SITUATIONAL THEORIES

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In this chapter we consider the development, current status and implications of theories that emphasize the role of immediate situations in sexual offending. We set the scene by revisiting the historical debate about the cross-situational consistency versus situational specificity of human behavior. While there is now a broad consensus in psychology that behavior is best understood in terms of the interaction of individual dispositions and situational factors, sexual offending research, policy and practice continue to be dominated by dispositional conceptions of the problem. Theories of sexual offending have to varying extents recognized the importance of situational factors, but this seems to have had comparatively little impact on researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. Research and applied efforts continue to focus much more on the presumed stable characteristics and treatment of adjudicated sexual offenders, than on the situational dimensions of sexual offenses and their wider implications for prevention. Theory and research on how specific dispositional and situational aspects of sexual offending interact remain almost wholly neglected.

After revisiting the person-situation debate, we examine the development of situational theories of general offending. We then consider how situational factors have historically been conceived of in theories of sexual offending. Next we examine recent developments in situational approaches to sexual offending, commenting on the strengths and limitations of such approaches as we see them. We consider separately the implications of situational theories for clinical and risk management responses to known sexual offenders, and more widely for the prevention of sexual offending. We conclude that situational factors are a theoretically and practically crucial, but widely neglected, aspect of sexual offending. In our view, neither dispositional nor situational factors alone are sufficient to explain sexual offending.
Rather, sexual offenses always occur as a result of proximal interactions between individual and situational factors.

DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATIONAL THEORIES

Person, situation, or both?

The debate about whether stable dispositions cause individuals’ behavior to be consistent across different situations (cross-situational consistency), or whether behavior is instead caused by the situation itself (cross-situational variability, or situational specificity), is often said to have been resolved by the work of Walter Mischel (1968), who is credited with introducing the now-well-known person-situation interaction paradigm. On one side of the debate were personality and trait psychologists, who argued that personality attributes are sufficiently stable to cause individuals to behave in consistent (and therefore predictable) ways in different situations. On the other side were social and behavioral psychologists, who argued that an individual’s behavior varies according to specific characteristics of the situation in which the behavior is enacted.

This debate has at times been very polarized. At one extreme, personality was seen as an unobservable, even illusory, construct, with critics arguing that personality research said more about how people wanted to see themselves than it did about true human nature. At the other extreme, situational factors were seen as mere noise in the ‘real’ business of personality research, and in any case were impossible to define and measure in any meaningful way. More generally, though, the debate has been about the question of the relative contribution of individual and situational factors, and how these interact to produce specific individual behavior. Mischel (1968) famously reviewed personality research and concluded that the modal correlation between persons’ scores on personality tests and their actual behavior was about .30, leaving
more than 90% of the variance in actual behavior unexplained by personality characteristics\(^1\). On the other hand, personality theorists reviewed social psychology research and showed that the average correlation between situational factors and actual behavior was about .40, indicating that more than 80% of the variance in behavior was left unexplained by situational characteristics (Funder & Ozer, 1983). Apparently neither personality nor situations alone reliably predict actual behavior, at least not to the extent that one can be proclaimed to the exclusion of the other.

While the solution proposed by the person-situation interaction paradigm thus seems a very sensible one, Mischel’s *Personality and Assessment* (1968) at first fueled, rather than quelled, much of the heat in the debate. It was not for another 15 years or more that the open tensions between trait psychology and situationism began to subside (Mischel, 2009). Tensions remain to this day, however, although individual positions on the subject are nowadays perhaps more often reflected in the implicit (albeit sometimes apparently unwavering) partisan assumptions of theorists, researchers and practitioners, than in open discussion and debate. Lucas and Donnellan (2009) recently noted that although many of the empirical issues that fuelled the person-situation debate have been resolved (generally in favor of interactionism), the debate nevertheless continues to arouse strong reactions. They suggested that this could be partly due to its “inferred sociopolitical implications” (p.148). Different positions in the debate have occasionally even been tied to differences in personal political or philosophical views – dispositional accounts of behavior have been said to be favored by those with a conservative, individualist world-view that emphasizes individuals’ responsibility for their own successes and

\[^1\] Nisbett (1980) later reported an average correlation of .40
failures, whereas situational accounts are favored by those more inclined to a liberal, socialist world-view whereby behavior is seen largely as the product of individuals’ circumstances (Lucas & Donnellan, 2009; Zimbardo, 2004).

There can be few more fundamental questions about human nature than whether people themselves, or the circumstances they find themselves in, determine what they actually do. And there can be few weightier implications of this than for questions of moral conduct. Perhaps ironically in the context of the person-situation debate, social psychologists have shown that individuals themselves take very different positions on the dispositional-situational question depending on whether they are evaluating their own or others’ moral behavior. When evaluating others’ misconduct, we are prone to overestimating the contribution of internal dispositional factors (e.g. a stable propensity to aggression or impulsivity) and underestimating the contribution of external situational factors (e.g. provocation by others). We are more inclined to attribute situational causes to our own moral failures, but readily attribute dispositional causes to our successes. This cognitive bias is known as the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977).

As scholars concerned with understanding and preventing serious criminal behavior, we would hope that these or other subjective biases concerning dispositional or situational attributions have no bearing on the scientific and professional endeavors of our field. But we are not so sure. As we outline below, a number of influential theoretical approaches to sexual offending have clearly considered situational factors as part of the explanation. However, more generally, theories of sexual offending seem to be heavily biased toward dispositional explanations, and contemporary empirical research in the field is almost wholly dominated by dispositional approaches. Our task in the present chapter is to examine
the other side of the person-situation equation – the role of situational factors in sexual offending. We begin by reviewing situational theories of general crime.

