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## Situational Action Theory

Criminology is a fragmented discipline and its key theoretical and empirical insights are poorly integrated. There is not even clear agreement about what its theories aim to explain, ie what crime is. This state of affairs hampers the development of a sound understanding of crime and its causes and hinders advancement of effective crime prevention strategies and policies. *Situational Action Theory* (SAT) was developed to overcome key shortcomings identified in prominent criminological theories (briefly detailed in sections 1.1 and 1.2 below). SAT builds upon and aims to integrate, within an adequate action theory framework, main insights from criminological theory and research as well as theory and research from relevant social and behavioural sciences more generally (see, eg, Wikström 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a). In this book SAT serves as the analytical framework for our research into the social and situational dynamics of young people's urban crime.

### 1.1 Criminology: A fragmented and poorly integrated discipline

A key problem with criminological theorizing and research is that it is fragmented. One need only consult any criminological textbook (or take part in any major criminological conference) to be convinced of the discipline's theoretical fragmentation.

While a good deal is known about the correlates of delinquency and crime, there is surprisingly little agreement about the causes.

(Farrington 1988: 75)

The study of deviance and crime has traditionally been characterized by a multitude of seemingly unrelated and competitive theories.

(Liska et al. 1989: 1)

No simple theory in the crime/deviance area... has proven to be more than minimally satisfactory in overall explanatory ability, in applicability to a

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wide range of deviance, or in empirical support for its tenets. All are plausible, yet they fail as general theories.

(Tittle 1995: 1)

...criminology risks being a field of study in which many ideas are developed and all are chosen—in which all theories have equal claim to legitimacy and in which only the most highly specialized scholars can separate the theoretical wheat from the chaff.

(Cullen et al. 2008: 2)

The problem of fragmentation and poor integration is also well reflected when it comes to empirical research.

...there is no shortage of factors that are significantly correlated with offending and antisocial behavior; indeed, literally thousands of variables differentiate significantly between official offenders and non-offenders or correlate significantly with self-reported offending.

(Farrington 1992: 256)

...when factors become too numerous... we are in the hopeless position of arguing that everything matters.

(Matza 1964: 23–24)

...a major problem with the risk factor prevention paradigm is to determine which risk factors are causes and which are merely markers or correlated with causes.

(Farrington 2000: 7)

A discipline that is fragmented, theoretically and empirically, is of little help to politicians, policy makers, and practitioners who want to base their policies and interventions on the best available scientific knowledge about crime causation.

For decades, theoretical fragmentation in criminology has contributed to generally ineffective, fragmented and shortsighted public policies. Without a holistic understanding of the causes of crime, policy makers will continue to shift the focus of control efforts back and forth from individual-level to macro-level causes as the political pendulum swings from right to left. This erratic approach feeds the desperate belief that the problem of crime is intractable.

(Vila 1994: 314)

It is clear that to get out of the current stalemate of disparate theory and research and develop as a discipline, criminology needs to integrate key theoretical insights and relevant empirical findings within

a framework that can more effectively focus research and policy on the role of causally relevant factors and processes and their interactions in crime causation.

One of the key divides in existing criminological theorizing and research is between person-oriented and environment-oriented approaches. There is a lack of advanced theorizing that attempts to analytically integrate key insights from these two explanatory approaches. The role of the social environment, and particularly *how* it interacts with personal characteristics and experiences in crime causation, is surprisingly poorly developed and under-researched.

...more is to be gained by linking those traditions than by their continued separate development and testing.

(Reiss 1986: 29)

Existing research tells us more about the development of criminal potential than about how that potential becomes the actuality of offending in any given situation.

(Farrington 2002: 690)

Many contemporary efforts that purport to pursue the goal of theoretical integration might better be described as attempts at prediction. Variables from two or more theories are included in the same prediction equation, but there is little concern with relating the concepts to one another.

(Messner et al. 1989: 18)

Criminology lacks an accepted and general theoretical structure for guiding integrative inquiry into the causes of crime.

(Wikström and Sampson 2006: 1)

Person-oriented and environment-oriented approaches are potentially helpful for identifying important explanatory factors but, taken separately, do not provide fully developed explanations of crime *as an action*. Rather, person-oriented approaches mostly aim to explain the emergence of personal differences affecting people's tendency to commit acts of crime (their crime propensity), while environment-oriented approaches generally aim to explain place (and time) differences in the occurrence of acts of crime (or crime rates) as an outcome of criminogenic features of the environment. Typically, neither explains the actual *causal process* that directly links a person (crime propensity) and a setting (criminogenic exposure) to an act of crime. To do so requires the integration of

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causally relevant personal and environmental factors and analysis of their interaction within the context of an adequate action theory. However, developed action theory is a rarity in criminological theories.

If criminological theories refer at all to theories of action they mostly make general references to the importance of choice without giving any more developed account of its role within the theory, typically alluding to self-interest, pleasures and pain, costs and benefits and similar grounds for action.

(Wikström 2006: 70)

Even theories that explicitly deal with the person–environment interaction as a rule lack a developed account of how (through what process) personal and environmental factors interact in causing acts of crime. This problem is clearly illustrated by two of the currently most influential criminological theories: Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime (or, as it is often referred to, self-control theory) and Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory.

Both theories suggest that crime occurs because of the intersection of people (in Gottfredson and Hirschi's case, those with low self-control; in Cohen and Felson's case, motivated offenders) and opportunities to offend (in Gottfredson and Hirschi's case, opportunities to achieve quick, easy rewards with minimal effort through force or fraud; in Cohen and Felson's case, opportunities to interact with a suitable target in the absence of a capable guardian). However, although both theories recognize the role of personal and environmental factors, they largely focus on the role of one, essentially disregarding (or only paying lip-service to) the other, and, crucially, do not specify in any detail the process by which the two interact in producing acts of crime (see, for example, Clarke and Felson 1993: 1–4; Gottfredson and Hirschi 2003).

There is clearly a strong case for integrating key insights from person-oriented and environment-oriented approaches and, arguably, this is best achieved by means of an adequate action theory that can account for *how* (through what process) the interplay between person (propensity) and environment (exposure) affects actions (eg acts of crime), and thereby help identify which are the causally relevant personal and environmental factors among all the hundreds of empirically demonstrated crime correlates (for a recent overview of crime correlates, see Ellis et al. 2009).

## 1.2 Key common shortcomings in criminological theory

To advance criminological theory there are (at least) four main tasks that need to be addressed to create a comprehensive and integrated explanation of the causes of crime (Wikström 2010a):

- (1) to define what crime is (what it is the theory aims to explain);
- (2) to specify what it is that moves people to engage in acts of crime (to present an adequate action theory);
- (3) to specify which (and how) personal and environmental factors interact in moving people to engage in acts of crime (to properly integrate key insights from personal and environmental explanatory approaches);
- (4) to specify the role of broader social conditions (macro factors) and individual development (life histories) in crime causation (to analyse their influence not as causes but as causes of the causes).

Criminological theories are not always clear about what they aim to explain and, crucially, the definition of *crime* is rarely (though it should be) the starting point for the development of their explanations (but cf. Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990<sup>1</sup>). Without a clear definition of crime (what it is one aims to explain) it is difficult to develop an unambiguous theory of *crime causation*. A theory has to be a theory about *something*, causes have to cause *something*, and an explanation has to explain *something* (Wikström 2010a). Depending on how crime is defined (what it is a theory of crime aims to explain) relevant causes and explanations will vary.

There is a lack of a generally accepted definition of crime within the discipline of criminology. The concept of crime is differently defined in different theories (and sometimes not at all or only vaguely) and observers have questioned whether different theories of crime causation really aim to explain the same thing (eg Akers 1989: 25). Without a clear common definition of what criminological theory should explain it is difficult to analytically compare and empirically test which proposed theory is the best (most true)

<sup>1</sup> However, the starting point for Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory (their definition of crime) is problematic. They define crime as 'acts of force and fraud undertaken in the pursuit of self-interest' (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 15). One major problem is their definition includes an element of explanation: 'in the pursuit of self-interest' (see further Wikström and Treiber 2007).

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explanation of crime (because it is unclear if they aim to explain the same thing).

Some scholars have questioned whether it is possible to develop a general theory of crime. Wilson and Herrnstein (1985: 21) argue ‘that it is difficult to provide a true and interesting explanation for actions that differ so much in their legal and subjective meaning’. This objection is correct if one focuses on explaining the many different kinds of *acts* that constitute crime (eg shoplifting, rape, drunken driving, insider trading, plane hijacking); but if one focuses on explaining the *rule-breaking* (which is common to all crimes) this objection becomes less of a problem. A general theory of why people act in compliance with or breach rules of conduct is certainly possible.

People are the source of their actions and to explain their acts of crime we need an adequate *action theory* that explains what moves people to comply with or breach rules of conduct. Criminology lacks a generally accepted action theory; in fact, most criminological theories lack any developed theory of action.<sup>2</sup> Typically, criminological theory (and research) lists factors supposed to influence people’s crime involvement without specifying in much detail *how* (the process by which) these factors affect the occurrence of acts of crime. Many criminological theories appear to be theories about the causes of crime propensity (theories about the causes of *one* factor affecting people’s acts of crime) rather than theories explaining crime events.

