

Criminology and the Fundamental Attribution Error SLIDE 1

Pat Mayhew and I are being recognized today for work we did in the mid-1970s at the Home Office Research Unit in London. We showed that in explaining the occurrence of crime, you cannot ignore the opportunity to commit it. We found considerable evidence showing the powerful role of opportunity in crime, which led us quickly to the idea of reducing opportunities for crime through situational prevention. Before talking more about situational prevention, I want to describe some earlier research I did which paved the way for the work on situational prevention. This early research accounts for my talk's rather fearsome title which I hope will become clear to you.

I did this research in the mid-1960s when I got my first job as a newly-qualified clinical psychologist. I became the research officer for a group of training schools for delinquent boys in the West of England. I was located at the group's assessment center where all boys were first admitted on being sent by the juvenile courts to a training school. As might be expected, my bosses, most with social work or educational backgrounds, had little idea what to do with me. However, they did want my research to be useful for the schools and eventually it was decided that I would work on absconding, or escaping, from the schools.

Boys could easily abscond because the schools were all "open" with doors locked only at night. As many as 40% of the boys absconded at least once during their stay. Absconding caused much worry to the schools (not to mention the boys' families) because absconders often committed burglaries and car thefts in the local area to assist their escape. It was thought that if my research could identify the boys who were particularly prone to abscond, they could then be offered special preventive counselling.

In accordance with my clinical training, I set about comparing boys who absconded with those who did not on all manner of factors relating to upbringing and home, social circumstances, schooling and delinquent histories, as well as scores on personality and intelligence tests administered by the assessment center's psychologists. Subsequently, the psychologists administered new tests that I thought might better predict absconding. This program of research took about four years to complete, but it produced very little. Almost nothing distinguished the boys who absconded from other boys, apart from somewhat older ages at admission, slightly earlier starts in delinquent careers and a record of absconding from other forms of residential care.

This would all have been very disappointing had I not begun to find that various situational or environmental factors seemed to be related to absconding. For example, while in the assessment center, boys were more likely to abscond in the dark evenings of autumn and in months where there were extremes of sunshine. They were also more likely to abscond when

they had not been visited by their families, or if admitted at the same time as other boys with a previous absconding record.

Almost by chance, however, I stumbled on the most important finding when at a late stage in the research I gained access to unpublished Home Office records of absconding. These showed very large differences in absconding rates among the different schools. **SLIDE 2** The slide shows the results for Senior Schools for two years 1964 and 1966. I chose 1964 because in that year it was decided that boys should be allocated to the schools nearest to their homes. From my point of view, this meant that the boys in each school were little different from those admitted to the other schools.

Despite this, you can see from the slide that absconding rates varied from 10% of boys in School 1 to 75% in School 17. The results were similar for 1966, the most recent year for which data were available at the time. Even more important was that there was a close fit between the two years in rankings of absconding rates. In other words, the same schools tended to have either low or high absconding rates in both years. Due to the relatively short length of stay of about 15 months, few if any of the boys who were resident in 1966 would also have been resident 1964.

Overall, these findings demonstrated that features of school environment and regime were very important in determining rates of absconding and that, whatever these features were, their influence persisted over the years.

These findings reminded me of an important law of social psychology formulated by Kurt Lewin (1936) which I had learned as an undergraduate before undertaking my clinical training. Lewin had argued that behavior is a function of both personality and the situation, a relationship he expressed in a deceptively simple formula: $B = f(P.S)$. **SLIDE 3** This had proved true in my study of absconding, though in my case situation seemed to be more powerful than personality.

I was unable to investigate the regimes and environments of the training schools more carefully because I took a job at the Home Office Research Unit where I was put in charge of a section with Pat Mayhew, Mike Hough and other colleagues. The section was established to undertake research on improving crime control policy.