Situational conceptions of crime

Situational conceptions of crime emerged in the 1970s as an alternative theoretical and applied approach to then-dominant dispositional models that sought to explain crime primarily as a function of individual criminality (e.g. Cleckley, 1976; Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Hirschi & Hindelang 1977). From the outset, situational approaches were driven largely by practical concerns about crime prevention, and partly as a reaction to pessimistic conclusions about the apparent failure of offender rehabilitation efforts (Martinson, 1974). Contemporary criminological approaches were seen as ‘sinking under the weight of their own theorizing’ (Wortley, 2012), contributing little to practical outcomes concerning crime control and prevention.

Situational models instead aimed to offer pragmatic solutions to crime problems, with methods underpinned by uncomplicated theoretical principles. Below we summarize the main theoretical perspectives that inform the field of environmental criminology².

*The rational choice perspective*

The rational choice perspective (Cornish & Clarke, 1975; 1986) took as its starting point the assumption that offenders are deliberative and purposive decision-makers. According to this perspective, and in line with its uncomplicated theoretical approach, criminal motivations do not require any special explanation. Rather, crime is seen as intrinsically rewarding. Offenders, like everyone else, seek money, material goods, status, excitement, sexual gratification, and so on.

² Not to be confused with the study of environmental crimes (e.g. illegal waste disposal), environmental criminology is concerned with the effects of immediate environments on all kinds of crime.
Offenders do not commit crimes all of the time. Some do so relatively often, and many do so episodically or rarely. Otherwise they generally pursue goals similarly to everyone else - they get jobs to earn money to buy goods, settle disputes with others in a civil manner, engage in consensual sexual relationships, and so on. These same people at other times pursue these ordinary goals in illegal ways, for example by stealing to obtain money or goods, using violence to resolve a dispute, exploiting vulnerable others for some personal benefit, or engaging in unlawful sexual behavior. Individuals who are criminally involved, whatever the reason, from time to time encounter specific situations that present criminal opportunities. At these decision-points they sometimes opt to use unlawful means to achieve specific goals, generally because the unlawful option requires less effort and promises a better reward than legally available options.

Although criminal choices may ultimately be self-defeating, such choices nevertheless represent the most desirable option in the immediate circumstances, at least as the offender sees it. In fact the rational choice perspective does not assume that offenders always act completely rationally, nor that they necessarily possess the best information upon which to base their criminal decision-making. Rather, offenders operate within the constraints of ‘bounded rationality’. Offenders’ decision making may be constrained by the limited relevant information available to them, by the limited time they have to weigh up their options, and by their own cognitive biases and limitations.

According to the rational choice perspective, there are two main types of criminal decision-making: involvement decisions, and event decisions. Involvement decisions are those concerning initiation into, continuation of, and desistance from, criminal lifestyles. Peer influences, finding and losing employment, marriage and
separation, parenthood, drug dependence and recovery, successes and failures of their
criminal efforts, and so on, are all likely to affect offenders’ decisions about their
criminal involvement. In line with its central focus on the role of immediate
environments on crime, however, the main practical focus of the rational choice
perspective is on offenders’ event decisions. Event decisions are in-the-moment
decisions concerning the planning, execution and completion of specific crimes.
These decisions are guided primarily by the offenders’ judgment about the degree of
effort required to commit the crime, the risk of detection and punishment, and the
likely personal reward. Accordingly, all else being equal a crime is more likely to
occur when, from the potential offender’s point of view, it requires little effort, entails
low risk, and promises a highly desired reward.

Criminal incidents are not seen to be the result of a single criminal decision.
Rather, individual crimes are understood to unfold in a series of stages, each of which
requires the offender to make relevant decisions. After an offender has decided to
initiate a crime, events may unfold in unanticipated ways – a victim may fight back, a
third party may arrive at the scene, or problems may be encountered while attempting
to decamp. Offenders thus do not necessarily intend the outcomes that ultimately
ensue. Indeed the unfolding of events in unanticipated ways leads many offenders to
‘dig themselves deeper’ into trouble (Felson, 1998).

According to the rational choice perspective, then, situations provide the
already-motivated or criminally-inclined offender with criminal opportunities and
with (albeit often limited) information about the potential costs and benefits
associated with a contemplated crime. Incentives for criminal behavior are the same
as for ordinary non-criminal behavior – money, material goods, status, excitement,
sexual gratification, and so on. Disincentives include the effort involved in
completing the crime, the risks of getting caught, and potentially the guilt associated with violating personal or social moral standards.

**Routine activities theory**

The rational choice perspective is primarily concerned with the immediate situations in which offender decision-making occurs. Routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) frames these immediate situations within their natural ecological context. Routine activities theory emphasizes the ordinary, mundane nature of most criminal activity. Similar to the least-effort principle of the rational choice perspective, offenders generally do not go far out of their way to manufacture a criminal opportunity; rather, opportunities generally present themselves in the course of their everyday lives.

Cohen and Felson (1979) proposed a ‘basic chemistry of a crime’ – for any crime to occur three necessary elements must converge in time and space: 1) a likely offender; 2) a suitable target; and 3) the absence of a capable guardian. Many people have the potential to be offenders but do not actually offend, or at least they offend much less often than they could. They need the opportunity to encounter a suitable target, in the absence of a capable guardian, in order to convert their criminal potential into criminal actions. For non-personal (e.g. property) crimes, a suitable target may be one that the offender can get easy access to, carry away, conceal for a time, and sell. For personal crimes (e.g. sexual offenses), a suitable ‘target’ may be someone who is smaller, physically or psychologically vulnerable, unlikely to fight back, and perhaps can be intimidated to prevent them reporting the incident.

According to routine activities theory, a crucial element of crime is the presence or otherwise of third parties. It makes the point that most (potential) crime is prevented not by police or other agents of formal social control, but by ordinary
citizens engaged in their day-to-day routine activities. Everyone at some time or another has guardianship over some place or person - people routinely look out for their own children, notice strangers in the street, lock their cars and houses, and possibly even come to the aid of a victim if a crime is in progress.

