well. Moreover, unlike the deliberative process described in rational choice, the offender may be quite unaware of the influence the environment is having upon him/her. It is contended that including a role for precipitators in a situational model of offender behaviour more fully captures the concept of crime as a function of a person-situation interaction, a foundational

assumption of environmental criminology.

Environmental criminologists are pragmatic bunch and eschew theorising for its own sake. The idea that situations can induce individuals to commit crimes that they might not have otherwise contemplated, even if true, needs to satisfy the ‘so what?’ test.

There five main reasons that precipitators matter:

- Consideration of situational precipitators expands the range of techniques available for situational prevention. The situational crime prevention task has been traditionally framed in terms of reducing the opportunities for crime. The techniques suggested by the analyses of situational precipitators extend the concept of opportunity-reduction. Wortley (2001; 2002) has elaborated on the crime prevention implications of situational precipitators and has suggested prevention techniques, while the concept of situational precipitators has also been incorporated into Clarke’s situational crime prevention mode under the label of reducing provocations (Cornish and Clarke, 2003; Clarke and Eck, 2003; see also Clarke, this volume).
- The inclusion of precipitators in the situational model facilitates analyses of behaviours that are not ‘rational’ or that have otherwise been neglected by situational prevention researchers to date. Critics have contended that behaviours such as interpersonal violence and sex offending are beyond the scope of situational prevention. While this criticism may have always been debatable, it is certainly less true if precipitators are included as part of the situational analysis.

- Many of the interventions suggested by situational precipitators offer ‘soft’ prevention options. For example, many suggested precipitation-control strategies involve reducing stressful and dehumanising aspects of the environment (Wortley, 2002). A criticism of rational choice is that it leads to an undue focus on target-hardening as a prevention strategy. Critics have equated situational prevention with a ‘hard’ fortress society. While this criticism can be shown to be unfair (Clarke, 1997), precipitators help provide a more balanced image of situational prevention.
- Precipitators help counter scepticism concerning crime displacement. One of the frequent criticisms of situational prevention is that criminally-motivated individuals will simply move to another location or target if one crime opportunity is blocked. Empirically, the amount of crime prevented has been invariably shown to exceed the amount of crime displaced (see Clarke, 1997). Precipitators provide an explanation for this. If situations contribute to the potential offender’s criminal motivation, then controlling precipitators will reduce the likelihood that he/she will be motivated to seek out alternative crime opportunities.
- Precipitators help explain and guard against counterproductive situational interventions. Sometimes, opportunity-reduction strategies have the effect of increasing rather than decreasing crime (see Wortley, 1998; 2002). For example, restrictions on behaviour that are too tight (such as an overly-rigid prison regime) can generate frustration and defiance, and increase levels of expressive violence (for example, a prison riot). That is, under extreme conditions, some opportunity-reduction strategies can transform into

precipitators. Crime prevention practitioners need to strike the appropriate balance between 'tightening up' and 'loosening off'.

Review Questions

- (1) Think of an occasion when you did something that you consider to be out of character and of which you are not proud. What were the situational factors at the time that might have contributed to this lapse in personal standards?
- (2) What would you have done if you were a participant in Milgram's obedience to authority experiment? Given the right circumstances are we all capable of truly reprehensible acts?
- (3) Do people ever completely lose self-control when highly emotionally or sexually aroused? Does the concept of precipitators threaten the principle that people are responsible for their behaviour?
- (4) Looking at the case of Jim's visit to the nightclub described at the beginning of the chapter, and referring to the classification of precipitators shown in table 3.2:
 - (a) Identify the types of precipitators acting on Jim and locate them in the classification table
 - (b) For each precipitator suggest an intervention that might be introduced to reduce the effect of the precipitator on nightclub patrons.
- (5) Identify 3 situations where reducing crime precipitators might increase crime opportunities and/or decreasing crime opportunities might increase crime precipitators. What is the appropriate balance to strike in these cases?

