



Updates



The
Crime and Deviance
Channel



Situational Action Theory

Situational Action Theory

At the core of **Situational Action Theory** is the idea that individual decisions about whether or not to break social rules (such as the law) are, ultimately, questions of:

Morality: That is, just as everyone in a group or society develops a sense of the rules (or norms) that govern social interaction, decisions about whether to conform to or deviate from those rules are based on what the individual considers to be right and wrong ways to behave in a given situation. In other words, the decision to commit a criminal act ultimately comes down to a question of whether or not the individual perceives it to be the “right thing” for them to do in a particular situation.

It is not, of course, quite this simple since “decision-making” of this type isn’t something that exists in a social vacuum. Just as individual moralities are shaped by life histories and experiences, the social contexts in which behaviour is played out - and choices made –



is also hugely significant here. In this respect:

Social context has two important dimensions:

1. The individual level: This refers broadly to an individual’s social background, socialisation

Situational Action Theory (SAT) is associated with the work of writers such as **Wikstrom** (2010) and involves a contemporary updating of Interactionist criminology in the sense that it places the individual – and the choices they make – at the centre of any explanation of both criminal and non-criminal forms of deviance.

and formative life experiences. It is this context that shapes individual moralities and has a huge influence on how and why people make moral decisions about criminal behaviour. A general way of thinking about this idea is in terms of the various ways our primary and secondary socialisation shapes our beliefs about the world.

2. The situational level: This refers to the particular social situations the individual experiences throughout their life and ranges from general contexts – such as “living in a society”, the home, school and work – to specific contexts such as whether “going to a club” refers to playing a round of golf or getting out of your head on drink and drugs at an all-night party. The important thing about the situational level, as this example suggests, is that each situation operates under slightly different rules and involves different individual and collective behavioural expectations (waving a golf club around in a night club is likely to get you arrested...).



Every social situation, in this respect, offers different moral opportunities and challenges to the individual.

Social Contexts

Considered in terms of these two separate but necessarily interconnected dimensions, how people decide to behave in certain situations can be understood in terms of the interplay between, on the one hand, their personal moral rules and, on the other, their knowledge of the rules of conduct operating in a given situation.

In our society, for example, theft is illegal (“against the rules”). In certain situations, however, opportunities arise in which theft is a possible option.

How we decide to behave, in terms of the choice we make to conform to or deviate from situational rules, depends to some extent on the moral rules we each develop as individuals (although, as we will see, these may be modified by situational constraints).

We can illustrate and simplify this idea using the following situation:



You are a taxi driver who picks-up a fare. They ask you to drive as quickly as you can to their destination 10 miles away. The customer seems very flustered and in a great hurry. Under what conditions would you seriously (e.g. driving at 50 mph in a 30 mph zone) break the speed limit to get the customer to their destination:

1. They said they were in a hurry?
2. They offered you a very substantial tip?
3. They were being pursued by the police?
4. They were being pursued by someone who wanted to harm them?
5. Their partner was seriously ill in hospital and they needed to get to them as soon as possible before they died?
6. Some other condition?
7. Nothing would make you seriously break the speed limit.

When you get to your destination and the customer has left the cab you realise they have left their briefcase behind. You open it and see it contains around £20,000 in cash – enough to buy you a nice shiny new cab to replace your current clapped-out motor, pay off your mortgage, put your child through university or pay for a fantastic holiday. Do you:

1. Hand the money in to a police station?
2. Keep the cash?
3. Choose some other course of action?

The decisions you make in these situations will, according to SAT, depend on both your personal morality (are you the kind of individual who believes theft is always wrong?) and the situation in which you are required to make a choice:



In the first example, you might not be prepared to break the speed limit in return for a bribe (a generous tip), whereas you might be prepared to do it on compassionate grounds (or vice versa, of course...). For some, helping someone escape from the police is not an option, whereas for others it's a way of life...

Decisions, Decisions

These decisions involve a complex (and usually fairly rapid) assessment of a range of factors, some of which are **personal** (our moral beliefs), while others relate to a variety of **situational** factors that modify our moral stance:

Is our knowledge that it would be morally wrong to seriously break the speed limit overridden by the need to get someone to hospital before their relative dies? A further factor here, of course, is an assessment of the risk involved.

If you chose to steal the money you would have it all, but the police may try to track you down and arrest you (or, worse still, what if the customer was the accountant for an organised crime gang whose money you've just stolen?). On the other hand, if you report your find there might be a reward, no danger of arrest (or worse...) and the knowledge that you have done something our society would generally consider morally

correct. The reward, if it existed, would however be significantly less than the cash you're currently holding in your sweaty little hands...