Eck (2003) expanded on the role of third parties by proposing three types of ‘crime controllers’ (see Figure 1). Eck retained the term ‘guardian’ to refer to persons with the responsibility, commitment, and capacity to protect the potential victim. Guardians may be parents, older siblings, teachers, peers, and others who ordinarily look out for the person concerned. Eck termed the second type of crime controller ‘handlers’. Handlers have the same kind of relationship with the potential offender as guardians do with the potential victim. These are people who can exert a positive influence over the potential offender, such as parents, teachers, friends, workmates, and for active offenders perhaps probation and parole officers. The third of Eck’s crime controllers are ‘place managers’. These are persons responsible for supervising particular physical locations such as schools, parks, public buildings, shops, and so on. Place managers may be teachers, security officers, workplace supervisors, bar managers, police, or others with relevant roles and responsibilities for controlling behavior in specific settings.

*Situation crime prevention*

Situational crime prevention (SCP) is an applied criminological model founded on two distinct, complementary conceptions of criminal situations. The first is the rational choice and routine activities perspectives summarized above. These approaches do not deal directly with the source of offender motivations. Situations are simply seen as presenting criminal opportunities that an already-motivated or criminally-inclined offender rationally weighs up in terms of effort, risk, and rewards.
The second derives from social and behavioral psychology. According to this view, and in contrast to the conscious, deliberative process assumed by the rational choice approach, situations can affect people in non-conscious ways so as to precipitate a behavioral response that they may otherwise not have considered, at least not at that time or place.

This second perspective attributes much more dynamic properties to criminal situations. Wortley (1997; 1998; 2001) proposed four main ways in which situations may precipitate criminal motivations. Situations can present cues that prompt a criminal response; they can exert social pressure to conform to situational norms or expectations; they can weaken moral restraints, and so permit a criminal response; and they can induce emotional arousal that provokes a criminal response. In practical terms, situational crime prevention may therefore be effected not just by reducing criminal opportunities, but also by alleviating the precipitating conditions of specific problem behaviors.

In line with the rational choice approach, SCP originally gave little weight to variations in the strength or type of criminal motivations. The criminally-inclined offender was simply a given. The recognition that situations can also precipitate criminal motivations required further theoretical developments to account for variations in the responses of offenders to criminal situations. Cornish and Clarke (2003) described three hypothetical offender types, reflecting differences in the criminal disposition, or criminal readiness, of offenders. The antisocial predator refers to experienced offenders who have an established criminal lifestyle, committing a wide variety of crimes across a wide range of contexts. As a result they have acquired knowledge and skills for minimizing risk and effort and maximizing the payoff of their crimes. Their choices to commit crimes primarily involve assessments
of whether or not their goals are best facilitated by criminal means. They will seek out and select situations based on cues that provide them with information about the risks, effort, and rewards associated with a contemplated crime.

The second offender type is the *mundane* offender. These offenders have a less extensive, less diverse, and generally less serious criminal involvement. They may from time to time engage in drink driving, littering, or speeding, but are not committed to routinely using criminal means to achieve their personal goals. The less serious nature of their offending both reduces risk and lowers the cost of failure. They are less likely to actively seek out criminal opportunities, but they may be quick to grasp opportunities that do arise, especially when they can justify or rationalize their criminal involvement. Errors in judgment may occasionally result in their involvement in serious, violent or sexual offenses.

The third of Cornish and Clarke’s (2003) offender types is the *provoked* offender. These offenders are not typically criminally inclined – they do not have a criminal history, do not lead criminal lifestyles, and may even lead a highly conforming lifestyle. Rather, their offending involves an atypical reaction to specific circumstances or situational pressures. Nevertheless they may commit an offense anywhere in the range from the most trivial to the most serious, including homicide. In any case, their offending is precipitated by a particular situation they encounter. They may react to perceived provocation, succumb to a temptation, or otherwise act in a momentary lapse of self-control.

Consideration of the different motivations of offenders is a relatively new development in SCP that brings it closer in line with the person-situation interaction model. In theory and practice, SCP nevertheless maintains as its primary focus the characteristics of the situations in which specific kinds of offenses occur, not least
because of its pragmatic assumption that situations are more readily accessible and much easier to modify than the psychological characteristics of offenders, especially those who have not yet offended. In practical terms, SCP aims to create safer environments for everyone who encounters them, not to make individual offenders safer by changing their presumed stable criminal dispositions.

Situational conceptions of sexual offending

Criminological theories have tended to reject the idea that different kinds of offending require special explanations, and have accordingly paid little attention specifically to sexual offending. Where sexual offending is considered at all, it is generally understood to occupy a position at the more serious end of a continuum of socially irresponsible or unlawful behavior (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). Sexual offending theorists and researchers have in turn paid little attention to developments in criminology. Sexual offending research has its theoretical roots instead in psychiatry and clinical psychology, and the field today continues to be dominated by clinical conceptions and concerns. Sexual offending is by definition a legal, not a psychiatric or psychological, construct. Nevertheless, clinical conceptions over the years have tended to view the problem primarily in terms of sexual psychopathology – as a kind of sexual deviance that happens to be illegal, rather than as a kind of crime that happens to be sexual. Even when sexual offending is seen not to involve enduring sexual psychopathology, some other psychopathological condition involving individual-level ‘deficits’, ‘disorders’ or ‘dysfunctions’ of some kind is typically invoked to explain the problem. Thus it is not just the offending behavior that is seen as unusual and problematic, but offenders themselves are assumed to possess negative personal characteristics that cause their offending and that distinguish them from
‘normal’ people. This dispositional bias persists despite the fact that theories of sexual offending have, albeit to varying extents, recognized the role of situations.

*The ‘situational sex offender’*

Clinical typologies of sexual offenders have historically distinguished between those who possess and those who do not possess stable or enduring sexual offending motivations. Early psychoanalytic conceptions of the ‘fixated’ and ’regressed’ child sexual abuser types (Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, & Christenson, 1965; Groth, Hobson, & Gary, 1982; Knight, Rosenberg, & Schneider, 1985) sought to distinguish offenders with presumed sexual preferences for children (fixated type) and those whose offending is thought be precipitated by situational stressors (regressed type). Howells (1981) made a similar, though theoretically more neutral, distinction between ‘preferential’ and ‘situational’ offenders. In this scheme the sexual offending of the situational offender was seen as context specific, precipitated by external stressors and restricted to a limited set of circumstances.

