

CHAPTER 3

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 think about the role that immediate environments play in behaviour. According to rational choice perspective, the immediate environment is the source of information 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 precipitators.

Table 3.1 compares the rational choice and situational-precipitator approaches to analysing crime. First, 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. Second, 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 feelings of aggression; whether Jim carries through with an aggressive course of action is regulated by opportunity. Third, 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. Fourth, precipitators often (although not always) operate below consciousness; 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, 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 over-ride the physiological effects; the decision whether or not to proceed with an assault is seen as an active choice.

(Table 3.1 about here)

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 inclusions 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 (see chapter 1). While rational choice explains why criminally-motivated individuals might commit crime on some occasions but not on others, precipitators can help explain changes in criminal propensity within an individual – why, for example, normally law-abiding individuals might sometimes commit crime. The following section examines the different ways that situational precipitators have been conceptualised in psychology, and the contribution that the concept of situational precipitators makes to understanding the dynamics of criminal behaviour.

(figure 3.1 about here)

Types of Precipitators

Psychological theory suggests four main ways that immediate environments might precipitate criminal responses. Learning theory explains how situational cues can *prompt* individuals to perform criminal behaviour. Social psychology examines the social forces that exert *pressure* on individuals to offend. Social-cognitive theory describes how situational factors can help weaken moral prohibitions and so *permit* individuals to engage in normally proscribed behaviour. Finally, environmental psychology outlines how situationally-induced emotional arousal can *provoke* a criminal response. The full classification of precipitators is shown in Table 3.2.

(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. Theoretically, the role of prompts in precipitating behaviour is explained by learning theory. Learning theory is concerned with changes in behaviour that result from environmental experiences (Skinner, 1953). In criminology, most attention has been given to the way patterns of criminal behaviour are acquired over time, through childhood experiences and the like.

However, learning theory also holds that for learned behaviour to be produced on any given occasion it needs to be evoked by an appropriate environmental stimulus. For example, most people will remember the experiment involving Pavlov's dogs.

Through the repeated pairing of food and a bell, the dogs learned to salivate when a bell was rung, even when there was no food. One way to stop the dogs salivating is to retrain them by ringing the bell without food until the association is eventually broken and the response is extinguished. But the salivation can be stopped immediately by simply not ringing the bell. That is, the salivation is situationally dependent and only occurs when prompted. 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, Berkowitz (1983) found that the sight of weapons could trigger feelings of aggression and facilitate violence. 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.

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. Based on the same principle, signals are often introduced into the environment to remind people that certain behaviours are inappropriate. For example, Geller *et al* (1983) found that honesty prompts attached to self-service newspaper racks significantly reduced thefts.

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. Individuals can derive expectancies from situational cues. For example, Graham and Homel (1996) 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 (Akers *et al*, 1979; Warr and Stafford, 1991). 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. 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: Being a member of a group or crowd can create a sense of anonymity and induce disinhibition. Most people have experienced the sensation of becoming immersed in a group and doing things that they would never have done alone. An extreme example of this phenomenon is the herd mentality and frenzied behaviour displayed by members of a ‘lynch-mob’ (Colman, 1991). Being a member of a group has two psychological effects. First, people feel that they cannot be personally identified, and they become less concerned with the opinions and censure of others. Second, people experience a decreased ability to monitor their own behaviour, and they lose touch with their usual values. 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 minimize 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 school yard 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 have been 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 organisms 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). Homel and Clark (1994) found nightclub violence was related to levels of patron boredom, lack of seating, unavailability of food and provocative behaviour of security staff. 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), college dormitories (Baum and Valins, 1977), nightclubs (Macintyre and Homel, 1996) and naval ships (Dean, Pugh and Gunderson, 1978). 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 well-being. 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).

Types of Offenders

Both precipitators and rational choice may play a part of every crime, but the relative importance of each may vary from individual to individual. Recently, 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:

1. *Anti-social predators* are the stereotypical, calculating criminal. 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).
2. *Mundane offenders* are ambiguous 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.

3. *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 identification of offender types is a new development in environmental criminology. While the situational approach is conceptually underpinned by psychological theories of behaviour, individual differences have generally played little role in the analysis of crime. The offender has been treated as a constant. Bringing characteristics of the offender into the equation more accurately reflects the view of behavior as an interaction between person and situation, and offers the potential for better targeted crime prevention strategies. According to the offender 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 inform 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)

Cornish and Clarke (2003, and chapter 2 this volume) have argued that the antisocial predator is the default offender type, or at any rate, that thinking about crime as rationally chosen offers the most effective model for situational prevention. However, as table 3.3 suggests, an offender type may subsume the offending patterns of the types below it. Thus, predatory offenders are likely also to exploit opportunities and react to precipitators when the situations arise, and in fact, may be more likely to do so than are mundane and provoked offenders. Individuals with antisocial dispositions tend to offend across the spectrum. For example, one of Australia's most notorious criminals, Neddy Smith, was ultimately convicted of killing a stranger in a road-rage incident (Sydney Morning Herald, October 4, 2005). All three types of offenders may at some time commit offences due to situational precipitators.

