

Organized crime, situational crime prevention and routine activity theory

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Published online: 3 August 2012

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Mainstream criminology traditionally focuses on offenders instead of criminal events and criminal activities. Furthermore, crime is explained by motivations and special characteristics of offenders. The prevailing line of reasoning is roughly that there is something wrong about offenders who continue along the path of crime, either in a biological sense (for example, a lack of self-control) or in a social sense (for example, a lack of conventional ties or stakes in conformity). However, organized crime research shows, first, that some offenders are quite normal in many respects, though they are involved in serious forms of crime; and, second, that not all crimes are the same or just symptoms of latent characteristics such as low self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990).

One of the major contributions of Ronald Clarke and Marcus Felson to criminology is shifting the focus of some criminologists from a preoccupation with offenders to a detailed analysis of criminal events and criminal activities. Furthermore, studies by Clarke, Felson and others have demonstrated how situational crime analysis may help us to identify circumstances which facilitate crime as well as viable opportunity-reducing measures, regardless of the motivation of offenders (e.g. Felson and Clarke 1998). If crime needs the convergence in time and space of a motivated offender, a suitable target, and absence of a capable guardian (the ‘crime triangle’), this means that crime can be prevented by keeping motivated offenders away from suitable targets at specific points in time and space or by increasing the presence of capable guardians. In various publications, Clarke has explained—mainly based on a rational choice perspective on offending—the techniques of situational crime prevention: e.g. increasing the effort, increasing the risks, reducing the rewards, reducing provocation,

The views expressed in this article are the authors’ views only. The editors would like to thank Courtney Tosh and the team of Trends of Organized Crime for their editorial work on this special issue and Marcus Felson, Ron Clarke and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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and removing excuses (for an overview, see e.g. Felson and Clarke 1998; Bullock et al. 2010; Tilley and Farrell 2012). Similarly, Felson has analyzed meticulously how routine activities influence the convergence in time and space of motivated offenders and suitable targets, in the absence of capable guardians, and what this means for crime prevention (e.g. Cohen and Felson 1979; Felson 1994, 2006).

From predatory crime to organized crime and terrorism

Each type of crime imposes different requirements and can be analyzed from a situational perspective. Originally situational crime analysis was mainly focused on ordinary crime, particularly predatory offenses such as burglary, robbery, et cetera, with a clearly defined ‘suitable target’ and one or more predatory offenders. Later on, the situational approach was transplanted from the study of ordinary crime to consensual crimes such as organized crime (Cornish and Clarke 2002; Van de Bunt and Van der Schoot 2003; Levi and Maguire 2004; Soudijn and Kleemans 2009; Bullock et al. 2010) and terrorism (Clarke and Newman 2006). It is interesting to note that this situational perspective already had a history in the study of the logistics of organized crime (Sieber and Bögel 1993), a pioneering study by the German Bundeskriminalamt.

Several authors have applied the situational approach to organized crime, with a specific focus upon opportunities for crime prevention (for a review, see Bullock et al. 2010; Von Lampe 2011). Situational analysis is ‘crime specific’. It is not focused upon organized crime in general, yet it concentrates on, for example, cocaine smuggling or preferably even more specific activities or events, such as passengers smuggling swallowed ‘balloons’ of cocaine on transnational flights. Cornish and Clarke (2002) state that the problem analysis starts with unpacking the sets of ‘crime scripts’ involved, as these will reveal the opportunity structures that enable the activities involved. This way barriers for the commission of organized crime can be discovered and developed, similar to the ‘twenty-five techniques of situational crime prevention’, which are aimed at increasing the effort, increasing the risks, reducing the rewards, reducing provocations, or removing excuses. Examples of this approach involve drugs smuggling, contraband cigarettes, sex trafficking, organized timber theft, mortgage fraud, and infiltration in the public construction industry (Bullock et al. 2010).