A similar preferential versus situational distinction can be inferred from early typologies of adult-victim offenders. Some adult-victim offenders have been characterized by disturbed sexual, violent, or dominance-type motivations (Groth, 1979; Knight, 1999). For these offenders dispositional disturbances were assumed to cause their sexual offending. Others were said to have relatively normal sexual lives and relationships, although they may be generally opportunistic and criminally involved (Groth, 1979; Knight, 1999). In these cases, the motivation for sexual offending can be tied to context-specific circumstances, such as alcohol intoxication, emotional stressors, and availability of a ‘suitable’ victim.

These early typological schemes were vague about the role of situations in sexual offending. Their emphasis was instead on differences among offenders in the
presumed stable pathological motivations thought to be associated with their sexual offending, and that also distinguish them from normal people. The idea of the ‘situational’ offender thus suggests an absence of pathological motivations, rather than the presence of other specified motivations.

Behavioral approaches

Alongside social psychologists, radical behaviorists were the main protagonists on the ‘situationism’ side of the person-situation debate as it continued to unfold into the second half of the 20th century. Clinical behavioral approaches to sexual offending became popular in the 1960s and 1970s, with a number of behavioral treatments (e.g. aversive therapies) used widely at the time. Such treatments were based on classical and operant conditioning theory, which assumed that sexual responsivity to unusual or socially undesirable sexual stimuli could originally be established from chance encounters with specific situations. The types of environmental stimuli that were most likely to cue sexual responses were those for which human males were biologically ‘prepared’ due to their evolutionary history. Thus sexual responses to children or to non-consenting adults are “reasonably well-prepared responses, since they might both be considered to be reproductively advantageous or to represent points on a generalization gradient not too far removed from the stimuli which are the most advantageous.” (Laws & Marshall, 1990, p.211).

This essential, albeit perhaps uncomfortable point about the natural proclivity for humans, and especially sexually mature males, to be sexually responsive to situations involving under-age or non-consenting potential sexual partners seemed to have been lost in the clinical application of behavioral theories to sexual offending. Clinical researchers and practitioners were concerned with preventing recidivism among known sexual offenders, not with how and why sexual offending originally
occurs. Rather than focusing attention on how particular kinds of situations can elicit problematic sexual interests and unlawful behavior, including in otherwise apparently ordinary people, behavioral theories were used instead to further advance the dispositional, psychopathological perspective by concluding that sexual offending was caused by learned deviant sexual preferences.

Relapse prevention

Relapse prevention emerged in the 1980s as an applied model for the treatment of sexual offenders (Pithers, Marques, Gibat, & Marlatt, 1983). Its focus was pragmatic, with its theoretical foundations rooted in the behavioral and cognitive behavioral traditions. Relapse prevention had originally been developed based on research on alcoholism and drug addiction (Marlatt, 1980; Marlatt & Gordon, 1985) and aimed to assist drug-dependent persons maintain control or abstinence by teaching them how to identify high-risk situations (situations thought likely to precipitate relapse, such as spending time with drug users), and to either avoid or cope responsibly with such situations (e.g. by learning refusal skills). Applied to sexual offenders this involved training to self-identify and avoid risky situations, and to improve their decision-making and coping skills so as to prevent further sexual offending. Relapse prevention with sexual offenders involved both internal and external dimensions of control. In addition to enhancing self-management skills, offenders were often prohibited from going to certain places or engaging in certain activities that might present opportunities or cue offense-related thinking or behavior, and parole officers and others were often recruited to monitor the offender’s activities and whereabouts.

Ward and his colleagues criticized the original relapse prevention model for being too focused on avoiding risky situations (Ward & Hudson, 1998), later arguing
that the main focus of treatment should be on assisting offenders therapeutically to overcome presumed psychological, emotional and social barriers to leading personally fulfilling, prosocial lifestyles (Ward & Siegert, 2003). With regard to our present topic, the proposal to move away from concentrating on situations associated with (re)offending appears to be a retrograde step. Nevertheless both the original and proposed new models recognize that risk of reoffending can be increased in certain situational contexts. Neither model deals with the role of situations in the offender’s original offending. Following the clinical tradition, the theoretical and applied focus here is on understanding how repeated sexual offending may be understood and controlled, rather than on the origins of the problem and how it may be prevented in the first place.

*Finkelhor’s four preconditions model*

Finkelhor’s (1984) preconditions model explained child sexual abuse in terms of four elements that are necessary for an offense to occur: 1) the motivation to sexually abuse; 2) overcoming internal inhibitors; 3) overcoming external inhibitors; and 4) overcoming the resistance of the child. Finkelhor noted that there may be various sources of motivation to sexual abuse, including emotional congruence with children, sexual arousal to children, and the inability of offenders to meet their sexual or emotional needs in alternative, prosocial ways (termed ‘blockage’). Overcoming internal inhibitors involved transient emotional, physiological or cognitive states (e.g. stress; intoxication; justification) that weaken the offender’s usual moral self-censure. The third and fourth preconditions are concerned with how the motivated offender interacts with the immediate external environment, for example how the offender may seize or create opportunities to abuse and manipulate the victim to gain their compliance and avoid detection.
Finkelhor’s model is consistent with the person-situation interaction model of behavior. Thus, personal characteristics (e.g. emotional congruence with children; deviant sexual interests) interact with situational characteristics (availability of a vulnerable victim and opportunity to abuse) to produce actual offending. The model deals in some detail with the idea that situations themselves (e.g. alcohol intoxication; the absence or illness of a caregiver; presence of a vulnerable victim; atypical sleeping arrangements) can precipitate offense-related motivations and behavior. The model is equally applicable to understanding the origins of sexual offending as it is to understanding reoffending for persistent offenders.

