

## Book Review

# Breaking rules: The social and situational dynamics of young people's urban crime

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*Breaking Rules* is a highly ambitious book. As indicated in the subtitle to the volume, the overarching objective is to explain the social and situational dynamics of young people's involvement in crime. The research enterprise is predicated upon a key epistemological premise, namely, that a cogent scientific explanation of any phenomenon must be grounded in an understanding of causal mechanisms. Moreover, such an understanding ultimately requires the rigorous application of sound theory.

The research reported in the book is guided by a relatively new theory in criminology – Situational Action Theory (SAT). SAT represents an attempt to integrate two fundamental 'divides' in criminological theorizing and research: person-oriented and environment-oriented approaches. The core principle of SAT is that crime is ultimately the outcome of certain 'kinds of people' being exposed to certain 'kinds of situations'. *Breaking Rules* explicates SAT in detail and assesses hypotheses derived from it with data from a major data collection effort in England – the Peterborough Adolescent Young Adult Development Study (PADS+). PADS+ focuses on a cohort of approximately 700 youths living in the city of Peterborough. The methodology of PADS+ is quite innovative, combining interviews with youths and their parents, official data, time-space diaries, and small area community surveys. These methodological techniques are especially well suited to address the core substantive concern of the research – the ways in which personal characteristics and experiences interact with features of the situational environment to increase or decrease the likelihood that criminal acts will be committed.

The book is organized into four parts. Part I introduces SAT, describes the methodology of the research and the main concepts and measures, and reports initial findings about the distributions and causes of crime. The basic claim of SAT is that criminal acts are likely to be committed when persons with a relatively high criminal propensity (weak moral inhibitions and a limited capacity to exercise self-control) encounter settings that are highly criminogenic. Criminogenic settings are those '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) ...' (p. 17). The results of the empirical analyses are supportive of SAT, revealing a significant interaction between certain 'kinds of people' and exposure to 'kinds of situations'. The distinctive feature of this interaction is that 'young people with a low crime propensity are largely situationally resistant to criminogenic influences while young people with a high criminal propensity are particularly situationally vulnerable' (p. 158).

The focus of attention shifts in Part II to the distribution of crime and disorder across areas of the city of Peterborough. The analyses consider land use patterns, neighborhood structural and social characteristics, and the ‘activity fields’ of young people. The results replicate findings that have been widely reported in prior ‘neighborhood-effects’ research about features of urban environments that tend to be criminogenic (for example, commercial character, social disadvantage, poor collective efficacy). In addition, a particularly innovative feature of the analysis is the capacity to examine the spatial distribution of youths with varying criminal propensities and to relate this distribution to indicators of offending. Consistent with the researchers’ guiding theoretical framework, an area’s number of resident offenders is related to its number of residents with high criminal propensity.

Part III of the book takes advantage of the unique methodological features of PADs+ to address the role of the convergence of crime-prone persons in crime-prone settings directly. The data from the space-time budgets, combined with the small area community survey data, allow the researchers to examine exactly where and when crimes were committed by youths with varying degrees of criminal propensity. The results yield impressive support for SAT. Young people with a high criminal propensity actually tend to commit crimes when they encounter settings that are theorized to be criminogenic (for example, time spent in unsupervised, peer-oriented activities in neighborhoods with weak collective efficacy). An additional chapter in Part III probes the perception-choice process that is theorized to underlie crime by means of a randomized factorial survey that identifies intentions to act violently under varying scenarios. Consistent with the logic of SAT, crime is perceived as an alternative for youths with high criminal propensity, but it is rarely perceived as an alternative for those with low criminal propensity.

The final section of the book consists of a chapter that summarizes the main findings, draws out general implications for theory and crime policy, and identifies important issues for future research. The authors conclude that the common ‘divide’ in criminological theorizing and research between person-oriented and environment-oriented approaches is misguided. The results of their analyses imply that ‘the person–environment interaction is critical to understanding the causes of young people’s crime and the patterns of young people’s crime in an urban environment’ (p. 406). Accordingly, crime policy and prevention resources need to be jointly targeted to inhibiting the development of criminal propensity (for example, by fostering personal morality and the capacity for self-control) and altering features of settings that make crime an attractive alternative (for example, by strengthening the enforcement of moral norms). With respect to future theorizing and research, the authors acknowledge the importance of addressing systematically the role of larger socio-historical processes that ultimately create the contexts within which people act and that determine the development of criminal propensities. These factors are conceptualized as ‘causes of the causes’ of crime from the vantage point of SAT.

There is much to like about *Breaking Rules*. To say that the research is theoretically informed is an understatement. The analyses focus like a laser on the core claims derived from SAT. The methodological procedures are creative and uniquely well suited to the research purposes. In particular, the joining of the individual survey data on personal characteristics, the space-time budget and the community survey data allows the researchers to probe into the person/environment interaction in ways that simply have not been possible before. The development of the argument is methodical, logical and thorough. To be sure, the book is by no means light reading. The theorizing is often highly abstract, and some of



the analyses are technically advanced. Nevertheless, the authors write clearly, and they offer succinct, non-technical summaries of the key substantive points throughout the text.

The analyses are limited in some respects. Measurement of key concepts is not always ideal. For example, the feature of the environment that is theorized to be central to the perception-choice process underlying crime is the moral context of the ‘setting’, with the setting defined as ‘the part of the environment that, at any given moment in time, is accessible to a person through his or her senses’ (p. 15). The researchers have no information on immediate settings and must use characteristics of territorial units (output areas) to proxy settings. There is thus appreciable ‘slippage’ between the measurement of exposure to a criminogenic environment and the theoretical concept. Similarly, although ‘morality’ appears as a multidimensional concept in SAT encompassing moral rules, moral values and moral emotions, its measurement is limited to a rather simple scale that only captures selected aspects of moral rules. In addition, the authors acknowledge that a key feature of the perception-choice process underlying crime has not been addressed in their analyses – motivation.

Despite these limitations, *Breaking Rules* succeeds in pushing forward the boundaries of the discipline by applying a promising criminological theory skillfully. The research demonstrates convincingly that the person–environment interaction plays a critical role in the origins of crime and that SAT offers a powerful analytic framework for understanding the associated causal dynamics. Overall, the book serves as an exemplar of contemporary social science at its best.

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