So this is where I return to the work on situational prevention for which Pat and I are being recognized. Our section produced a research report published in 1976, *Crime as Opportunity* (Mayhew et al. 1976), which assembled evidence from a wide variety sources showing that opportunity played a vital role in the occurrence of crime and which argued that reducing opportunities for crime could become an important part of crime policy. The single most important evidence in support of the power of opportunity concerned a study of suicide that I undertook with Pat which I will show you. **SLIDE 4.**

The first column shows the numbers of suicides committed each year in England and Wales between 1958 and 1976. During this time the annual numbers of suicide dropped around 30%, when in most other European countries the numbers of suicides were increasing. So why did the suicides fall? The second column holds the answer. It shows that suicides by domestic gas (“putting one’s head in the oven”), once the most popular way to commit suicide, were wiped out during the period. This occurred because the poisonous content of the gas (carbon monoxide) was steadily reduced, first because gas began to be made more cheaply from oil rather than coal and subsequently because the oil-produced gas was replaced by natural gas from the North Sea, which has no carbon monoxide.

So this slide shows that suicide, a behavior usually seen as committed by desperate people, was greatly reduced when an easy opportunity to commit it was removed. It was also apparent that relatively few would-be suicides switched to generally more unpleasant ways to die when they could no longer use gas – a clear demonstration of the power of opportunity in human affairs. If you remember nothing else that I say today, I hope you will remember this study.

Since then more than 200 studies have documented that situational crime prevention, as it came to be called, has achieved some remarkable reductions in levels of all manner of specific kinds of crime. Examples are shown in the slide **SLIDE 5**

This has usually been achieved with little or no displacement of crime elsewhere, to other times, to other targets or to other kinds of crime. A recent review of more than 100 situational prevention studies found no evidence of displacement in two-thirds of these studies. **SLIDE 6** In addition, nearly 40% of the studies found some evidence of “diffusion of benefits”. This refers to the fact that places or targets outside the range of a situational prevention measures often show drops in crime as large as those directly targeted (Clarke and Weisburd, 1994).

SLIDE 7 illustrates diffusion of benefits. It shows that when CCTV cameras were installed to protect student parking lots at Surrey University, they reduced theft in parking lots 2, 3 and 4 as expected. However, they also reduced theft in parking lot 1 which the cameras could not survey as their view was blocked by buildings.

The research on situational crime prevention is widely published and today I want to focus on a different topic, which draws directly on my absconding research – this topic is the “dispositional bias” of Criminology. I mentioned this in the first paper to use the term situational crime prevention that was published in 1980 in the *British Journal of Criminology* (Clarke 1980). What I meant by the dispositional bias was that most criminological theories explained not why crime occurs, but only why some kinds of people are disposed to become criminally motivated. This was said to be due to various unfavorable factors in their upbringing, in their personalities, or in their social backgrounds. These theories, like my initial efforts to explain absconding, completely neglected the important situational and opportunity determinants of crime.

Sarbin and Miller (1970) had earlier made the same criticism and it was subsequently sharpened up by Hirschi and Gottfredson (1986) who made a distinction between “theories of criminality” and “theories of crime”. Theories of criminality – those I characterized as dispositional – constituted the great majority of theories, while theories of crime, which took account of situational and opportunity variables, were much in the minority.

The dispositional bias of criminological theory can be traced back directly to the sociologist Edwin Sutherland (1937), who in his famous textbook, *Principles of Criminology*, urged the discipline to focus on explaining why some kinds of people were criminally motivated while he consigned explanations that took account of opportunity and situations to the realm of trivia.

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Most criminologists followed his advice. They seem to have agreed that all that was necessary to explain crime is to explain criminal dispositions, which somehow lead directly to criminal behavior. However, scholars do not usually follow slavishly the advice of those coming before them, however eminent. So why did they do this? The answer, once again, comes from social psychologists, such as Nisbett and Ross (1980), who built on Kurt Lewin’s work in a series of careful experiments in the 1970s to describe what they called the “fundamental attribution error”. This is the pervasive human habit of overstating the role of the person and underestimating the role of the situation in explaining people’s behavior. Ken Pease and Gloria Laycock (2012) have described a pernicious little wrinkle of the error: we do not apply it to our own behavior SLIDE 9. As they explain:

“We are happy to acknowledge situational determinants of our own peccadilloes. I am bad tempered because I slept badly. He is bad tempered because he is that sort of person.” (p178)

To those less familiar with Criminology this might all seem an arcane theoretical argument, but Environmental Criminologists like me believe that the discipline’s neglect of Kurt Levin’s formulation of behavior and the blinkers imposed by the fundamental attribution error, has led to severe limitations of criminological theory and crime policy.