*Marshall and Barbaree’s integrated theory*

Marshall and Barbaree’s (1990) integrated theory explained sexual offending in terms of distal and proximal interactions between biological, developmental, sociocultural and situational factors. Most biological approaches to sexual offending, in the tradition of psychopathological approaches, concentrate on presumed individual differences (e.g. Cantor, Blanchard, Christenson, et al., 2004). Marshall and Barbaree instead proposed that, as a result of their evolutionary history, all human males are biologically prepared for self-interest and sexual aggression. They saw social cognitive development as the key process whereby males normally acquire the capacity and commitment to inhibit these biologically-based tendencies. Failures of socialization were argued to result in heightened vulnerabilities to negative sociocultural influences such as positive attitudes to violence, negative attitudes to women, and the availability of pornography, particularly for adolescents. Sexual offenses themselves were seen to occur in specific situational contexts. Thus, in line with the person-situation interaction model, Marshall and Barbaree argued that
“certain environmental factors interact with particular states of the individual to facilitate sexual aggression and abuse.” (p.268).

Marshall and Barbaree’s integrated theory clearly regards the disinhibiting effects of specific situations as a crucial aspect of sexual offending. Summarizing relevant research available at the time, they discuss alcohol intoxication, state anger, sexual arousal, perceived permissibility, perceived anonymity, stress, and state anxiety as potential situational disinhibitors. The situational elements of their model are consistent with modern situational conceptions of general offending, as we have outlined above, including the conception that some situations contain dynamic properties that can precipitate offending motivations that may otherwise not occur. The integrated theory specifically implicates situations in the origins, as well as maintenance, of sexual offending motivations and behavior.

Ward and Beech’s (2006) integrated theory

Ward and his colleagues have presented a series of (sometimes scathing) critiques of the major specialist sexual offending theories, including Finkelhor’s (1984) four preconditions model (Ward & Hudson, 2001), Hall and Hirschman’s (1992) ‘quadripartite theory’3 (Ward, 2001), and Marshall and Barbaree’s (1990) integrated theory (Ward, 2002) (see also Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2005). Focusing particularly on child sexual abuse, they concluded that each of these theories “has serious weaknesses that limit its ability to provide a satisfactory explanation” (p.319) and proposed a new theory based on the ‘best elements’ of the three theories (Ward & Siegert, 2002). Later Ward and Beech (2006) proposed a new integrated theory that they argued was an explicit departure from existing sexual offending theories because

3 We have not referred to Hall and Hirschman’s model here because it says nothing about the role of situational factors. The model is concerned exclusively with dispositional features of offenders.
such theories in their view deal only with “the surface level of symptomatology” (emphasis in original) and have “failed to capture the causal origins of dysfunctional sexual behavior.” (p.45).

Ward and Beech’s (2006) integrated theory is less parsimonious than the theories it proposes to replace, relying as it does on a multitude of biological, developmental, psychological, and ecological factors, all of which are said to be interrelated in complex ways. Like most approaches to sexual offending, the theory gives most of its attention to presumed psychological problems of sexual offenders. On the other hand, the theory acknowledges that “sometimes the major causal factors resulting in sexual offending reside in the ecological niche rather than within the person” (p.53). Citing Marshall and Barbaree (1990), Ward and Beech (2006) noted that sexual offending may be “quite opportunistic, or the consequence of circumstances that effectively erode an individual’s capacity to behave in an ethical, and typical, manner.” (p.53). However, Ward and Beech’s (2006) integrated theory adds nothing new to a situational analysis of sexual offending, and indeed deals with this aspect less prominently and in considerably less detail than Finkelhor’s and Marshall and Barbaree’s models.

CURRENT STATUS OF SITUATIONAL THEORIES

Modus operandi research

Situational conceptions of sexual offending were given fresh impetus by the empirical work of Kaufman and his colleagues, who examined the modus operandi of adult and adolescent sexual abusers (e.g. Kaufman, Hilliker, & Daleiden, 1996; Kaufman, Hilliker, Lathrop, & Daleiden, 1993). Earlier studies had reported detailed descriptions of sexual abuse (e.g. Berliner & Conte, 1988; Budin & Johnson, 1989; Lang & Frenzel, 1988), but for our present purposes Kaufman, et al.’s approach was
significant because it aimed to systematically describe how such offenses unfolded in discrete stages from the immediate pre-offense phase (e.g. victim-offender interactions), through the offense incident itself (what actually happened), to the immediate post-offense phase (e.g. how the offender attempted to avoid detection).

This line of work was followed by other research groups, and there is now a substantial catalogue of modus operandi studies describing sexual offenses committed by adult offenders with child victims (e.g. Proulx, Perrault, & Ouimet, 1999; Smallbone & Wortley, 2000), adult offenders with adult victims (e.g. Beauregard, Lussier, & Proulx, 2005), adolescent offenders (e.g. Hunter, Hazelwood, & Slesinger, 2000; Leclerc & Tremblay, 2007), and female offenders (Kaufman, Wallace, Johnson, & Reeder, 1995).

The key focus of offender modus operandi research is on proximal factors associated with sexual offending – on how, when and where offenses occur, rather than on the presumed stable characteristics and motivations of offenders – and is therefore consistent with the situational approach to understanding offending behavior. Nevertheless even here the term *modus operandi* implies a stable, organized pattern of offender behavior that is perhaps more in line with dispositional than with situational conceptions. Kaufman, et al.’s early work was descriptive and atheoretical, and did not take an explicit position on the disposition-situation question. However this research portrayed the offender more or less exclusively as an active manipulator of his environment, implying that situational aspects of sexual offenses contribute little or nothing to the offender’s motivation beyond presenting choices about how best to satisfy his already-formed deviant sexual urges. More recent modus operandi research has drawn explicitly from the rational choice perspective (e.g. Beauregard & Leclerc, 2007), and accordingly this research too construes offense situations simply
in terms of presenting choices to the already-motivated offender. Modus operandi studies have thus generally not considered how the immediate environment may act on the potential (or even the experienced and determined) offender to precipitate offense-related motivations that would otherwise not occur.