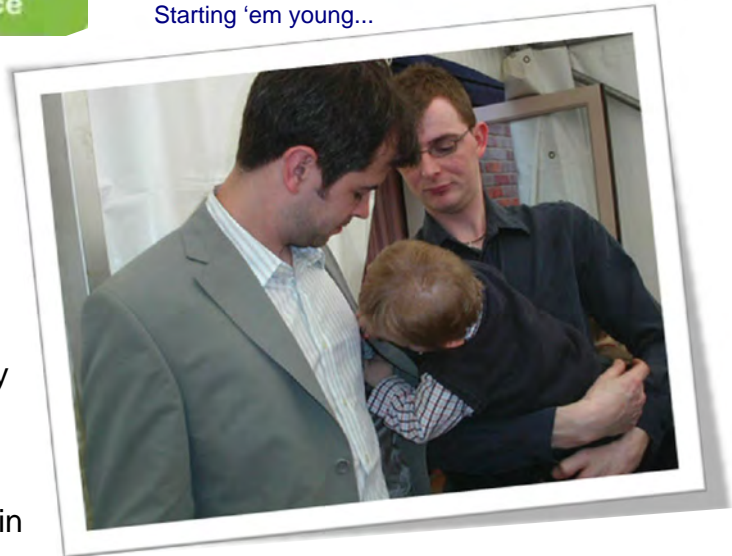
As the above suggests, some situations (or **social contexts**) are more conducive to criminal behaviour than others - and when people find themselves in such a situation, whether through design or accident, they are forced to make a (moral) decision - to break or obey the rules. This decision is shaped by two factors:

1. **Who** they are (something determined by a combination of **social background** and their **personal sense of morality**).
2. **Where** they are (considered in terms of the situation in which they find themselves). Sitting quietly at home or an evening watching television is not a situation that is as potentially conducive to criminal behaviour as being down the pub with your mates getting blind drunk).

We can also note that social contexts don't just refer to **physical spaces** (such as being home alone or down the pub). Such spaces always have an **emotional meaning** for us (when we're in the pub we probably expect to socialise with friends, when we're in the kitchen we expect to cook and so forth). A further dimension to emotional space is that it

Starting 'em young...

extends to people in our life. Our personal morality may, for example, prevent us stealing from our friends and family because we have strong emotional ties to them and care about their feelings, whereas stealing from a stranger is not given a second thought precisely because we don't care about them...



We can summarise these ideas in terms of two factors:

1. Action: Different individuals have the ability to make a range of choices – such as whether or not to deviate from social / legal norms in any situation. These choices are, however, always affected by:

2. Situation: Our choices of action are deeply affected by a situation in which we are faced with alternatives (and the need to make a decision). "Situation", in this respect, is a contributing – but not necessarily causal - factor in an individual's choice of action.

An individual's situation (as we've outlined it above) serves to crystallise a set of possible alternative behaviours (which, for the sake of

illustration, we've characterised as to either conform or to deviate) and the individual's ultimate choice depends on their assessment of the **viability** of these alternatives. That is, taking everything into account (from moral beliefs about right and wrong through the benefits to be gained to the costs involved) the individual arrives at what they believe to be the most viable alternative in any situation.

As a way of illustrating these ideas, take the situation of two people (Tarquin is very wealthy, Dennis very poor) who need a car. The wealthy individual has the same perceived alternatives as their much poorer counterpart (they both *really need* a car). However, the weighting of these alternatives means that individual action – how each goes about acquiring something they need – is likely to be very different.

For the wealthy individual buying, rather than stealing, the car is likely to be seen as the most viable course of action in this situation, whereas the reverse is more-likely to be true of their much poorer counterpart.



Nice car (shame about the price)

However, these types of behavioural decisions are rarely, if ever, this stark and determined. Just because Tarquin can afford to buy a car doesn't necessarily mean he will. He might decide the money he saves buy stealing it (he is, after all, a professional car thief) could be put to better use. Dennis, on the other hand, has a large family who depend on him and he may decide the risks involved in stealing a car (he has no idea about how do this successfully), getting caught and being sent to prison far outweigh any possible benefits.

Crime Propensities

One reason why people react differently in terms of their perception of viable alternatives in any given situation is their:

Propensity to crime: This is the idea that when people come into different situations they bring with them a range of moral tendencies related to their personal social background and experiences. Where one person, for example, sees a crowded shopping centre and the opportunity to shop, another person sees the opportunity to steal. In other words, their initial propensity to deviance goes some way to determining their perception of viable alternative actions in that situation – to shop or to steal, as it were.