To explain acts of crime we need to understand the process (mechanism) that produces acts of rule-breaking. An *action theory* is a theory that details the process (the mechanism) that produces action. Correctly specifying the process that moves people to act in one way or another (eg to follow or breach rules of conduct) is crucial to identifying which of all the many crime correlates are causally relevant for the outcome and which are only *markers* (factors merely correlated with causally relevant factors) or *symptoms* (factors merely associated with the outcome). According to SAT, this process

<sup>2</sup> Some prominent criminological theorists have alluded that their theories are compatible with some variant of rational choice theory (eg, Felson 1986; Hirschi 1986). However, they do not develop the potential for integration in any detail. Applications of [rational] choice theory can typically be found in particular research areas, such as deterrence (eg, Nagin and Pogarsky 2003) and situational crime prevention (eg, Clarke 1980). See McCarthy (2002) more generally on the use (and lack of use) of [rational] choice theory within criminology.

is one of *perception of action alternatives and choice* (Wikström 2006). Only those factors that influence the perception–choice process that moves people to act are causally relevant in the explanation of action. Consequently, *only* those factors that directly (or indirectly, as causes of the causes) influence the perception–choice process that moves people to follow or breach rules of conduct (stated in law) are causally relevant in the explanation of acts of crime (see further Wikström 2011a).

Criminological theories (and research) tend to analyse the causes of crime as if the influence of personal and environmental factors on acts of crime were independent. This is a mistake. There can be no proper explanation of action (eg acts of crime) without considering the person–environment *interaction*. Environments do not act. People act, but, importantly, they do not act in a social vacuum. People act in response to settings (the parts of the environment that they directly experience). There are no personal or environmental factors that are sufficient to cause action on their own; they only become activated as part of the person–environment interaction. The explanation of the causes of acts of crime requires an understanding of how (through what processes) the *situational dynamics* (person–setting interactions) influence people to follow or breach rules of conduct. The crucial question is what personal and environmental factors are causally relevant, that is what personal and environmental factors interact to influence the perception–choice process by which people are moved to follow or breach rules of conduct.

In the analysis of crime causation it is important to distinguish between the causes and the ‘causes of the causes’ of acts of crime. Criminological theories (and research) are not always fully clear about this central analytical distinction. Analysis of the *causes of the causes* of acts of crime primarily concerns the explanation of why people come to have different crime propensities, why environments (places) come to vary in their criminogeneity, and why different kinds of people (according to their crime propensity) come to be exposed to different kinds of settings (environments) with particular criminogenic features.

Person–setting interactions take place in, and are dependent on, the wider social context. To explain the *social dynamics* of crime requires an understanding of how (through what processes) systemic factors (such as residential and activity differentiation) influence the occurrence of particular (and the frequency of particular) person–setting interactions in which people develop (their crime

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propensities) and act (commit acts of crime). In other words, the analysis of the social dynamics (as a study of the causes of the causes) helps explain *why* certain kinds of people are exposed to certain kinds of settings (in which they develop and act), while the analysis of the situational dynamics (as a study of the causes) helps to explain *why* certain person–setting combinations are likely to make people (follow or) breach particular rules of conduct.

To understand why and how particular kinds of interactions emerge at particular times and places we need an ecological approach. We need to understand how processes of *social selection* (and their interplay with self selection) introduce kinds of people to kinds of settings (and how these kinds of settings emerge). This, in turn, will help explain spatial and temporal patterns and concentrations of acts of crime.

All in all, developing an adequate theory of crime causation requires the realization that

- (1) crimes are actions—specifically, actions that breach rules of conduct—and should, therefore, be explained as such;
- (2) people are the source of their actions; therefore, to explain their actions, we need an adequate action theory that explains what moves people to act in compliance with or breach rules of conduct;
- (3) people’s actions are an outcome of a perception–choice process initiated and guided by the person–environment interaction (where this interaction is the input to the perception–choice process); therefore, we require a situational action theory to understand the situational dynamics of crime;
- (4) people’s interactions occur in a wider social context; therefore, we need an ecological perspective to grasp the social dynamics of crime. Understanding the role of this wider social context helps explain why certain kinds of environments (settings in which people develop and act) emerge and, crucially, why certain kinds of people are exposed to certain kinds of settings (what interactions take place).

A proper study of crime causation thus calls for an *ecological action approach* that takes into account actors, action contexts, and their interaction, and how that interaction is dependent on the wider social context. Moreover, there is a need to take more seriously issues of human agency and causation (Wikström 2011a). SAT aims to provide such a framework.

### 1.3 Situational Action Theory: Basic constructs and propositions

According to SAT, people are essentially rule-guided creatures (Wikström 2010a). People express their desires (and needs) and their commitments, and respond to frictions, within the context of rule-guided choice. To explain human action (such as acts of crime) we therefore need to understand how the process of rule-guidance influences what action alternatives people perceive and what choices they make in relation to the motivations (temptations and provocations) they experience.

#### 1.3.1 Outline of the basic situational model

SAT proposes that acts of crime (C) are ultimately an outcome of a perception–choice process ( $\rightarrow$ ) that is initiated and guided by the interaction (x) between a person's crime propensity (P) and criminogenic exposure (E):

$$P \times E \rightarrow C$$

*Acts of crime* are defined as acts that break moral rules of conduct stated in law. The *perception–choice process* is a process of perceiving action alternatives and making choices in relation to a motivation (a temptation or provocation). This process can be either predominantly automated (expressing a habit) or reasoned (making a judgement) depending on the familiarity of the circumstances and the congruence of the rule-guidance in the setting in which the person takes part. What action alternatives people perceive (eg if they see an act of crime as an action alternative) and, on that basis, what choices they make (eg if they choose an act of crime) in relation to particular motivations, depends on the *interaction* between their crime propensity and the criminogenic features of the settings to which they are exposed.

SAT maintains that a person's *crime propensity* depends on the extent to which his or her relevant morality (moral rules and their attached moral emotions) and ability to exercise self-control encourage breaching moral rules of conduct (stated in law); and that a setting's criminogenic features depend on the extent to which that setting's (perceived) moral norms and their enforcement (or lack of enforcement) encourage the breach of moral rules (stated in law). A person's *criminogenic exposure* is the extent to which he or

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she takes part in settings with criminogenic features. Crime propensity and criminogenic exposure are the key direct causally relevant factors in the explanation of a person's acts of crime. The factors that influence (1) the development of a person's crime propensity, (2) the emergence of criminogenic settings (environments), and (3) people's exposure to criminogenic settings are analysed in SAT as *the causes of the causes*. Below we develop these arguments in more detail.

### 1.3.2 Explaining crime as moral action

SAT maintains that acts of crime are best explained as moral actions, that is actions guided by moral rules. A *moral rule* is a rule of conduct that states what is the right or wrong thing to do (or not to do) in a particular circumstance. The *law* is a set of moral rules of conduct. Acts of *crime* are acts that breach moral rules of conduct stated in law. This is what all crimes, in all places, at all times, have in common. To explain acts of crime we thus need to explain *why* people comply with or breach rules of conduct (stated in law). That is what a theory of crime causation should explain.

A theory of crime causation is a special case of a general theory of moral action. Explaining acts of crime is not different from explaining why people breach moral rules more generally. The explanatory process is the same. The only difference between an act of crime and another breach of a rule of conduct is that the former is *stated in law*. If we can explain why people comply with or breach rules of conduct in general we can also explain why people comply with or breach moral rules stated in law. As Ehrlich ([1936] 2008: 39) points out, 'the legal norm... is merely one of the rules of conduct, of the same nature as all other rules of conduct'. In this context it is important to stress that SAT does not require the existence of the law, only the existence of moral rules. While, in principle, it is possible to abolish the law (and, hence, there would be no breaches of moral rules *stated in law*), it is not conceivable that moral rules can be abolished (because people are essentially rule-guided creatures; see further Wikström 2010a).

The explanation of crime as moral action has the great advantage of being *applicable to all kinds of crime*, from shoplifting to major company fraud, from bar fights to mass shootings, from civil disobedience to roadside bombings, to mention just a few examples. The key explanatory *factors* and causal *processes*

involved are the same; it is only the input to the process, its *content* (the applicable moral rules), that may vary depending on what kind of moral action we want to explain (Wikström 2010a). For example, the perception–choice process that makes a person lie to a friend, shoplift or blow up an airplane is the same (he or she has to see the action as an alternative and then chose to carry it out) but the relevant moral rules that guide the process may be very different.

One great advantage of explaining crime as moral action is that it *avoids the problem that some actions are defined as crimes at some times, or in some places, but not at other times, or in other places*, because what is explained is why a person performs an action that breaches a rule of conduct (eg drives at 100 mph on a road with a 70 mph speed limit), not why he or she performs the particular action in itself (drives at 100 mph). Thus, for example, the issue of why homosexual acts may be criminalized in some jurisdictions but not in others, or the fact that they have previously been criminalized in a jurisdiction but no longer are, does not present any problems for the theory. SAT does not aim to explain why particular rules of conduct exist (eg why cannabis smoking is illegal) but why people follow or breach particular rules of conduct (eg why people smoke cannabis when it is illegal). To explain why certain actions are considered acts of crime is an important criminological topic, but not one it is necessary to address when the aim is to explain why people comply with or breach rules of conduct stated in law.

Explaining crimes as moral action does not (necessarily) involve any judgement about whether or not existing moral rules (including laws) are good (virtuous) or bad (reprehensible). SAT does not entail a ‘*moralistic*’ approach to the study of crime. The theory does not address the issue of *what is* right (good) or wrong (bad) to do (or not to do), but focuses on *how* moral rules (rules about what it is right and wrong to do or not to do) guide human action. The basic argument is that people’s actions (such as acts of crime) are best explained as moral actions, actions guided by moral rules (whatever the rules and their origins).