So how would Criminology benefit from devoting more effort to explaining crime rather than criminality? First, the discipline would become less abstract and more theoretically successful. This is because the dependent variable, that is to say what is to be explained, would be a concrete behavior, a form of crime, not an abstract disposition to commit crime. The independent variables, i.e. the explanatory variables, would be measured aspects of the immediate physical and social settings in which that kind of crime routinely occurred. They would not, as so often the case in theories of delinquency, be proxy measures of long ago influences on the formation of delinquent and criminal motivation such as relative deprivation, disadvantage, social class, etc. It should be no surprise, as found by Weisburd and Piquero (2008), that theories of delinquency have produced such dismal predictions in the past 30 years. This is not a criticism of the quality of work on dispositions – only that it deals with no more than half of the problem of explaining crime.

The second benefit for Criminology is that it could explain a much broader range of criminal phenomena than today. Explaining crimes rather than criminality will require researchers to specify the particular form of crime they are studying. This is because every specific form of crime has its own “opportunity structure”, that is to say the unique constellation of social and physical conditions that are different from any other form of crime, even one that is apparently similar.

For example stealing hub caps in the inner city is a form of car theft, but so is stealing a car, giving it a new identity and successfully selling it overseas to a foreign country. The opportunity structures for these two kinds of car theft, and the skill sets, knowledge and contacts of the offenders involved, are completely different. Dispositional theories might help to explain theft of hub caps, but not the much more sophisticated crime of stealing a car, giving it a new identity and sending it to an overseas buyer. There is no way that an adolescent offender in the inner city would be capable of undertaking that crime.

If you accept this point, consider how much more varied are the opportunity structures and relevant explanatory variables for the following very different forms of crime that I have selected almost at random:

Acquaintance rape	Workers’ compensation	Human smuggling
Cyberbullying	fraud	Enslavement by militias of
Maritime piracy	Insider trading	young girls in Africa,
Tomb raiding	Acid attacks on young	Killing rhinos for their
Ransom kidnapping	women in India	horns.

The list is almost endless. Careful studies of these specific forms of crime, explaining them and making suggestions for reducing their incidence and harm would be fertile ground for hundreds of young criminologists. There would be new and challenging theoretical questions to investigate, including detailed accounts of how offenders act as the “situated decision makers” that Derek Cornish and I have described.

- How do they perceive, define and judge criminal opportunities.
- How do they decide to take advantage of them or not.
- How might they create such opportunities
- And why might they desist from these crimes.

The new research agendas resulting from explaining crime rather than criminality are exciting and almost unlimited.

In time, specialist groups will form which deal in broader aggregations of these specific crimes. There will be specialists in public transport crime, school and campus crimes, cybercrimes, housing crimes, public safety crimes, wildlife crimes, retail crimes, frauds and financial crimes, domestic violence, terrorism. These specialties, that Marcus Felson has been encouraging, will serve as the basis for interesting and useful professional careers. One consequence is that academics like me in departments of criminology will have to modify our syllabi to equip these new criminologists with the technical skills to undertake this work.

Whatever the benefits for Criminology of a greater focus on crime than criminality, the real benefits would be for crime policy. The fundamental attribution error is the main impediment to formulating a broader set of policies to control crime. Nearly everyone believes in their hearts that the best way to control crime is to prevent people from developing into criminals in the first place or, failing that, to use the criminal justice system to deter or rehabilitate them. This has led directly to overuse of the system at vast human and economic cost.

Hardly anyone understands – whether they are politicians, public intellectuals, government policy thinkers, police or social workers – that focusing on the offender is dealing with only half the problem. We need also to deal with the many and varied ways in which society inadvertently creates the opportunities for crime, the opportunities that motivated offenders exploit. And I do not mean the conditions in the past that led offenders to acquire criminal dispositions. I mean the many ways that society creates crime opportunities here and now.