**Situational crime prevention approaches**

Wortley and Smallbone (2006) outlined a conceptual and applied model for the situational prevention of sexual abuse that positioned the problem explicitly within the context of the person-situation interaction paradigm. Drawing on Cornish and Clarke’s (2003) offender-situation typology, Wortley and Smallbone presented a hypothetical typology based on variations in offender dispositions and variations in the role of offense situations. This typology is depicted in Table 1. Three basic types of child-victim sexual offender⁴ and three types of situations were proposed. The *determined* offender⁵ is likely to have already committed sexual offenses, or may have developed clear intentions before committing his first sexual offense. In either case his offence-related motivations are sufficiently strong that he takes calculated steps to identify or create potential opportunities. Through experience he will have developed a repertoire of skills and techniques to offend even in challenging situations. The determined offender will also be likely to recognize and exploit fortuitous opportunities to offend. His disposition to commit sexual offenses may or may not include general antisocial proclivities, but whether he is a specialized (i.e. commits only sexual offenses) or versatile offender (i.e. commits both sexual and

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⁴ Wortley and Smallbone (2006) used different terms to those proposed by Cornish and Clarke (2003).

⁵ We have previously used various terms for this hypothetical type of offender, including ‘predatory’ and ‘committed’ offender. We use the term ‘determined’ here because we think it is a more suitable description of an offender whose motivation to sexually abuse is established before they encounter or create a suitable opportunity. This is the default offender type in most modus operandi research and in the rational choice and routine activities approaches.
nonsexual offenses) this is the most likely type of offender to ultimately develop stable deviant sexual motivations. In many respects the determined offender fits the popular stereotype of the persistent, sexually disturbed ‘pedophile’. Wortley and Smallbone (2006) estimated that the determined offender type comprised about 25% of the convicted child-victim offenders in their sample. As well as having previous convictions for sexual offenses, most (80%) of this group had previous convictions for nonsexual offenses as well.

The second hypothetical offender type is the opportunistic offender. These offenders are ambivalent in their criminal motivations, typically engaging in occasional, low-level offending. They are unlikely to invest the significant effort that may be required to create opportunities to commit a sexual offense, but will occasionally take opportunities as they fortuitously occur. In Table 1 we refer to these situations as ‘tempting’. They are typically criminally versatile, and so will usually have repeated experiences of rule-breaking and exploiting others before committing their first sexual offense. Smallbone and Wortley (2004) found that of the 63% of child-victim sexual offenders in their sample who had a prior conviction for any offense, 82% were convicted of a nonsexual offense prior to committing their first self-reported sexual offense. Based on offenders’ criminal histories, Wortley and Smallbone (2006) estimated that about 40% of their child-victim offenders were likely to be opportunistic offenders.

The third offender type is the situational offender. These offenders ordinarily lead law-abiding lives, and their sexual offending occurs as a reaction to a particular set of environmental circumstances that induce them to commit an offense they otherwise would not commit, at least not at that time or place. In Table 1 we refer to these situations as ‘precipitating’. Wortley and Smallbone (2006) estimated that about
35% of their child-victim sexual offenders may be classified as situational offenders. More recently, Wortley and Smallbone (in press) have argued that many consumers (but not necessarily producers or distributors) of Internet child pornography are otherwise law-abiding citizens who offend as a result of the increased availability, ease of access, and apparent anonymity afforded by the Internet and associated technologies. The Internet itself may thus drive child pornography consumption by presenting new opportunities and temptations to apparently increasing numbers of situational and opportunistic offenders.

Table 1 illustrates two important points. First, situational factors do not become less relevant as the motivation of the offender becomes stronger. Rather, the role of situations and thus the dynamics of the offender-situation interaction change. For determined offenders, situations primarily inform choices about how best to complete an offence without being detected. For opportunistic offenders, situations present opportunities that the offender would not otherwise go to the effort of creating. For situational offenders, situations precipitate offense-related motivations that would otherwise remain latent and unrealized.

The second point illustrated by Table 1 is that there is a downward, but generally not upward, flow of offenders from higher to lower situational categories. Determined offenders are likely to offend across all three situational categories, whereas situational offenders by definition do not commit offenses in tempting or especially challenging situations. At the same time it is likely that, as a result of their offending, some situational offenders will graduate to become opportunistic offenders, and some opportunistic offenders will in turn graduate to become determined offenders. Low observed sexual recidivism base rates among both adolescent and adult sexual offenders suggest that this progression is the exception
rather than the rule. On the other hand, it is likely that many now-determined offenders began sexual offending as situational or opportunistic offenders.

**Integrating individual, ecological and situational explanations**

Our group has attempted to incorporate situation-level explanations into a comprehensive, integrated theory of sexual offending. This is a work in progress, and thus far we have proposed models for child sexual abuse (Smallbone, 2006; Smallbone, Marshall, & Wortley, 2008), Internet child pornography offending (Wortley & Smallbone, in press), and for all types of sexual offending (Smallbone & Cale, in press). Our theory is based on revisions and extensions of Marshall and Barbaree’s (1990) original integrated theory. The revised theory aims first and foremost to explain the onset of sexual offending – that is, why a person commits a sexual offense for the first time. It deals separately with the question of why some novice offenders progress beyond the onset offense, and why some of these ultimately become highly persistent. The theory is outlined schematically in Figure 2.