The situational approach conceptualizes organized criminal activity as sets of criminal events. It has enriched the organized crime literature with concepts such as ‘opportunity structures’, ‘crime scripts’, and ‘offender convergence settings’. Offender convergence settings are locations where offenders may find co-offenders and which allow criminal cooperation to persist even when the particular persons vary (Felson 2006: 97–99; Kleemans and Van de Bunt 2008).

Criticism

Central to the situational approach is a general disbelief that criminal groups and criminal organizations are that important in explaining organized crime. Instead of

focusing upon criminal groups, the focus lies on criminal activities and opportunity structures. However, Von Lampe (2011) comments that the situational model does not seem to fit properly for organized crime activities. Perhaps it is true that much street crime can be prevented, if motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians do not converge in time and space. However, offenders in organized crime, in the first place, seem to be more resourceful in a way that makes them less dependent on any given opportunity structure in time and space. Second, a ‘target’ in terms of the ‘crime triangle’ is often lacking, as the basis of the activities lies in co-operation. Third, the mechanisms assumed to generate preventive effects within a situation, most notably the discouraging effects of the presence of others, do not seem to work under all circumstances. Hence, applying the situational crime prevention model to organized crime seems to stretch several concepts beyond the point where their explanatory power is strongest: ordinary, predatory crimes at a specific point in time and space.

Thematic special issue

This special issue comprises seven papers in which ideas on situational crime prevention and routine activity theory are applied to issues of organized crime and terrorism, followed by a reflection on these papers by Felson and Clarke. All seven papers were prepared by researchers of the Dutch National Police Agency and were presented during a meeting with Ron Clarke, before going through the regular peer-review process of Trends in Organized Crime. Although Trends in Organized Crime has had special ‘country issues’ before, it never had all papers written by members of the same organization. However, the diversity of topics (ranging from outlaw motorcycle gangs to cybercrime, prisons, money laundering, synthetic drugs, terrorism, and piracy) ensures a broad spectrum. Furthermore, there are not many police organizations in the world which employ academic researchers who are granted full access to all material regarding investigations and allowed to publish about it. By combining primary data on organized crime and a theoretical framework, ideas on situational crime prevention can be put to the test.

Huisman and Jansen, in their article ‘Willing offenders outwitting capable guardians’, focus on 1 % MC’s—commonly known as outlaw motorcycle gangs—and the subculture of (ex)trailer park residents, showing how these two specific subcultures provide contacts, places, and offender convergence settings (including effective shielding against the authorities) to organize profitable criminal activities. Three group characteristics—social bonds, reputation and the culture of silence—make offenders from trailer parks and from 1 % MC’s feared and respected actors in the underworld. These group characteristics are instrumental in the creation of a void in which there are no capable guardians, both psychosocially (e.g. situations and relations in which social factors dominate individual behavior) as well as physically (e.g. the respective club houses and trailer parks). Another advantage is that through intimidation and reputation psychosocial barriers are erected in order to prevent effective guardianship. Behind these barriers there is a safe social environment for the organization of profitable crimes.

Soudijn and Zegers focus on cybercrime and virtual offender convergence settings. Felson coined the term ‘offender convergence setting’ to describe certain physical locations, e.g. local tough bars, in which (potential) offenders meet each other. Perpetrators of cybercrime also make use of such locations, yet digitally in so-called virtual forums. The study focuses on one particular forum that was targeted by a law enforcement agency, revealing 150,000 postings by 1,846 members. These postings revealed crime scripts as described by cybercriminals themselves. It turns out that hacking accounts and stealing money is not their biggest problem: the main risk is not leaving traces when wiring the money into other accounts. The study shows that ICT makes concepts of space different: offenders from different parts of the world are able to meet, ‘rate each other’, and continue business bilaterally (shielded from the authorities). This way, the world becomes smaller, and it’s much easier for ‘rare’ offenders to find suitable co-offenders. This might also be true for different criminal activities, when specialized offenders have to search for specialized co-offenders.

