The Social Psychology of Crime: Groups, Teams and Networks

by David Canter and Laurence Alison

Aldershot: Ashgate Press (2000) ISBN 1 84014 497 1
(334 pages, £19.50)

Reviewed by Claire Lawrence

The link between social psychological concepts and criminal behaviour is one which would appear obvious and theoretically interesting to the academic, and useful as a guide for action to the practitioner. However, the psychological and criminological literature has largely avoided an exploration of this link in favour of generalisable sociological ideas, which by nature tend to be problematic when hypotheses need to be tested, or are based in situational crime prevention paradigms, which often lack deeper explanatory value. This book attempts to explain criminal behaviour at a level that is useful to both the practitioner and the academic—offering intellectual and explanatory insight as well as pragmatic direction for action. Specifically the book attempts to incorporate the social dimension of crime: an aim that is intended to fill the gap left by current offender-profiling strategies.

This volume contains some excellent chapters, which offer insight into various criminal activities; however, there are also chapters that appear to have been written for some other purpose, and prised into the format and scope of the current volume. The book as a whole deals more with organisational than with social psychological theory. This is not necessarily a problem, but the reader should be made more aware of this slant.

The introductory chapter sets the scene for the book well, although it discusses concepts such as ‘personal learning histories’ of the offender which are barely developed in the rest of the book (the main exception being Chapter 9: The Psychology of the Stranger). Chapter 2 deals with cultural theory—which is a refreshing inclusion—and the discussion of police versus criminal methods of organisation is intriguing. However, the evidence given is largely anecdotal, and one is left wondering just how useful this analysis would be. Chapter 3 is an excellent, detailed and comprehensive discussion of Small Space Analysis and Social Network Analysis in general. It offers the novice a good understanding of the technique, and although it occasionally gets a little bogged down in the detail, it achieves a balance between a discussion of theory and of methodology. Chapter 6 picks up this methodology and offers the reader an examination of the methodology in practice—in the examination of football violence. The lack of discussion around the findings is a little disappointing, and the poor labelling of diagrams is frustrating, but the overall examination and use of the method is useful. The chapter on Fraud (Chapter 4), however, does not seem to sit as well in this volume, as it gives a much more historical documentation of fraud and governmental policy. Despite there being available literature on fraud and concepts such as trust, cultural attitudes and norms, and frames of risk perception, from which to draw, this chapter largely ignored the psychological aspect of this crime.

Chapter 5 offers an interesting, and too brief, account of hostage-taking. Concepts such as Hostage Identification Syndrome are discussed, and the reader is left wanting to know more. Similarly, Chapter 7’s account of ram-raiding is comprehensive and offers an in-depth link into organisational

and social theory. This is an interesting and informative chapter and one which gives insight into the findings of a major study. In the same way, Chapter 8 attempts to discuss the organisational patterns found in groups of armed robbers. This chapter is not so successful as the chapter on ram-raiders, mainly due to its reliance on a study using small numbers of participants—the results are therefore a little static due to the lack of statistical techniques available to be used on the data. Themes are developed, but how generalisable these themes are is difficult to gauge. Chapter 9 gives some excellent analysis on criminological theory and links these ideas with personality theories to date. It is unfortunate that the authors rely on Eysenckian models of trait theories alone, as more contemporary discussions of the Big 5 personality theories and interactionism would have offered the reader a more current examination of the topic. Nevertheless, the discussion of narratives, while a little crusading in places, is a useful addition to the examination of the challenge of desistance. The final chapter draws the book to a successful close, and highlights the contribution of organisational psychology to the volume.

This book excellently illustrates the need to test theories of crime against measurable criteria, and also offers some ideas to be tried out by practitioners. Some chapters are typically better than others, and the focus on organisational psychology should be emphasised. In its discussion of a range of criminal behaviours, the book is ambitious but mostly achieves its aims.

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