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- We manufacture crime-prone goods
- we practice poor management in many spheres of everyday life;
- we permit poor layout and design of places;
- we neglect the security of the vast numbers of electronic systems that regulate our everyday lives
- and we sometimes pass laws with unintended crime effects

As I have explained, in its short history, situational prevention has accumulated dozens of successes in chipping away at some of problems created by these conditions. This attests to the values of the principles that I, Pat Mayhew, Derek Cornish and other colleagues formulated so many years ago. Much more surprising, however, is that the same thing has been happening in every sector of modern life without any assistance from governments or academics. I am referring to the avalanche of security measures that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of private and public organizations have been taking in the past 20 or 30 years to protect themselves from crime.

This has involved every sector of modern society – shops, banks, schools, colleges, hospitals, offices, transport systems, the airline industry, fast food restaurants credit card companies, motels, and any other business or organization that is open to some form of criminal exploitation – which as a matter of fact is all of them. They have all been tightening up security.

SLIDE 11. This enormous phenomenon, has largely escaped the attention of governments and of most academics, though everybody has complained that their lives have become more inconvenient and difficult as a result (dare I mention airline travel as an example). **Slide 12**

So what explains this avalanche of security? I don't think there is any real mystery to it. I am sure it is not because these businesses and organizations are trying to prevent kids from growing up to be delinquent. I don't think they are trying to make society safer from crime. Rather, I think that they know from experience that they get only limited help from the

authorities when they are crime victims. Therefore if they are to become more efficient and reduce their costs due to this victimization they must make themselves less vulnerable to crime. To do so they must make crime more difficult, more risky, less tempting and less rewarding.

In other words, they have arrived at the same solutions advocated by situational prevention, but in implementing them they have not been burdened by the need to demonstrate the solutions work; they can abandon them if they do not. They have not had to worry about displacement as long as it is to some other agency or entity. They probably care little about diffusion of benefits, if they have even heard of it, except in so far as it might benefit their competitors. Finally, they have not been obliged to spend time defending their commonsense actions against a phalanx of social critics. What matters to them is the bottom line of profitability.

I should mention that this change in security is so strong and widespread and is happening in all Westernized countries that some criminologists, especially Jan van Dijk, Nick Tilley and Graham Farrell (e.g. Farrell, 2014) have claimed that it explains the substantial crime drops that most of these countries have experienced in the past few decades and I think they are probably right.

I hope this avalanche of security might permanently change the dialogue about crime control. It was brought about by the private sector acting with little input from government. It has resulted in a wholesale change in the opportunities for crime without any deliberate effort to manipulate criminal dispositions. It clearly signals that major sectors of our society understand that we can prevent crime by manipulating the situations that permit crime without any, or little, contribution from the criminal justice system. In other words, many society's leaders, pursuing their own interests, have intuitively grasped that they have the capacity to protect themselves from crime by reducing the opportunities they provide for crime. While they might never have heard of the fundamental attribution error, they have avoided making it.

The private sector is not the only beneficiary, but it is also good news for governments because the savings in crime resulting from the actions of the private sector mean there is much less crime for the police and the courts to respond to. In return, government should try to help the public sector make the best use of its crime prevention resources. It can do this by funding research into which private sector preventive measures work best. As Graeme Newman and I argue, the government should also try to persuade the private sector not just to protect itself from crime, but also to protect the public from crime caused by its products and practices (Clarke and Newman 2005). Think only of the misery once endured by hundreds of thousands of motorists whose cars were produced with inadequate door and steering locks.

So however welcome is the greater involvement of the private sector in crime policy, it will not solve all the problems of crime. But the private sector has demonstrated that crime can be reduced, not just by changing offenders, but by reducing crime opportunities. Accepting this point will help us formulate more effective crime reduction policies. It will also help to deal

more quickly with the new manifestations of crime that will inevitably appear with changes in society. In sum, it means we should be in a better position to reduce the harms of those mostly selfish and greedy behaviors that we call crime.

Thank you!