Franca van der Laan presents findings on criminals orchestrating their crimes from behind bars. Based upon examination of police intelligence on 13 cases, Dutch penitentiary law, visits to two prisons, and interviews with prison and law enforcement staff, the author concludes that for criminal leaders there are ample opportunities, and few barriers, for managing their criminal organization from prison. The main reason is that communication is their most important tool for committing crimes, while human rights and penitentiary law set limits to curbing or monitoring visits and communication. The design of Dutch (and many other Western European) prison regimes is dominated by paradigms of reintegration of criminals and internal security, creating many opportunities for prisoners to communicate with the world outside.

Soudijn focuses on removing excuses in money laundering. Financial facilitators play a key role in criminal networks, as they are able to change and launder money without drawing attention to the criminals themselves. Interviews with police officers show that the technique of removing excuses could work under certain conditions. However, it turns out that financial facilitators provide various activities and that not all financial activities take place in the legal financial–economic system. An important difference is between those who are involved in cash based transactions (illegal, semi-legal activities) and those who construct smokescreens on paper. This difference is more important, also for the purpose of removing excuses, than the three classical phases of money laundering (placement, layering, integration).

Weenink, in his article on situational prevention of terrorism, shows how criminal investigation might contribute to a situational approach to terrorism. Therefore, he discusses *Policing Terrorism* by Newman and Clarke (2008), and confronts it with experiences from work in the field of counterterrorism: criminal investigations at the Dutch National Police Agency. He criticizes Newman and Clarke of having a too narrow scope on policing terrorism, in particular when it comes to the role of criminal investigation, as they restrict their focus to local police work in the phases immediately before and after a terrorist attack. According to the author, case files show that criminal investigators play a key role in the prevention of terrorism. They intervene in earlier phases of terrorist preparation, target a wider range of terrorist offences than terrorist attacks, and prosecute radicals for their non-terrorist offences. Furthermore,

criminal investigations offer insights that might be of help in developing a situational crime prevention approach to terrorism.

Rengeling focuses on the recent revival of maritime piracy, particularly near Somalia. Somali pirates captured dozens of ships and their crew and demanded large sums of ransom money. Consequently, an international fleet is now trying to protect ships, while international shipping companies have taken target hardening measures such as putting up barriers and giving crews access to weapons. By using situational crime prevention analysis, Rengeling proposes alternative measures that would make it unattractive for pirates to attack passing ships. One of these measures is creating ‘safe rooms’, fortified rooms in which the captain and his crew are able to hide when pirates are about to take over a ship. By cutting engines from these fortified rooms and sending alarm signals to any nearby patrolling ship, the very ‘attractiveness’ of the target is reduced significantly.

Vijlbrief concentrates on a specific issue related to situational crime prevention: the discussion on displacement effects (see for a review: e.g. Guerette and Bowers 2009). In his article, he assesses the role of crime displacement within organized crime, taking the Dutch synthetic drugs market as a case study. Since the late 1990s, the Dutch government has tried to create barriers to synthetic drugs producers in obtaining precursors, the basic chemical ingredients for synthetic drugs, and other essential chemicals. Over the years, this policy has resulted in a scarce supply of the main ingredients for synthetic drugs. Furthermore, other preventive measures were taken, such as raising awareness among glass blowers that certain adaptations to glass flasks probably served no other purpose than clandestine XTC production. The article highlights mixed results: in some ways XTC production might have been impaired, but there are also signs of displacement effects, as criminal groups seem to have adapted parts of the criminal process.

In the final article, **Felson and Clarke** reflect on all papers in this special issue. They conclude that illegal tasks have logistical requirements and that offenders often cooperate in order to meet some of these challenges, including a need to reach customers as well as a need to find co-offenders. At least four mechanisms serve these logistical purposes: social ties, shared activity space, internet and modern telecommunications, and legitimate occupational roles that provide access. Hence, the articles of this special issue underline the necessity to move beyond the standard ‘crime triangle’ of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. Specific case studies of organized crime and terrorism might be fruitful to further empirical and theoretical progress in this field.

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