However, this does not imply any position of *moral relativism* (that all moral rules are equally likely to occur and endure). There are most likely important grounds for why some particular kinds of moral rules emerge, for example relating to *human nature* and the problem of creating *social order*. There is probably no coincidence that most societies (of some complexity) regulate, for example,

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ownership, sexual behaviour, and the use of violence (albeit the nature of these regulations may vary over time and between jurisdictions).

Morality is not only a question about what rules of conduct a person holds, but also about how much he or she *cares* about adhering to specific moral rules. It is reasonable to expect a correspondence between a person's *moral values* (what actions he or she regards as good or bad) and his or her *moral rules* (what actions he or she considers right or wrong to do). People who agree with a rule of conduct generally consider it a good thing to comply with the rule and a bad thing not to. However, the degree to which a person finds particular actions good (virtuous) or bad (reprehensible) may vary. He or she is likely to care more about some rules of conduct than others. For example, a person may consider it wrong both to run a red light and to break into another person's house, but he or she may consider running a red light less reprehensible. People also vary in how important they consider adhering to a particular moral rule. For example, some people may find it unthinkable to snitch on a friend, while others may not find it that big a deal (even if, in principle, they consider it wrong to do so).

The strength of a person's particular moral rules may be seen as reflected in the *moral emotions* he or she attaches to breaching a particular moral rule. People vary in how much *shame* (feeling bad in front of others) and *guilt* (feeling bad in front of oneself) they feel for having conducted (or, in the case of guilt, even having merely thought of conducting) a particular kind of action. In the analysis of people's morality, SAT uses the concept of moral rules (indicating what a person perceives as right and wrong to do) and moral emotions (indicating the strength of particular moral rules) to capture a person's morality.

### 1.3.3 Elements of the situational model: Person, setting, situation, and action

People act, they act within settings, and the interaction of people and settings creates situations, to which their actions are a (deliberate or habitual) response. The key elements of the situational model of SAT are thus (1) a person, (2) the setting, (3) the situation, and (4) an action. A *person* is defined as a body with a biological and psychological makeup, experiences, and agency (powers to make things happen intentionally). The environment is all that lies

outside the person. A *setting* is defined as the part of the environment (the configuration of objects, persons, and events) that, at any given moment in time, is accessible to a person through his or her senses (including any media present). A *situation* is defined as the perception of action alternatives and process of choice, which emerges from the person–setting interaction. *Action* is defined as a bodily movement or a sequence of bodily movements, under the person’s guidance (eg speaking, hitting, pinching, running, or laughing). Reflexes are not counted as actions. The situation lies at the core of SAT’s explanation of moral action (including acts of crime), not the person or the environment (setting), but the perception–choice process that arises from their interaction. That is why the theory has been labelled *Situational Action Theory*.

SAT fully recognizes the important fact that people are different (have different propensities), and that environments (places) are different (provide different kinds of exposure) but, crucially, argues that particular combinations of kinds of people and kinds of settings will tend to create particular kinds of situations (perception–choice processes) that, in turn, will tend to encourage particular kinds of action (for example particular kinds of acts of crime). A key argument of SAT is that any explanation that focuses on (or ignores) either personal or environmental factors will fall short as an explanation of acts of crime.

### 1.3.4 *Crime propensity and criminogenic exposure*

SAT proposes that people vary in their propensity to engage in acts of crime (and particular acts of crime) as a consequence of their morality and ability to exercise self-control. *Crime propensity* is the tendency to see and, if so, to choose acts of crime (a particular act of crime) as a viable action alternative in response to a motivation (temptation or provocation). People who easily see acts of crime as action alternatives they readily choose to carry out may be regarded as crime prone, while those who rarely or never see acts of crime as action alternatives may be regarded as crime averse. This general reasoning may be applied to specific types of crime, in which case we can talk about a *crime-specific propensity* (eg a propensity to shoplift to get desired goods or a propensity to use violence to forward political ends).

According to SAT, a person’s crime propensity fundamentally depends on his or her *morality* (his or her moral rules and their

attached moral emotions). People vary in how important it is for them to abide by the rules of law (and rules of conduct more generally). However, they also, crucially, vary in their *action-relevant moral rules* (the specific moral rules of relevance to breaking particular kinds of rules of conduct, such as the use of violence, and the specific circumstances in which such use may be seen as a morally justifiable action alternative), and the strength of these moral rules (as indicated by the shame and guilt attached to violating the rule). The likelihood that a person will perceive a particular crime as an action alternative in response to a motivator depends on his or her action relevant moral rules and their strength.

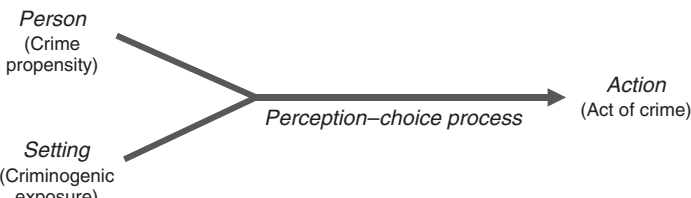
While people's morality is the basic personal factor of relevance for their crime propensity, their *ability to exercise self control* is also of importance in cases in which they are externally encouraged to break a moral rule they themselves hold (this point will be further elaborated in section 1.3.7). A person's ability to exercise self-control depends on his or her executive capabilities (see further Wikström and Treiber 2007), but is also influenced by momentary personal factors such as alcohol and drug intoxication or high levels of stress or emotion. All in all, a person's crime propensity may be seen as the outcome of the interaction between his or her morality and ability to exercise self-control.

However, propensity is not action. Even those with the highest crime propensity spend very little of their time awake engaging in acts of crime (see Wikström and Butterworth 2006: 212–13; Wikström et al. 2010: 80). For crime propensity to be triggered into action it has to interact with action-relevant features of a setting. Settings present different *moral contexts*, that is different *moral norms* and *levels of enforcement* (through formal and informal monitoring and intervention and their associated potential consequences), which means they differ in the extent to which they encourage or discourage breaches of rules of conduct (stated in law) in relation to the opportunities they provide and the level of friction they create. The moral norms of a setting will vary in the degree to which they correspond with the rules of conduct stated in law (for example the moral norms of some settings may encourage cannabis smoking even when doing so is illegal). Settings that tend to encourage acts of crime (or particular acts of crime) may be regarded as *criminogenic settings*. Just as we can speak about people's crime-specific propensities we can also speak about settings' *crime-specific criminogenic features*.

The influence of a setting's moral context on action is always a question of its *perceived* moral context. Although it is reasonable generally to assume a rather close correspondence between the actual and perceived moral norms of a setting and their enforcement, people may misinterpret which moral norms apply to a setting, and the efficacy of their enforcement, particularly if they operate in new and unfamiliar settings. Some settings may also be more diffuse (or conflicting) than others in terms of the available cues regarding which moral norms apply and the level to which they are enforced. All in all, a person's *criminogenic exposure* may be seen as his or her encounters with settings in which the (perceived) moral norms and their (perceived) levels of enforcement (or lack of enforcement) encourage breaches of rules of conduct (stated in law) in response to particular opportunities or frictions.

### 1.3.5 The perception–choice process

SAT proposes that human actions, such as acts of crime, are an outcome of a perception–choice process initiated and guided by the *causal interaction* of (crime) propensity and (criminogenic) exposure (see Figure 1.1). The factors that influence a person's perception of action alternatives and process of choice (ie his or her propensity and exposure) are the factors that are causally relevant for his or her actions. A *causally relevant factor* in the explanation of action is a factor that when manipulated will change the relevant input into the perception–choice process and, hence, influence a person's (automated or deliberate) choice of action. The perception–choice process may be regarded as a two-stage process in which the perception of action alternative sets the boundaries for the choice process by providing the alternatives among which a person makes a choice.



**Figure 1.1** The causes of the perception–choice process in crime causation

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*Perception* (ie the information we get from our senses) is what links a person to his or her environment (on perception generally, see Maund 2003). Perception is selective (filtered) and depends not only on the features of the setting in which a person takes part, but also on his or her relevant previous experiences and personal characteristics (such as preferences). People in the same setting differ in what they attend to and how they process and evaluate this information. In the explanation of action, an important aspect of perception is the perception of action alternatives that emerge as an outcome of the person–environment interaction. People vary significantly in what kind of action alternatives they perceive in response to a particular motivator in a particular setting, and, crucially, whether such action alternatives include acts that break rules of conduct, such as an act of crime (see further Wikström 2006). Understanding *why* people vary in the action alternatives they perceive in a particular setting is central to the explanation of why they follow or break rules of conduct.

People make choices among the action alternatives they perceive. A *choice* is the formation of an intention to act in a particular way (eg forming an intention to take a CD from a shop without paying). Intention and action are not the same because even if a person has formed an intention to act in a particular way the action may (particularly in prolonged action sequences) be interrupted or prevented before it is carried out, eg a security guard may suddenly turn up, or the person may detect a CCTV camera he or she had not previously noticed, making him or her change his or her mind about carrying out the theft. Moreover, actions may succeed or fail, and they may have intended and unintended consequences (see Wikström 2006).