Like Marshall and Barbaree’s (1990) theory, our theory aims to integrate individual (biological and developmental), ecological (sociocultural in the original model) and situational levels of explanation. At the centre of our model, and in line with the person-situation interaction paradigm, are the proximal interactions between the individual characteristics of the offender and the situational factors present in the immediate behavioral setting. We use the term ‘individual vulnerabilities’ to indicate the (potential) offender’s state of susceptibility to the influences of (potential) sexual offense situations. Individuals vary in their susceptibility to different kinds of situational influences, although we argue that some level of susceptibility is virtually universal. Happily, most people never act on or even notice this susceptibility.
We argue that offenders do not generally learn to commit sexual offenses (although they almost certainly learn \textit{from} committing such offenses), but rather they have in effect failed to learn not to. Sexual violence and abuse do not need to be learned because the biological foundations of such behavior, particularly for males, have been established through natural selection. This is a key proposition of Marshall and Barbaree’s (1990) original model. As Marshall and Barbaree put it, “the (universal developmental) task for human males is to acquire inhibitory controls over a biologically endowed propensity for self-interest associated with … sex and aggression” (p.257) (parentheses added).

Positive socialization serves both to constrain the potential for (especially) males to engage in sexual violence and abuse, and to enable socially responsible emotional and physical intimacy. Restraining mechanisms include empathic concern, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning; enabling mechanisms include perspective-taking, self-confidence, trust, and social skills. The former, and not the latter, are implicated directly in sexual offending. Inadequate enabling capacities may lead to social clumsiness and failure to find a suitable mate and produce offspring, but this does not cause offending, except perhaps indirectly (e.g. Finkelhor’s concept of ‘blockage’); rather, it is the failure of restraint that causes offending.

Risk and protective factors for sexual offending and sexual victimization can be located at various levels of the social ecological (family, peer, organizational, neighborhood, and sociocultural) systems in which the potential offender and potential victim are socially embedded. In accordance with social ecology theory, more proximal systems (e.g. family and peers) exert a more direct and therefore more powerful effect than more distal systems (e.g. neighborhood; sociocultural norms).
The situational elements that comprise the immediate behavioral setting present the most proximal, and therefore exert the most direct and powerful, influence on sexual offending. Situations present opportunities for offense-related motivations to be enacted, and also contain dynamic properties that can precipitate offense-related motivations that would otherwise not occur (or not occur at that time). As proposed by Wortley and Smallbone (2006), offender-situation interactions differ according to variations in both dispositional and situational characteristics. Once a first sexual offense has occurred, persistence is more likely if the offending behavior is experienced as rewarding, and if favorable opportunities and relevant precipitating conditions continue to be presented. Persistence is less likely if and when offending becomes unrewarding relative to anticipated effort and risk.

We do not have the space here to elaborate on our theory. For our present purposes the key point is that neither individual nor situational factors alone are sufficient to explain sexual offending. Rather, both are always relevant: sexual offenses always occur as a result of proximal interactions between individual and situational factors. There are wide variations in individuals’ psychological susceptibility to situational influences, and in the situational features that allow or precipitate the problem behavior.

IMPLICATIONS OF SITUATIONAL CONCEPTIONS

A fundamental shift in focus may be needed to bring sexual offending research, policy and practice closer in line with a person-situation interaction conception of human behavior. Such a shift may open important new possibilities for understanding and responding to the problem. In this section we first consider the implications of situational conceptions for clinical responses to known offenders. We then consider some wider implications for preventing sexual offenses.
Clinical implications

Risk assessment

Sexual offender recidivism research has been almost wholly concerned with the individual-level characteristics of offenders who have been observed to reoffend; little attention has been given to studying the ecological and situational context in which reoffending occurs. Accordingly, popular actuarial risk assessment scales (e.g. Static; SORAG), structured clinical protocols (e.g. STABLE; SVR-20) and related assessment instruments (e.g. PCL-R) are all focused on individual-level predictors. Few give weight to ecological or situational risk factors, and none are theoretically or empirically concerned with the interaction of individual and situational risk factors. Risk among known sexual offenders is instead conceptualized in almost exclusively individual-level terms.

According to a person-situation interaction conception of sexual offending, recidivism will vary according both to the individual characteristics of offenders and to the characteristics of the situations they encounter. Especially for repeat offenders, situational risk factors may be extrapolated from a careful situational analysis of previous offending incidents, as good practitioners presumably already do. Such assessment practices may be improved by utilizing situational theories to make sense of how certain situations interact with individual characteristics to heighten recidivism risk. It is likely that, except perhaps for the most determined offenders, recidivism risk will tend to be restricted to particular kinds of circumstances. For example even offenders categorized as high risk on individual-level risk assessment scales are likely to reoffend only in certain potentially foreseeable circumstances. These may be rather idiosyncratic, but there is still a need to know more generally about situational risk factors. Moving forward will require new research priorities.
focused on situational factors associated with sexual (and other) recidivism, and the
development of situational risk assessment protocols for use in clinical forensic
settings.

*Risk management*

Risk management strategies with known sexual offenders, and especially with
those assessed on individual-level factors as high risk, generally involve prohibiting
and monitoring certain of the offender’s whereabouts, movements, and activities.
Without an assessment of relevant situational risk factors, individual-level risk
assessment alone informs only generic risk management strategies based on the most
rudimentary conceptions of the situational dimensions of sexual offending. Child-
victim offenders may for example be prohibited from entering schools or even public
places where children may be. A much greater level of specificity is possible with
individualized situational risk assessment. The more situational risk management is
targeted to individual circumstances, the fewer restrictions the offender is required to
observe, and the greater his opportunity to engage in potentially protective personal
and social relationships, work, and recreational pursuits.

Realizing the full potential of situational risk management will require shifts
in research, practice and policy. Research is needed to empirically identify the various
permutations of situations in which reoffending occurs, and to evaluate the
effectiveness of situational risk management strategies. Research and practice
experience is required to develop and disseminate applied situational risk assessment
protocols. New best-practice standards may be needed to require practitioners to
possess adequate knowledge and expertise in the conduct and communication of
situational risk assessment, just as some jurisdictions now require competence in
individual-level risk assessment. Practitioners with such knowledge and expertise are
needed to allow decision makers such as the courts and parole boards to impose more individually-tailored risk management plans. Finally, researchers and practitioners may need to more effectively engage with policy makers to urge a shift toward more targeted sexual offender management policies.