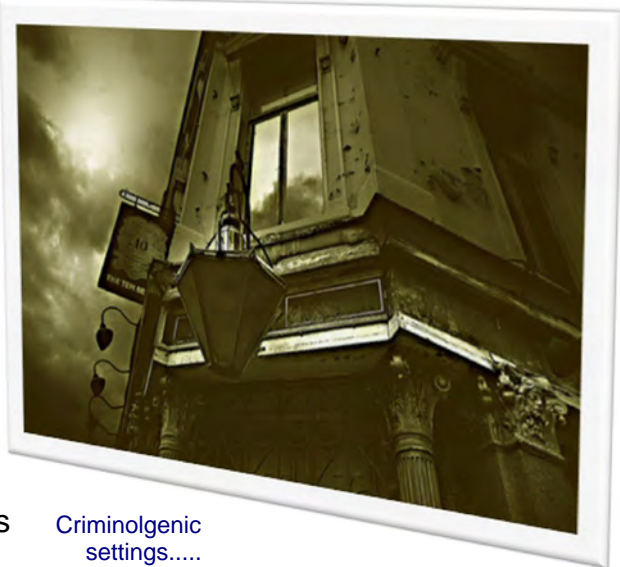


Significantly, the development of our personal morality (and hence crime propensity) is not simply a question of our socialisation; it also involves wider ideas about the legitimacy of general social rules (such as the law, how the legal system operates and so forth). Thus, situations where an individual comes to believe the law is applied unequally – where, for example, the rich and powerful are perceived to be able to flout the law or use it for their own purposes, escaping punishment in situations where less fortunate individuals are severely punished, for example – can have a powerful impact on personal morality. If “some people” for example are seen to be above the law this perception may seriously impact on our general propensity to follow legal rules.



Crime propensity, therefore, is a key – and empirically measurable – variable in the SAT equation – but our crime propensity, according to **Wikstrom**, is only activated by some kind of environmental inducement. In other words, while we may each hold different crime propensities that are affected by a range of personal and wider social factors, we only act on these propensities in certain settings – and it follows from this that some settings are more-likely than others to trigger this propensity.

Criminogenic settings, in this respect, are those situations that present the individual with a moral context that is conducive to – and sometimes encouraging of - crime. In other words, there are some situations (such as hanging-out with a group of friends heavily involved in criminal behaviour) where an individual experiences greater temptations or stresses than others. Thus, an individual who strongly desires to be “part of the group” will accept the group’s (low) moral standards as part of the price of entrance; similarly, an individual who has no strong desire to be part of the group is unlikely to be swayed by their ideas or behaviours. In this respect, people who have *similar crime propensities* may act in very different ways, depending on the social contexts in which they move. Just as people have differing crime propensities, so do



Criminogenic settings.....

Individuals who steer clear of highly criminogenic settings (instead of hanging out with friends who routinely engage in crime they hang instead with people who do not – the classic, if stereotypical, example being the youth who was part of a petty crime gang leaving the group because he has a new girlfriend who disapproves of his former associates) would not, according to SAT, show the same level of criminal activity. This is significant because it suggests that criminological theories that focus only on the psychological characteristics of offenders are ignoring an important aspect of the crime equation – that our behaviour can be radically changed or modified by our social setting (something that has significant ramifications for the way we deal with criminals in terms of things like punishment and reform).



criminogenic settings (some situations are more – or less – encouraging of crime than others) and this helps to explain why people with similar crime propensities don’t necessarily act in similar ways.