Most action theories tend to focus on factors that influence people's *choice* between action alternatives (eg why they chose an act of crime to satisfy a particular desire, instead of a legal action), while paying little or no attention to why people differ in what *action alternatives* they perceive in the first place (eg why some people see an act of crime as an action alternative to satisfy a particular desire while others do not). SAT insists that the perception of action alternatives is of more fundamental importance to people's actions than the process of choice between perceived action alternatives. It is *only* when people perceive an act of crime as an action alternative that the process of choice becomes relevant for the explanation of whether or not they commit an act of crime.

This is a crucial insight because the main reason why most people, most of the time, do not engage in most acts of crime is that they generally *do not perceive* crime as an action alternative. For example, most people who walk by an unsupervised and unlocked car with the keys in the ignition do not see this as an opportunity to steal the car. Thus the main reason why most people abide by the law most of the time is not that they regularly *choose not to* commit an act of crime because, for example, they fear the consequences. Rather, they just do not perceive crime as an action alternative. However, this does not imply that the process of choice is unimportant in the explanation of crime. On the contrary, when people do see crime as an action alternative the process of choice is crucial to the outcome (ie whether or not an act of crime will result).

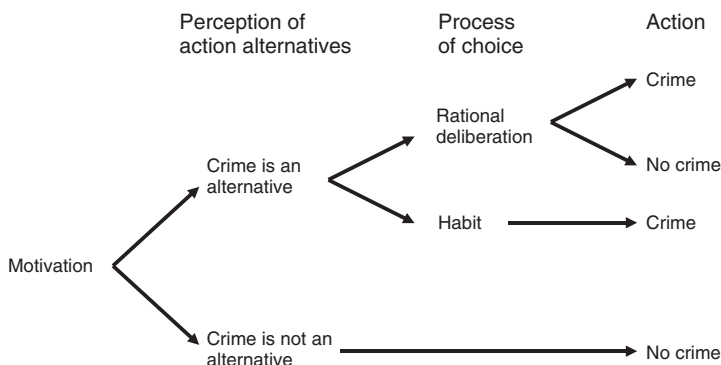
### 1.3.6 Rational deliberation and habit

If people do not see an act of crime as an alternative for acting upon a motivation there will be no act of crime. On the other hand, if they do see an act of crime as an action alternative the outcome may, or may not, be an act of crime depending on the process of choice. SAT proposes that there are basically two kinds of processes of choice; habitual or rational deliberate processes (Treiber 2011; Wikström 2006).<sup>3</sup> In the first case (habit), the actor perceives only *one* causally effective action alternative (the act of crime) and automatically forms an intention to carry out that action. To see only one causally effective alternative means the person makes no active consideration of any other action alternative (although he or she is likely to be loosely aware, in the back of his or her mind, that there are other possibilities). In the second case (rational deliberation), the actor sees *several* potent action alternatives, including at least one that involves an act of crime, and whether or not he or she will form an intention to engage in an act of crime depends on the outcome of his or her deliberation (see Figure 1.2). Let us briefly develop these arguments.

People are not merely puppets at the sole mercy of psychological and social forces. It is therefore essential to aim to model how (the process by which) social and psychological forces impact people's actions. However, the role of human agency is poorly treated in

<sup>3</sup> There is plenty of evidence for the existence of a dual process of human reasoning of this kind (see, eg, Evans and Frankish 2009).

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**Figure 1.2** Key steps of the perception–choice process

criminological theory and research, if at all. That people are moved to action by making a choice implies that they have *agency*, that is the (context-dependent) power to make things happen intentionally. SAT recognizes that human action exhibits elements of free will and predictability and incorporates voluntaristic and deterministic processes into its explanation of acts of crime.

People express agency through habit or rational deliberation. Depending on the circumstances, their actions are thus more or less strongly determined. When people act out of *habit* they essentially react (in a stimulus-response fashion) to environmental cues (they only perceive one causally effective action alternative). They ‘allow’ the setting to determine their actions by triggering associative mechanisms developed through repeated previous exposure to similar circumstances. When people *deliberate* they actively weigh pros and cons of different alternatives for action (the process of deliberation may at its most elaborate even involve discussing the problem with, and taking advice from, other people).

When people deliberate they may be thought of as exercising ‘*free will*’, meaning there is no predetermined alternative for action they automatically apply; instead they actively choose among perceived action alternatives. However, this does not mean that people choose without constraint when deliberating because, crucially, the choice among alternatives (to act upon a motivation) is a choice among the alternatives they perceive (and people vary in what alternatives they perceive in relation to a particular motivation in a particular setting). In other words, *they exercise ‘free will’ within the constraint of perceived action alternatives*. When people act

based on deliberation they are likely to be aware of why they act as they do (although they may not be fully aware of why they perceive the particular action alternatives amongst which they choose). When people act habitually, they do not exercise ‘free will’ since no active choice among action alternatives is involved in the action process (see further Wikström 2006). Moreover, when people act out of habit they may be unaware of why they act as they do (although they may be able post factum to ‘rationalize’, more or less correctly, why they acted as they did).

SAT accepts that rationality (at times) plays a role in guiding human action. According to SAT, when (and only when) people deliberate they aim to act *rationally*. To act rationally means to choose the action alternative that is ‘the best means of satisfying the agent’s desires [*or commitments, or responding to a provocation*], given his beliefs about the available options and their consequences’ (Elster 2007: 193, text in italics and brackets added by the authors).<sup>4</sup> Rational choice theories, thus, specify ‘that in acting rationally, an actor is engaging in some kind of optimization’ (Coleman and Fararo 1992: xi). Rationality does *not* (necessarily) assume that people (always) act out of *self-interest*.<sup>5</sup> As Elster (2007: 193) comments, ‘the confusion of rationality and egoism is a crude error, although one that is facilitated by the practise of some rational-choice theorists’. When people act out of habit, rationality does not come into play because there is no weighing of pros and cons among several action alternatives (to choose *the best* alternative requires that a genuine choice among alternatives is made). Habitual action may even be *irrational*, that is people may act in ways they would not consider in their best interest had they deliberated.

Habitual action is oriented towards the *past* as it involves drawing upon previous experiences to guide current actions, while rational deliberate action is oriented towards the *future* as it involves trying to assess the best potential outcome of different perceived action alternatives. When people operate in *familiar* circumstances with *congruent* rule-guidance the perception–choice process tends to be habitual (they tend to see only one causally effective action alternative).

<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to imagine it would be otherwise *when people deliberate*, ie, that people’s choices would be random or they would *aim* not to choose the best alternative (as they see it).

<sup>5</sup> Or, for that matter, that a choice of action is (always) guided by the aim to acquire pleasure and/or avoid pain.

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In other words, people tend to do what they normally do in such circumstances without giving it much thought. When people act in *unfamiliar* circumstances, and/or they experience *conflicting* rule-guidance, the perception–choice process tends to be rational deliberate (that is, people aim to choose the best among several perceived action alternatives). The level of deliberation preceding a (rational) choice may vary dramatically depending on the importance and circumstances of the choice. Only rarely will such deliberation involve a full-blown process of rational choice that ‘requires that benefits and costs of all courses of action be specified, then postulating that the actor takes the “optimal” action, the action that maximizes the differences between benefits and costs’ (Coleman and Fararo 1992: xi). Although most actions are likely to be predominantly habitual or deliberate in nature, many actions, particularly in prolonged action sequences, may include elements of both habit and rational deliberation (eg people may drift back and forth between habitual and deliberate action guidance).

The extent to which acts of crime (and particular types of acts of crime) are an outcome of habit or rational deliberation is largely unknown (ie not researched), although there are good reasons to believe that many acts of crimes are expressions of habit rather than the result of rational deliberation, as are human actions in general (see, eg, Forgas and Laham 2005; Wood and Quinn 2005). A major reason for persistent offending, for example, may be that people have developed habits that encourage the breaking of particular rules of conduct (stated in law) in particular circumstances:

The notion of habitual choice may in fact be particularly relevant to the explanation of chronic offending, as habituation suggests stability in the interactions between individuals and the settings they encounter, leading to enduring patterns of behavior, which could arguably include persistent offending.

(Wikström and Treiber 2009b: 411)

### 1.3.7 *Situational factors: Motivation, the moral filter, and controls*

The key *situational factors* influencing the perception–choice process in the situational model of SAT are (1) motivation, (2) the moral filter, and (3) controls (Wikström 2010a). Their roles in the process of action are briefly described in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1 Key situational factors in the perception–choice process**

- 
1. **Motivation** initiates action processes
  2. The **moral filter** provides *action alternatives* (in response to a particular motivation)
  3. **Controls** influence the *process of choice* when there is conflicting rule-guidance (regarding perceived action alternatives)
- 

### Motivation

*Motivation* is defined as goal-directed attention. Motivation is a necessary but not sufficient factor in the explanation of why people break particular rules of conduct. To act people must first be motivated to do so, yet there are no particular motivations that always make people break a particular rule of conduct. For example, people may kill others for greed or revenge, or they may shoplift for excitement or to get money to buy drugs. If certain mobile telephones become popular (many people prefer them) that may explain why many such telephones are stolen, but not why some people who prefer them choose to steal them while others do not.

Motivation is a situational concept; it is an outcome of the person–environment interaction (on motivation and action generally, see Heckhausen and Heckhausen 2008). The two main kinds of relevant motivators, according to SAT (Wikström 2006, 2010a), are

- (1) *temptations*, which are either
  - (a) the outcome of the interaction between a person's desires (wants, needs) and opportunities to satisfy a desire (want, need), or
  - (b) the outcome of the interaction between a person's commitments and opportunities to fulfil a commitment;
- (2) *provocations*, which occur when a friction (an unwanted external interference) makes a person annoyed or angry with its perceived source (the extent to which depends on his or her sensitivity to particular unwanted interferences).