**Offender treatment**

From a crime prevention point of view, psychological and psychiatric treatment of sexual offenders makes most sense as part of a broader risk management strategy, rather than as an end in itself. The goal should be to prevent further offending. From this perspective therapeutic interventions may be useful if they can deal effectively with individual-level problems likely to be associated with reoffending (i.e. the person side of the person-situation equation). Incorporating relapse prevention into the treatment response widens this focus to include attention to situational risk factors and to how individual and situational factors may interact to cause further offending. Institution-based treatment (i.e. in prisons, hospitals, youth detention centers, residential treatment facilities, and the like) may be at a disadvantage here because observations of the offender and his life circumstances are conducted in an artificial environment. In these settings it may be more difficult for practitioners to avoid succumbing to dispositional biases, and to overlook the importance of the ecological and situational context of the problem behavior. Centralized community-based programs can be similarly limited unless practitioners make the effort to engage with the offender’s family and other aspects of their natural social ecology.

A comprehensive conceptual framework that focuses attention on individual, ecological and situational factors allows practitioners to understand the problem behavior in its ecological and situational context, and from there it is possible to
identify and address a range of contributing factors both internal and external to the offender. The importance of this becomes especially clear in cases where offenders live in, or on their release return to, highly criminogenic environments. Without systemic and situational interventions, the traditional individual-level treatment goal essentially involves making the individual offender somehow less susceptible to the criminogenic effects of their living environment. An ecological-situational approach recognizes that changing aspects of the immediate environment itself is often key to changing individual behavior.

Implications for prevention

Sexual offender recidivism studies suggest that, once they are arrested, many (perhaps most) youth and adult sexual offenders do not go on to be rearrested for further sexual offenses (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). On the other hand some will become highly persistent. Specialized treatment and risk management may therefore be important for those offenders who would otherwise go on to commit further sexual offenses. However, preventing recidivism among known offenders is only one aspect of a potentially much wider prevention agenda. The most desirable prevention goal, of course, is to prevent these offenses from occurring in the first place.

A situational-ecological conception of sexual offending opens the door to a much wider range of potential prevention strategies than is possible with an exclusively individual-level conception of the problem. In fact situational conceptions of general crime, as we saw earlier in this chapter, were developed for the express purpose of informing practical crime prevention strategies. Situational prevention is most suited to very specific problems, so the starting point is to narrow the target of specific prevention measures. What is likely to work to prevent sexual abuse in schools will be quite different from what is required to prevent sexual assaults in and
around bars and clubs, which will be very different again from what is required to prevent Internet child pornography offending, for example. For each specific setting a micro-level situational analysis needs to be conducted, from which a range of situational interventions may be devised.

A detailed analysis of how situational prevention may be applied to specific kinds of sexual offending, in this case Internet child pornography, was recently presented by Wortley and Smallbone (in press). Suggested situational interventions ranged across the domains of various guardians and place managers and aimed to increase risk, increase effort, reduce rewards, remove excuses, and reduce provocations. Police could increase perceived risk by operating ‘stings’, alerting (but not necessarily arresting) detected users, and publicizing those arrests that are made; they could increase effort by issuing ‘take-down notices’ to concerning websites; they could remove excuses with ‘pop up’ messages on concerning sites; and they could remove ‘provocations’ by intervening with vulnerable young people who may be engaging in risky online behavior. ISP (Internet Service Provider) companies could increase risk by requiring identity verification; and they could increase effort by de-registering suspect ISP addresses. Individual businesses could increase effort by blocking online payments for illegal material; and they could reduce rewards by instigating advertising boycotts. Workplaces could increase risk by conducting regular audits of employees’ Internet use; they could increase effort by installing filtering software; and they could remove excuses by having clear codes of conduct. Parents could increase risk by implementing and monitoring house rules about Internet use; and increase effort by installing filtering software on home computers.

These are just a few examples of situational prevention, applied to just one specific type of sexual offending. However these examples illustrate some important
general points. First, situational prevention involves a potentially wide range of prevention agents, not just criminal justice practitioners. Second, a host of simple, unobtrusive, everyday strategies can be employed to make particular settings safer for everyone who encounters them, rather than limiting the focus of prevention efforts to a small number of risky people. Third, situational prevention aims to prevent offending before it otherwise occurs. Waiting until offenders have already offended, and until victims have already been victimized, is ultimately a more costly option. Dealing with known offenders is important, but it only becomes necessary when other prevention options have failed.

CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this chapter we observed that although theories of sexual offending have to varying extents recognized the importance of situational influences, this aspect of theory has had comparatively little impact on research, policy and practice. This may be partly because modern approaches to sexual offending maintain their historical connections to individual-level, psychopathological conceptions of the problem, rather than to contemporary ideas about crime, its causes and prevention. Situational conceptions of crime provide models for guiding research into situational aspects of sexual offending, and perhaps more importantly for understanding how individual and situational aspects of sexual offending interact. Embracing the individual-ecological-situational models that have been so influential in shaping the research and practice agendas in developmental criminology (e.g. Loeber & Farrington, 1998), clinical approaches to youth crime and violence (e.g. Henggeler, et al., 1998), and child maltreatment (Belsky, 1993), may yield a more complete picture of sexual offending and bring associated research and applied efforts closer into line with these clearly-related fields.
To conclude, then, just as exclusively individual-level explanations provide an incomplete picture of sexual offending, so too would situational explanations alone be incomplete. The real challenge is to understand how the problem behavior arises in the interaction of individuals with their immediate environments. We think these individual-situational interactions will be best understood in the context of the ecological context in which they occur.
REFERENCES


Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2006). Applying situational principles to sexual...


Table 1. Responses of sexual offenders according to disposition-situation interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation Type</th>
<th>Offender Type</th>
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<td>Challenging</td>
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<td>Precipitating</td>
<td>Reacts to</td>
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Figure 1. Eck’s (1993) Crime Triangle
Figure 2. Integrated theory of the onset and progression of sexual offending
(Smallbone & Cale, in press)