Types of Offences

Just as the role of precipitators may vary among offenders, they may also play a greater or lesser role depending upon the nature of the crime in question. This section highlights two areas in which precipitators make a particular contribution to our

understanding the situational dynamics of crime – ‘irrational’ crime, and crime that occurs within ‘capsule’ environments.

‘Irrational’ crime

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 (Trasler, 1986; 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 to date there has been 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. 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 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 (and it is not suggested that rational choice is irrelevant in expressive violence), the situational events leading up to the homicide have demonstrably impaired the perpetrators' capacity to make a clear-headed decision. There is further examination of the role of precipitators in expressive violence in the discussion of capsule environments below.

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). In the absence of strong deviant motivations, immediate environments play an important role in precipitating child sexual abuse (Smallbone, Marshall and Wortley, in press; Wortley and Smallbone, 2006). 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).

Capsule environments

Capsule environments are bounded locations where people are brought or come together for a specific purpose. They include 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 (in press) 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 for Crime Prevention

The concept of situational precipitators of crime has obvious crime prevention implications, and some of these have been hinted at in the course of the chapter. Take the nightclub example from the beginning of the chapter. This scenario suggests that nightclub violence might be reduced by precipitation-control strategies such as training security staff in non-confrontational management techniques (encouraging compliance), restricting patron density (reducing crowding), reorganising the floor plan to facilitate traffic flow (reducing frustration), enhancing patron comfort (controlling environmental irritants), and enforcing responsible alcohol serving policies (clarifying responsibility). However, crime prevention was not the focus of this chapter and a more detailed discussion of controlling situational precipitators can be found elsewhere (Wortley, 2001; 2002; Wortley and Smallbone 2006). Recently, too, the concept of situational precipitators has 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 purpose of this section is to outline the contributions that the concept of precipitators makes to situational crime prevention. There are five:

1. Consideration of situational precipitators expands the range of techniques available for situational prevention and encourages crime prevention practitioners to think in a more focussed way about the antecedents of behaviour. 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.
2. 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.

3. 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. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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, too many restrictions on behaviour (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.

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that human behaviour – and criminal behaviour in particular – is inextricably dependent upon its situational context. The role of situations in crime as presented in this chapter, however, differs from the usual way that situations are conceptualised in environmental criminology. In contrast to the rational choice perspective, the psychological theories presented in this chapter emphasise the precipitating role of immediate environments. That is to say, environmental factors may actively induce offenders to commit crimes that they may not have otherwise contemplated at that time. The motivations for crime may be supplied or at least intensified by the situation. Moreover, unlike the deliberative process described in rational choice, according to this perspective immediate environments may influence people at a sub-cognitive level. The offender may be quite unaware of the influence the environment is having upon him/her. It is contended that consideration of the role of precipitators provides for a more faithful rendering of the person-situation interaction, which is a foundational assumption in psychology, and provides for a broader approach to situational crime prevention.

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

Dimension	Situational Precipitators	Rational Choice
Focus of analysis	Antecedents of behaviour	Consequences of behaviour
Function of immediate environment	Initiates behaviour	Enables behaviour
Motivation of offender	Situationally dependent	Already motivated
Psychological processes	Sub-cognitive	Conscious
Control by offender	Involuntary	Deliberative

Table 3.2. Classification of situational precipitators of crime.

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

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

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

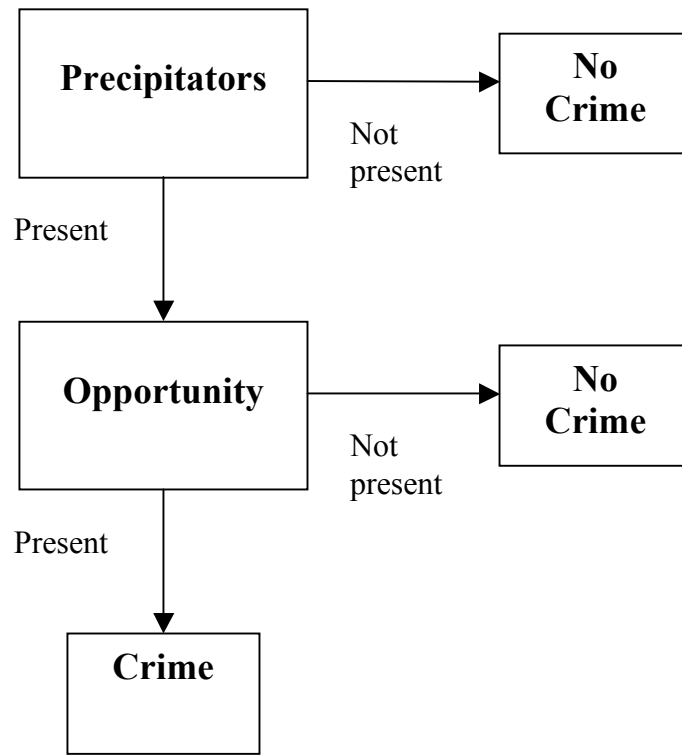


Figure 3.1. Relationship between precipitators and opportunity.