Motivators may include negative or positive *emotions*; temptations will often be associated with positive emotions (eg excitement), while provocations will usually be associated with negative emotions (eg anger). Motivators vary in strength. A strong motivator is one that has strong (positive or negative) emotions attached to it.

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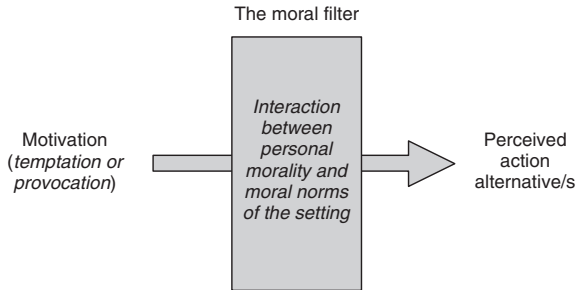
It is a mistake to assert, as general strain theory seems to (eg Agnew 2005: 2), that acts of crime only emerge from negative emotions, caused by strains and stressors (see Wikström 2010a). It is not difficult to think of examples of acts of crime linked to positive emotions such as excitement and fun (a point well made, for example, by Katz 1988).

### The moral filter

What action alternatives a person perceives in response to a particular motivator (temptation or provocation) depends on the interaction between a person's relevant moral rules (and their associated moral emotions) and the (perceived) relevant moral norms (and their enforcement) of the setting in which he or she takes part. The personal moral rules and the moral norms of a setting that are relevant in the explanation of acts of *crime* (particular acts of crime) are those that are *law relevant* (ie that concern actions that adhere to or break rules of conduct stated in law). Whether or not personal moral rules or the moral norms of the setting are the most potent influence may vary by circumstance, but there is always a minimal influence from both. People care more about certain moral rules (feel more shame and guilt if violating them), and certain moral norms are more salient (more relevant, commonly shared, and effectively upheld and enforced) in some settings than in others.

A person's moral engagement with the moral context of a particular setting creates a *moral filter*, defined as the moral rule-induced selective perception of action alternatives, circumscribing what actions are perceived as appropriate in response to a particular motivator (Figure 1.3). The moral filter is applied to motivation either habitually (through the exercise of a moral habit) or as part of rational deliberation (providing action alternatives for a moral judgement). Whether the moral filter is applied automatically or deliberately depends on, as previously discussed, whether the actor operates in familiar circumstances with congruent rule-guidance, in new or unfamiliar circumstances, and/or in circumstances where the rule-guidance is unclear or conflicting.

The moral filter may encourage or discourage breaking a moral rule (such as a law). If a person's moral rules and the moral norms of the setting encourage adhering to a particular rule of conduct when acting upon a motivation, it is unlikely the person will see breaking that rule of conduct as an alternative. On the other hand, if a person's moral rules and the moral norms of the setting encourage



**Figure 1.3** The role of the moral filter

breaking a particular rule of conduct when acting upon a motivation, it is likely the person will perceive breaking that rule of conduct as an alternative. Thus, if there is a correspondence between a person's moral rules and the (perceived) moral norms of a setting, the action alternatives a person perceives are likely to be in accordance with those rules. This is what is referred to as SAT's *principle of moral correspondence*. However, a person's moral rules do not always correspond with the moral norms of a setting, in which case controls becomes important for what actions may follow upon a particular motivation.

### Controls

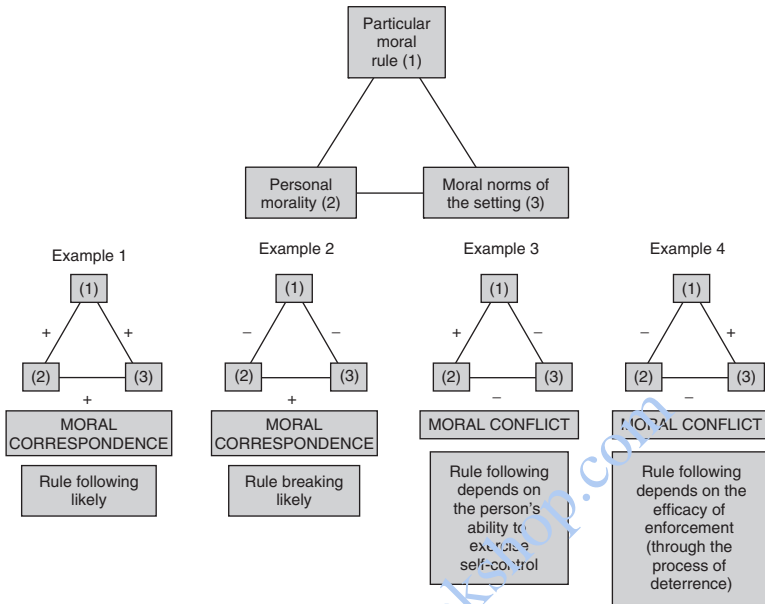
SAT proposes that controls *only* come into play in the explanation of acts of crime when people (1) deliberate and (2) there is conflicting rule-guidance between personal moral rules and the moral norms of the settings regarding whether or not to engage in an act of crime. When people (as a result of the application of the moral filter) do not see an act of crime as an action alternative, or they see only one causally effective alternative, which is an act of crime (and therefore act out of habit), controls are irrelevant. Controls 'oppose something in support of something else' (Mele 2001: 121) and thus (in the explanation of crime) require a circumstance in which a person deliberates over action alternatives that include an act of crime. Again, if an act of crime is not perceived as an action alternative, or an act of crime is committed out of habit, no control is involved. This is referred to in SAT as *the principle of the conditional relevance of controls* (Wikström 2010a).

*Control* is conceptualized in SAT as the process by which a person manages conflicting rule-guidance in his or her choice of action

in relation to a particular motivation. What controls thus aim to control is the adherence to moral rules when a person deliberates about alternatives for acting upon a motivation (Wikström 2010a). Controls may be internal in origin (through the process of self-control) or external in origin (through the process of deterrence). *Self-control* is defined as an (inner-to-outer) process by which a person succeeds in adhering to a personal moral rule when it conflicts with the moral norms of the setting (a typical example would be withstanding peer pressure to smoke cannabis when doing so conflicts with one's own rules of conduct). *Deterrence* is defined as an (outer-to-inner) process by which the (perceived) enforcement of a setting's moral norms (by creating concern or fear of consequences) succeeds in making a person adhere to the moral norms of the setting even though they conflict with his or her personal moral rules (a typical example would be a person who finds shoplifting morally unproblematic and considers doing so but, because of environmental cues that make him or her consider the risk and consequences of getting caught, refrains).

The principles of moral correspondence and the conditional role of controls are illustrated as four ideal cases in Figure 1.4. Box 1 represents a particular moral rule of conduct (eg a law that prohibits smoking cannabis). Box 2 represents the person's moral rules relevant to that particular moral rule (eg personal moral rules relevant to whether it is right or wrong to smoke cannabis) and Box 3 represents the moral norms of the setting applicable to that particular moral rule (eg the moral norms that encourage or discourage smoking cannabis). The signs indicate whether or not there is correspondence (+) or conflict (–) in moral rule-guidance. As shown in Figure 1.4, a person's *ability to exercise self-control* only comes into play when the moral norms of the setting encourage him or her to break a rule of conduct but his or her personal moral rules discourage doing so in response to a motivation (example 3), while the *efficacy of deterrence* only comes into play when a person's moral rules encourage rule-breaking but the moral norms of the setting discourage doing so (example 4). In examples 1 and 2, controls are not relevant because there is a moral correspondence between the person's moral rules and the moral norms of the setting that either discourages (example 1) or encourages (example 2) breaking a particular rule of conduct.

Control theories in criminology tend to conflate moral rules and controls in the explanation of acts of crime (see Wikström 2010a).



**Figure 1.4 Principles of moral correspondence and the conditional relevance of controls**

SAT maintains the importance of distinguishing the two analytically, as they play different roles in crime causation. Moral rules influence the perception of action alternatives, while controls (may) play a role in the process of choice. Moreover, some control theories tend to focus on control as a personal characteristic (eg self-control as a trait) and generally ignore its situational nature (see Wikström and Treiber 2007).

SAT stresses the importance of distinguishing analytically between:

- (1) controls as (situational) processes of self-control and deterrence in the management of conflicting rule-guidance;
- (2) people's ability to exercise self-control and the capacity of settings to create effective deterrence (Wikström 2010a).

People vary in their ability to exercise self-control and settings vary in their capacity to create effective deterrence. A person's ability to exercise self-control depends on his or her executive functions (general cognitive abilities) but also on temporary personal

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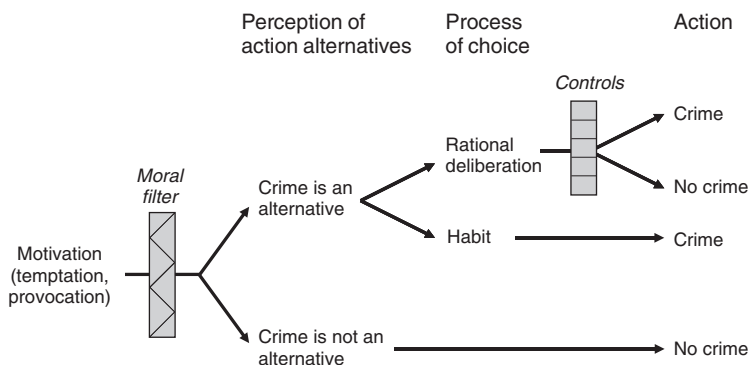
factors like intoxication or extreme stress or emotions (see Wikström and Treiber 2007). A setting's capacity to create effective deterrence (ie concern or fear of consequences) depends on the level of enforcement of relevant moral norms (ie the effectiveness of monitoring and intervention and the likelihood and severity of sanctions).