Causes of Causes

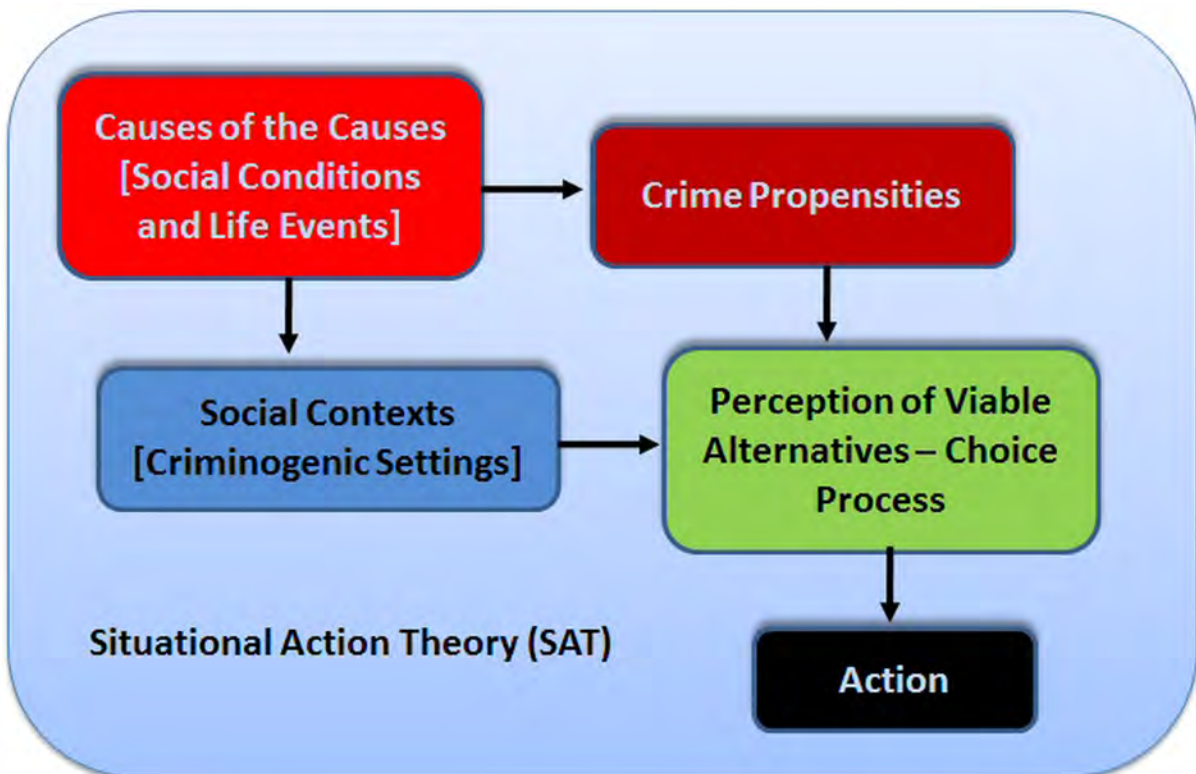
One final dimension to SAT is the idea that while specific contexts are important (where some are more conducive to criminal choices than others), in any explanation of crime it is not the context itself that is inherently criminal (such that any individual entering into a particular context / situation is inevitably drawn towards criminal choices). Rather, it is the interplay *between* context and propensity towards criminal alternatives /

rule breaking that is ultimately significant; this means, therefore, that we also need to recognise and understand the “causes of causes”. As **Wikström and Treiber** (2009).argue, if we know what moves and motivates people to commit criminal acts in certain situations (but not others) we should be able to trace back to the indirect causes of crime – the social conditions and life events that act upon and shape individual moralities.

In other words, if an individual with a measurable propensity towards settling problems through violence when placed in particularly threatening or stressful situations has developed a particular set of moral beliefs (that under some conditions and some circumstances they will respond violently

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Crime Propensity} \\ & \times \\ & \text{Exposure to} \\ & \text{Criminogenic} \\ & \text{Settings} \\ & = \\ & \text{Crime} \end{aligned}$$

to the behaviour of others) it follows we should be able to identify key causes in the development of a particular moral outlook; some of these causes will be in areas like economic deprivation and social exclusion, while others will relate to levels of moral integration and regulation (societies or groups that display high levels of moral integration, for example, experience less rule breaking than those with lower levels because people generally care more about what others think about their behaviour). Similarly, a society that tolerates higher levels of sexism, racism or homophobia will experience higher levels of rule breaking in situations that are tied to general moral beliefs (acts of violence against homosexuals, for example, are likely to be lower in societies where there is greater moral intolerance of this sexuality).



Origins and Destinations

Situational Action Theory draws on a range of familiar sociological theories of deviance. These include

- Differential Association
- Delinquency and Drift
- Strain
- Labelling
- Right realism
- Left Realism
- Radical Criminology

However, it provides a unique twist to each of these by showing how social actions are located within a clear social structure – one based on concepts of morality.

The focus on morality not only helps to explain how and why people make choices (to conform to or deviate from rules in certain situations), it also helps to locate morality within a clear social framework – not just of rules and social order but also in terms of how and why different moral propensities develop as part and parcel of an individual's social development.

In other words, the concept of morality is given clear structural origins (in terms of socialisation processes, for example.) while also recognising that how and why people make moral choices is highly dependent upon both the context in which these choices are made and the moral propensities / predispositions individuals bring to social situations.



So many choices...

References

Wikström, Per-Olof (2010) "Situational Action Theory" in Cullen, Francis and Wilcox, Pamela (eds.), "Encyclopaedia of Criminological Theory". Sage

Wikström, Per-Olof and Treiber, Kyle (2009) "Violence as Situational Action": International Journal of Conflict and Violence,