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Table 3.1. Comparing the rational choice and the situational precipitator approaches to analysing crime

Dimension	Situational Precipitators	Rational Choice
Psychological domains	Emotions, morals, perceptions, thoughts	‘Cold’ decision making
Focus of analysis	Antecedents of behaviour	Consequences of behaviour
Function of immediate environment	Initiates behaviour	Enables behaviour
Motivation of offender	Situationally dependent	Already motivated
Level of awareness	May be sub-cognitive	Conscious
Control by offender	May be involuntary	Deliberative

Table 3.2. Classification of situational precipitators of crime.

Prompts	Pressures	Permissions	Provocations
<p><i>Triggers:</i> e.g., weapons effect</p>	<p><i>Conformity:</i> e.g., gang crime</p>	<p><i>Minimising the rule:</i> e.g., culture of corruption</p>	<p><i>Frustration:</i> e.g., road rage</p>
<p><i>Signals:</i> e.g., ‘gay-bashing’</p>	<p><i>Obedience:</i> e.g., following corrupt superiors</p>	<p><i>Minimising responsibility:</i> e.g., alcohol-related crime</p>	<p><i>Crowding:</i> e.g., nightclub violence</p>
<p><i>Imitation:</i> e.g., copy-cat crime</p>	<p><i>Compliance/ defiance:</i> e.g., defying security staff</p>	<p><i>Minimising consequences:</i> e.g., ‘petty’ theft</p>	<p><i>Territoriality:</i> e.g., turf wars</p>
<p><i>Expectancies:</i> e.g., pubs with violent reputations</p>	<p><i>Anonymity:</i> e.g., lynch mobs</p>	<p><i>Minimising the victim:</i> e.g., revenge against employer</p>	<p><i>Environmental irritants:</i> e.g., riots in heat waves</p>

Table 3.3 Behaviour of the offender as a function of the interaction between offender type and situational characteristics.

Situation	Offender		
	Predator	Mundane	Provoked
Challenging	Manipulates		
Tempting	Exploits	Exploits	
Precipitating	Reacts to	Reacts to	Reacts to

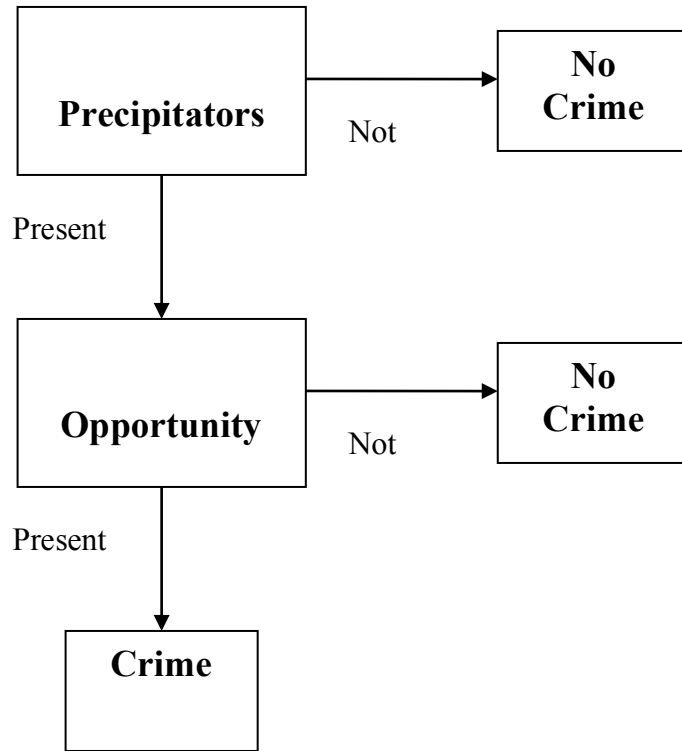


Figure 3.1. Relationship between precipitators and opportunity.