### 1.3.8 Summing up the key constructs of the situational model, their relationships and roles in the action process

The key constructs of the situational model of SAT (and their relationships) are summarized in Table 1.2. The second column specifies the key personal characteristics (the factors causally relevant to a person's particular crime propensity), and the third the key setting features (the factors causally relevant to a setting's particular criminogeneity). People vary in their desires, commitments, and sensitivities (to particular frictions) as well as their morality (moral rules and their attached moral emotions) and ability to exercise self-control. Settings vary in the opportunities they provide and the frictions they create as well as in the moral norms and levels of enforcement that apply to particular opportunities and frictions. The first column specifies the situational factors that emerge out of the interaction between the relevant personal characteristics and setting features (eg the moral filter is an outcome of the interaction between personal morality and [perceived] moral norms of the setting). Finally, the

**Table 1.2 Key constructs of the situational model and their relationships**

Situation	=	Person	x	Setting	Affects
Motivator:					
1. Temptation		a. Desires (needs) b. Commitments		Opportunity Opportunity	Goal-directed attention
2. Provocation		Sensitivity		Friction	
Moral filter		Morality		Moral norms	Perception of action alternatives
Control		Ability to exercise self-control		Capacity to enforce moral norms	Process of choice
		Propensity	x	Exposure	= Action



**Figure 1.5** The role of the moral filter and controls in the action process

**Source:** Wikström, P-O H. (2011a), 'Does everything matter? Addressing the problem of causation and explanation in the study of crime'. In J. M. McGloin, C. J. Sullivan, and L. W. Kennedy (eds), *When crime appears: The role of emergence* (London: Routledge).

fourth column specifies what aspect of the action process is affected by particular situational factors (eg the moral filter affects the perception of action alternatives). The role of the moral filter and controls in the action process is illustrated in Figure 1.5.

#### 1.4 Situational Action Theory: The causes of the causes

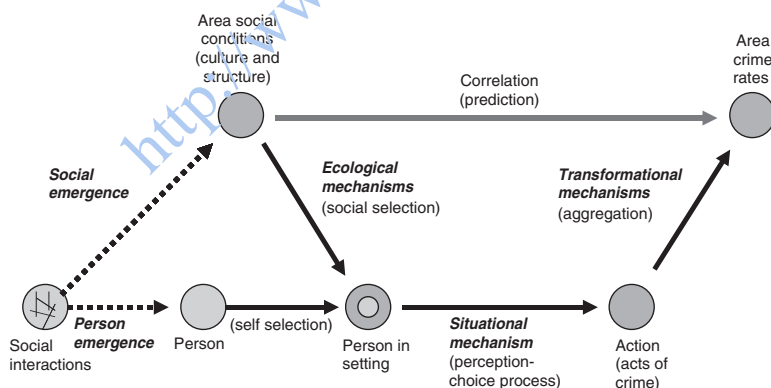
SAT proposes that the *situation* is the appropriate level to analyse and explain acts of crime because the causes of acts of crime are situational (ie acts of crime are an outcome of a perception–choice process initiated and guided by the interaction of crime propensity and criminogenic exposure in relation to a particular motivation). However, this does not render the role of *social systemic* factors and processes, and factors and processes in a person's *life history*, unimportant in the explanation of crime. SAT insists though that these factors should be analysed as *causes of the causes* rather than causes of acts of crime, and that to effectively analyse the causes of the causes we first need to know what the causes are (for more on the problem of causation and explanation in the study of crime, see Wikström 2011a). The argument is simple: if we do not understand the causes it is difficult (if not impossible) to understand the causes of the causes. The processes through which the causes and the

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causes of the causes are linked in the explanation of crime, according to SAT, is summarized in the following points, and illustrated in Figure 1.6.

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

The focus of this chapter so far has been the causal factors (propensity and exposure) that initiate and guide the causal (perception–choice) process that moves people to engage in acts of crime. The remainder of the chapter will focus on the problem of identifying and understanding the causes of the causes and, particularly, how this can be applied to a study of crime in the urban environment. The main argument advanced is that the problem of the causes of the causes (of action) is best analysed in terms of processes of (social and personal) *emergence*, and processes of (social and self) *selection*.



**Figure 1.6** Key causal mechanisms in the study of crime causation, as suggested by SAT

**Source:** Wikström, P-O H. (2011a), 'Does everything matter? Addressing the problem of causation and explanation in the study of crime'. In J. M. McGloin, C. J. Sullivan, and L. W. Kennedy (eds), *When crime appears: The role of emergence* (London: Routledge).

### 1.4.1 Social and personal emergence

The concept of *emergence* essentially refers to how something becomes as it is (on the topic of emergence generally, see Bunge 2003; Kaidesoja 2009; Sawyer 2005), for example, how a person acquires a particular crime propensity against the backdrop of his or her psychosocial development, or how an environment (setting) acquires a particular criminogeneity against the backdrop of socio-ecological factors. It refers to the occurrence of higher-order qualities that are not reducible to the lower-order processes that constitute the entity in question. However, even if these higher-order qualities are not reducible to lower-order processes, they may be explained by such processes. As Bunge (2003: 21) maintains, 'it is a mistake to define an emergent property as a feature of a whole that cannot be explained in terms of the properties of its parts'. In fact, 'some of the most interesting and toughest problems, in any science, are to discover mechanisms of emergence and submergence' (ibid.: 22).<sup>6</sup>

Cultural and structural characteristics of an area (eg a nation or a city), such as general and localized systems of formal and informal rules of conduct (including their application and enforcement), and patterns of social and spatial differentiation of kinds of people and kinds of activities, may be regarded as emergent properties of historical processes of social interactions, while people's characteristics (such as their propensities) may be regarded as emergent properties of (life) historical processes of personal social interactions in social context (with a biological foundation).

*Personal emergence* is a 'kinds of people' question, and a natural criminological focus is how people acquire different crime propensities. SAT proposes, as previously discussed, that people's morality and ability to exercise self-control are the key relevant personal aspects affecting their crime propensity and, therefore, the *processes* by which people acquire their morality and ability to exercise self-control are of prime criminological interest (see eg Wikström 2005). These include:

- (1) moral education (how people come to acquire particular moral rules and related moral emotions through processes of

<sup>6</sup> The concept of submergence refers to how something loses its emergent properties (eg, how a crime prone person becomes crime averse, or how a criminogenic environment loses its criminogeneity).

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- instruction, trial and error, sanctions, and observations of reactions to and sanctioning of others' actions); and
- (2) cognitive skills development (how people come to acquire particular cognitive skills, for example, through processes of cognitive nurturing and training) relevant to their ability to exercise self-control.

Central to the analysis of the processes of social interaction that influence criminologically relevant aspects of moral education and cognitive skills development are the role of key social institutions (as prime agents of socialization and nurturing), such as the family and school, but also peer networks (see Wikström and Sampson 2003: 131–5). The impact of these institutions is likely to vary depending on the stage of a person's biological maturation and social and cognitive development. The concept of 'time windows' is useful in this context, as stated by Bloom (1964: vii): 'variations in the environment have the greatest quantitative effect on a characteristic at its most rapid period of change and least effect on the characteristic during the least rapid period of change'.

One can, of course, go even further back in the causal chain and (as an analysis of the 'causes of the causes of the causes') examine the dependence of the nature and efficacy of criminologically relevant aspects of socialization and nurturing provided by the family, school, and peer networks on the broader social institutions of politics, religion, and economics in which they are embedded (see Messner 2012). Arguably, such knowledge would rely largely on insights from non-criminological research. In this book we do not aim to investigate the problem of how people acquire differential crime propensities but take the fact that people have different crime propensities as a starting point for our analysis of environmental influences on people's acts of crime.

*Social emergence* is a 'kinds of settings' question, and a natural criminological focus is how environments (in a particular jurisdiction) become different in features relevant to their criminogeneity. SAT proposes, as previously discussed, that an environment's (setting's) criminogenic features depend on the extent to which its moral norms and their enforcement encourage breaking rules of conduct (stated in law) in relation to the opportunities it provides and the frictions it generates. Of prime criminological interest, therefore, are the *processes* by which environments (settings) come to have (1) particular moral norms and (2) specific levels of moral norm

enforcement (through monitoring and intervention),<sup>7</sup> in relation to (3) the particular opportunities and frictions they present.

The theory and research tradition within criminology that most clearly focuses on exploring and explaining the social emergence of moral contexts of settings conducive to acts of crime (and, in the longer term, the development of people's crime propensity) is the social disorganization tradition. Originating from the classic Chicago School (eg Park et al. [1925] 1967), and its study of crime and other social problems in the urban area (eg Shaw and McKay [1942] 1969), this tradition has evolved over many years into its present form (eg Bursik 1988; Kornhauser 1978; Sampson 2006a).

The social disorganization tradition's primary focus is on how processes of urban residential segregation (mainly on economic grounds<sup>8</sup>) create neighbourhood differentiation in terms of population disadvantage, heterogeneity, and turnover, and, in turn, consequences for the efficiency of local social institutions (eg families and schools) and the strength of residents' social cohesion (social and moral integration). These latter factors are seen to impact the efficacy of neighbourhood collective socialization of children and young people, and the efficacy of momentary informal social control (monitoring and interventions) regulating residents' and visitors' behaviour (see, eg, Kornhauser 1978: 70–82). In this book we make no attempt to analyse and study the emergence of residential segregation (and its dependency on the wider political and economic context) but focus on how the resulting residential differentiation and its key social consequences help create spatial differences in the occurrence of criminogenic settings (eg areas with poor collective efficacy).

A basic idea of the social disorganization perspective is that differences between social environments (eg neighbourhoods, communities) in the rate of resident offenders (particularly young

<sup>7</sup> Note that moral norms of a setting can either encourage or discourage breaking rules of conduct (stated in law) and, hence, that effective enforcement of moral norms, depending on whether or not the moral norms support law-abiding action, can either encourage or discourage acts of crime. Lack of effective enforcement of moral norms is only criminogenic when the moral norms support law abidance.

<sup>8</sup> But more recently the impact of urban planning and local housing markets and policies (eg, the provision and location of social housing) have also been stressed as important influences on the pattern of residential social differentiation (see, eg, Baldwin and Bottoms 1976; Sampson 1990; Wikström 1991).

offenders) and the rate of crime events can be explained 'in terms of variations in the abilities of local communities to regulate and control the behavior of their residents' and visitors (Bursik and Grasmick 1993). More specifically, the theory asserts that socially disorganized environments do not have the capacity to regulate and control behaviour effectively. Kornhauser (1978: 63) defined social disorganization as a lack of 'a structure through which common values can be realised and common problems solved' (where law abidance may be regarded as a typical common value and people committing acts of crime as a chief example of a common problem).

Sampson and colleagues have further developed the modern social disorganization perspective by suggesting the concept of *collective efficacy*<sup>9</sup> (eg Sampson et al. 1997; Sampson et al. 1999; Sampson 2006b) to describe residents' willingness to intervene for the common good (ie their potential to exercise informal social control if needed) as the result of shared expectations and mutual trust in the community. A key argument is that residents are less likely to enforce rules of conduct in neighbourhoods with poor collective efficacy, that is 'in a neighborhood context where the rules are unclear and people mistrust or fear each other' (Sampson 2011: 232). The concept of collective efficacy thus subsumes the concepts of social cohesion (a community's ability to generate moral and social integration among its residents; Sampson 1993) and informal social control (monitoring and intervention). The structural sources of collective efficacy are largely seen to be the same as those discussed by Shaw and McKay ([1942] 1969) and Kornhauser (1978) as the structural sources of social disorganization (ie population disadvantage, heterogeneity, and turnover), although Sampson (1987, 1993) has highlighted the importance of family disruption (ie single parent households) as an additional important structural factor.

While the social disorganization tradition (in which we include collective efficacy theory) has contributed substantially to our understanding of the role of the social environment in crime causation, it has some general limitations as a theory of crime causation.

<sup>9</sup> It has (to our knowledge) never been made fully clear how the concepts of social disorganization and collective efficacy relate to each other, although the latter (collective efficacy) is clearly more focused on the local processes influencing whether or not people abide by rules of conduct, while the former (social disorganization) is more clearly focused on the structural conditions of importance for the emergence of these processes.

According to SAT, it is analytically important to clearly differentiate between the environment's long-term (cumulative) effect, as a *context of development*, on the formation and shape of people's crime propensities (eg through moral education), and its short-term (momentary) effect, as a *context of action*, on people's perceptions and choices relevant to their engagement in acts of crime (eg through the enforcement of law-relevant moral rules). However, social disorganization/collective efficacy theory does not always effectively differentiate between these two key analytical problems in its theorizing (but cf. Wikström and Sampson 2003). In this book, we focus on urban environments (urban settings) as *contexts of action* (and leave the problem of analysing their role as contexts of development, relevant to the development of people's crime propensities, to be addressed in future publications).

Social disorganization/collective efficacy theory does not explain why *acts of crime* occur. The influence of neighbourhood structural characteristics and social processes on crime are mainly analysed at the area level (explaining area *rates* of acts of crime) and therefore do not tell us that much about how (through what processes) structural characteristics are linked to individual acts of crime. Wikström and Sampson (2003: 127) suggest 'what has been missing is a concept that directly links the community context to individual development and actions... behavior-setting is a concept that may provide such a linkage'.<sup>10</sup>

SAT stresses the importance of understanding the role of the person–environment interaction in crime causation. Traditionally, the social disorganization perspective tends to ignore the role of *individual differences*, that is, the differential effect of particular kinds of environments on particular kinds of people's actions (although more recently the importance of this aspect has been increasingly emphasized by some scholars working in the social disorganization tradition; see, for example, Harding et al. 2011). Moreover, and crucially, social disorganization theory does not provide any situational model that explains *how* the *interaction* between people and environments moves people to engage in acts of crime. Interestingly, Kornhauser concludes her seminal

<sup>10</sup> To avoid confusion with Barker's (1968) concept of *behaviour setting* (which has a somewhat different meaning), SAT refers to *settings* (rather than behaviour settings). However, it should be acknowledged that SAT's concept of setting is partly inspired by Barker's concept of behaviour setting.

assessment of social disorganization (and cultural deviance) theory by arguing for the need 'to search for the root causes of delinquency in social structure and situation' (1978: 253). However, the role of the emergence of situations conducive to acts of crime, and its dependency on social structure, has not figured much in subsequent work in this tradition, although it is a challenge that is taken up by SAT.

The concept of *neighbourhood*, the key analytic unit of social disorganization theory, is rarely well defined. Originally, neighbourhoods were seen as 'natural areas' emerging as a result of the process of residential segregation (Park [1925] 1967; Zorbaugh 1961). Bursik and Grasmick (1993: 6) characterize a neighbourhood as 'a small area embedded within a larger area in which people inhabit dwellings' where 'there is a collective life that emerges from the social networks that have arisen among the residents and the sets of institutional arrangements that overlap these networks' and 'some tradition of identity and continuity over time'. Sampson (2011: 228) defines a neighbourhood as 'a variably interacting population of people and institutions in a common place', and goes on to say that he thus chooses to 'define neighborhoods geographically and leave the nature and extent of social relations problematic' (ibid.: 229). The problem of the unit of analysis when studying the impact of environments on individual action will be further discussed in section 3.3.1 (see also section 2.8.2).

Social disorganization/collective efficacy theory tends to primarily focus on residents' characteristics and relationships (eg cohesion), when explaining the influence of neighbourhood social features on rates of crimes (and residents' crime propensity). However, the moral norms of an area (setting) and their enforcement depend not only on residents' characteristics and relationships, but also on those of visitors to the area, as well as the kinds of activities that take place in the area, and the circumstances under which people take part in those activities. The social cohesion amongst people present in an area, and the nature of an area's social life, may vary substantially depending on its particular combination of residents, visitors, and activities, which has implications for the homogeneity of its (law-relevant) rules of conduct and their level of enforcement (or lack of enforcement). Compare, for example, the social life of a purely residential area with that of the city centre with a large transient non-residential population. Taking into account

the role of activities (and area visitors) also puts emphasis on the short-term *temporal* dimension of settings' moral contexts; eg the moral context of a specific area may be conducive to rule-breaking at particular times of the day but not at others as the kinds of people present and kinds of activities taking place may vary.

While social disorganization/collective efficacy theory helps us understand why some environments are more criminogenic than others (in particular, as it relates to residents' varying capacity to uphold law-relevant moral norms), it does not particularly help us to understand the processes by which people (and different kinds of people) become exposed to criminogenic environments within a jurisdiction (other than as a function of their home location). Arguably, acts of crime are an outcome of the person–environment interaction and, therefore, considering only the criminogenic features of environments tells only part of the story. People are differently influenced by criminogenic features of settings depending on their crime propensity. This is a problem that is helpfully addressed as a problem of selection.

#### 1.4.2 Social and self selection

Selection is a 'kinds of people in kinds of settings' question. The concept of *selection* relates to the ecological processes responsible for introducing particular kinds of people to particular kinds of settings (and thus creating the situations to which people respond through their actions). Particular patterns of selection are an outcome of the interaction of processes of social selection and self selection.

*Social selection* refers to the social forces (dependent on systems of formal and informal rules and differential distribution of personal and institutional resources in a particular jurisdiction) that enable (encourage or compel) or restrict (discourage or bar) particular kinds of people from taking part in particular kinds of time and place-based activities. *Self selection* refers to the preference-based choices people make to attend particular time and place-based activities within the constraints of the forces of social selection (eg people do not always have the resources, or are allowed, to take part in some activities they prefer). What particular preferences people have developed may be seen as an outcome of their life history experiences. The extent to which particular preferences can be

materialized depends on the person's context specific agency.<sup>11</sup> Depending on the circumstances, social or self selection can be more influential in explaining why a particular person takes part in a particular setting.

Selection is often discussed as a potential problem of bias in statistical analysis of environmental effects on people's actions. The main idea seems to be that because people select environments it is not the effect of the environment (kinds of environments) that is of importance for their actions but the fact that they (kinds of people) have self selected to be in the particular environment. A not uncommon idea seems to be that the same personal characteristics (eg poor ability to exercise self-control) that lead people to self select into certain environments also explain why they get into trouble in those environments.

Within the framework of SAT, selection is not treated as a (potential) bias but as an important explanatory factor (ie as a key cause of the causes, explaining why particular kinds of people are exposed to particular kinds of settings). SAT maintains that it is a mistake to confuse the processes by which people come to take part in particular settings (selection processes) with the effects of these settings (environmental effects) on their actions (and development) (Wikström 2006: 88; see also Sampson 2011: 244).

The criminological approach most relevant to the problem of (social) selection is *routine activity theory* (RAT), which emerged as a key theoretical approach in the late 1970s (eg Cohen and Felson 1979). Routine activities refer to generalized patterns of social activities in a society (ie spatial and temporal patterns in family, work, and leisure activities). RAT is based on two key ideas: (1) that the structure of routine activities in a society influences what kinds of situations (person–environment interactions) emerge; and (2) that people commit acts of crime in response to situational conditions (opportunities).

<sup>11</sup> People start life with little agency but generally significantly develop (albeit at different rates) their capacity to make things happen intentionally throughout childhood and adolescence. People who have acquired strong human capital (eg, skills), financial capital (eg, money), and social capital (eg, resourceful networks) generally have a greater potential to (and greater *belief* that they can) self select the activities (in places) they prefer. However, a person's agency may vary significantly between his or her different life domains (eg, family, work, and leisure) and between particular settings within those domains.

The situational model of RAT defines what constitutes an *opportunity*, that is the convergence of a motivated offender and a suitable target in the absence of a capable guardian (Cohen and Felson 1979; Felson and Cohen 1980). It is, in principle, an interactional model that by its logic requires all three elements to be present simultaneously for a crime to occur. A 'capable guardian' is a person (perceived to be) willing and capable to intervene to stop acts of crime, in other words a person (perceived to be) ready and able to exercise (formal or informal) social control. What constitutes a 'suitable target' is never made fully clear other than that 'target suitability is likely to reflect such things as value (ie the material or symbolic desirability of a personal or property target for offenders), physical visibility, access, and the inertia of a target against illegal treatment by offenders (including the weight, size, and attached or locked features of property inhibiting its illegal removal and the physical capacity of personal victims to resist attackers with or without weapons)' (Cohen and Felson 1979: 591).

A major shortcoming of RAT is that the theory does not specify how (through what causal process) the people–environment convergence brings about an act of crime. If this question is touched upon at all, proponents of RAT generally seem to allude to some version of rational choice theory (eg Felson and Cohen 1980). This argument is not well developed and RAT and rational choice theory have (to our knowledge) never been properly integrated (see Clarke and Felson 1993: 1–14).

Another major limitation of RAT is the poor treatment of the role of individual differences in the interaction process, something that is perhaps understandable against the background of the following claim by Clarke and Felson (1993: 2): 'the routine activity approach offered a thought experiment: to see how far one could go in explaining crime trends without ever discussing any of the various theories about criminal motivation'. However, the concept of motivated offenders seems to acknowledge that people differ in their propensity to engage in acts of crime (see Felson 2002), although some scholars who work in this tradition seem to take the rather extreme position that all people are motivated offenders, that is that acts of crime are solely a function of momentary influences on action by environmental conditions with no input of (differential) individual propensity (Wilcox et al. 2003).

Closely related to routine activity theory is Brantingham and Brantingham's (1993) *crime pattern theory*, a theory that more

specifically focuses on the prediction of spatial and temporal variation in crime events. The theory's basic assumption (similar to RAT's situational model) is that 'crime is an event that occurs when an individual with some criminal readiness level encounters a suitable target in a situation sufficient to activate the readiness potential (ibid.: 266).

The concept of readiness seems to conflate the concepts of motivation (as a situational concept) and propensity (as a more stable individual characteristic); 'readiness to commit a crime is not a constant: it varies from person to person; and it varies for each individual person across time and space as the backcloth varies' (ibid.: 266). The fact that readiness 'varies from person to person' indicates an assumption of (at least) somewhat stable individual propensity differences, while the fact that readiness is also seen to vary over time and space for a specific person indicates an assumption of situationally induced motivation. SAT emphasizes the analytic importance of clearly distinguishing between the concepts of propensity and motivation in the explanation of crime.

A key contribution of crime pattern theory is the idea that it is possible to predict crime occurrences from people's (offenders') activity space. 'Crime is not randomly distributed in time and space. It is clustered, but the shape of the clustering is greatly influenced by where people live within a city, how and why they travel or move about a city, and how networks of people who know each other spend their time' (P. J. Brantingham and Brantingham 2008: 91). SAT agrees with the explanatory importance of people's activity space, but prefers the concept of activity field. The concept of activity field incorporates that of activity space but also takes into account the circumstances in which people are exposed to particular environments. Environmental influences on people's crime are not primarily a question of where people spend time and when, but, crucially, a question of the features of the settings (environments) in which people take part, and the circumstances under which they do so.

While crime pattern theory shares many key important insights with routine activity theory it also shares some of the same basic explanatory problems facing routine activity theory. Just like RAT, it does not specify in any detail the causal process by which the convergence of people and environments moves people to action (other than alluding to rational choice theory). It is more a theory about why crime events occur at particular places and times than about why and how the convergence of particular kinds of people

with particular kinds of environments causes acts of crime. Nor does it specify in any depth the role of individual differences in the person–environment interaction (other than acknowledging that people have a different ‘readiness’ to engage in acts of crime).

## 1.5 Explaining urban crime patterns

SAT aims to incorporate and develop key insights from routine activity/crime pattern theory and social disorganization/collective efficacy theory within an emergence–selection framework. These theories make seminal contributions to our understanding of crime causation, but mainly as theories of the causes of the causes of crime; they help us understand the *social mechanisms* that explain how criminogenic settings emerge and how people are introduced to criminogenic settings. However, as already discussed, neither says much about the *situational mechanisms* that move people to engage in acts of crime, or the role of individual differences in that process. SAT aims to overcome these problems by integrating the role of social mechanisms (processes of emergence and selection) and situational mechanisms (perception–choice processes) in its comprehensive explanation of urban crime (and crime more generally) and its causes. The fundamentals of SAT’s explanation of urban crime are outlined below.

Historic processes of social emergence (for example as a result of political and economic processes affecting social group efficacy in the competition over desirable space and city planning) help explain why a city has a particular urban structure (a particular pattern of residential and activity differentiation creating a particular mosaic of social environments). Historical processes of personal emergence (developmental processes in local social contexts), and processes of selective in- and out-migration, help to explain an urban area’s population’s mix of personal characteristics and experiences. Historical processes of social and personal emergence are not unrelated since changes in the social environment mean changes in the social contexts that may be relevant to what experiences people have and what characteristics they develop (eg different generations growing up in the same city, or even in the same neighbourhood, may have very different social experiences). Contemporaneous processes of social and self selection help explain why certain kinds of people are introduced at a certain rate to certain kinds of settings (Figure 1.6).

## 42 Situational Action Theory

People are crime prone depending on the extent to which their morality and ability to exercise self-control encourages breaking rules of conduct stated in law. Settings are criminogenic depending on the extent to which their moral norms and their levels of enforcement (or lack of enforcement) encourage breaking rules of conduct stated in law. Acts of crime tend to occur when crime prone people are introduced to criminogenic settings in which they experience temptations or provocations.

Processes of social and personal emergence that affect the occurrence of criminogenic settings (the occurrence of settings with moral norms and levels of enforcement/lack of enforcement encouraging crime) and people's crime propensities (moral education and cognitive nurturing encouraging crime), and processes of social and self selection (expressed in people's activity fields) that influence the convergence of crime prone people and criminogenic settings, are all factors of importance for the explanation of the rate of crime in a city and its variation across different areas.

Concentrations of crime events in time and space ('hot spots') in an urban area are essentially consequences of concentrations in time and space of interactions between crime prone people and criminogenic settings (against the backdrop of a set of particular temptations and provocations of relevance for what kinds of crimes may occur at a particular location), creating the situations to which crime prone people may (habitually or after deliberation) respond with acts that break the rules of conduct stated in law.

Changes in the level of crime in a particular urban area (or in certain parts of an urban area) are seen to be a result of (1) changes in the prevalence of crime prone people among its population (and its visitors), or (2) changes in the extent of its criminogenic settings, or (3) changes in the nature of the selection processes that affect the rate by which crime prone people are exposed to its criminogenic settings. Such changes are an outcome of changes in processes of social emergence (as they affect the prevalence of criminogenic settings), or changes in processes of personal emergence (as they affect the prevalence of crime prone people), or changes in contemporaneous processes of social and self selection (as they affect the frequency of interactions between crime prone people and criminogenic settings) which, in turn, may be related to political and economic changes in the larger society in which the urban area is embedded and on which it depends.

In this book we will not deal with the role of historical processes of social and personal emergence in crime causation, but rather focus on how processes of social and self selection (as manifested in people's activity fields) can explain the spatial and temporal distribution of young people's crime in urban areas. In a nutshell, SAT proposes that contemporaneous urban crime patterns can be explained by the fact that the social dynamics created by the differentiated urban environment, and related processes of social and self selection, help create varying intersections of kinds of people in kinds of settings in different parts of the city, at different times of the day, creating different situational dynamics (perception-choice processes), some of which are more likely to result in acts of crime (or particular kinds of acts of crime), thus explaining concentrations of crime (and particular kinds of crime) in time and space.

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