Introduction to an Assigned Reading

Situational Action Theory (SAT)
Per-Olof Wikstrom

Specific Readings


Background

P.O. Wikstrom (Cambridge University) has been conceptually developing and empirically testing Situational Action Theory (SAT) for close to two decades. Very broadly,

1. The approach is grounded in an interactionist view of human action. Behavior is a function of the person and the environment.

   This idea in social psychology goes back at least to Kurt Lewin in the 1940s

   \( b = f(P \times E) \)

   and was re-popularized in the 1970s (Endler & Magnusson, 1976). Its philosophical origins go back to Aristotle (see below).

   The interactionist view suggests that the environment/setting/situation is important for understanding action, but the ways it matters, or the ways its influence plays out, will be different for different individuals. In analysis of variance (ANOVA) terminology, although there may be “main effects” of person or environment variables, what is key theoretically is the “interaction effect” – how person and environment impacts are mutually contingent.

2. The theory is quite clear about what it is trying to explain: whether an act defined as a crime is committed or not.

   Criminological theories at the individual level can be grouped quite broadly into those concerned with understanding and predicting criminality and/or describing longitudinal socialization processes leading to a disposition toward criminality versus those concerned with understanding and predicting whether a crime event will occur at a specific time or a specific place or a specific placetime.
For example, many delinquency (Rutter & Giller, 1984) and many violence or aggression theories (Moffitt, 1993) are about understanding propensities and prevalence rates, and most ecologically oriented crime prevention theories, for example situational crime prevention (Clarke, 1995), are about understanding where and when crime acts take place.

3. The view of human nature and human activity sees committing crime or not committing crime as a moral choice. It is a matter of morality not in a religious sense, but in the action sense, following Aristotle’s discussion of moral behavior in his *Nichomachaean Ethics*. ¹ (For what seems to be a straightforward introduction, see (Johnston, 1997).) This is related to, but also more situational than psychologists’ discussion of moral development (Hogan, 1973; Piaget, 1965 [1932 original]). Following Aristotle, much (but not all) human behavior is goal directed and thus teleological.

4. In very general terms what Wikstrom is trying to do is fill a gap in criminological theory, which has concentrated either on surrounding factors like community or contextual variables, or persons. He is trying to create a theoretical model that helps us understand how these two sets of dynamics connect with one another (Wikstrom & Sampson, 2003).

**Key Features of SAT**

*Settings and perceived situations*

As shown in the handbook table (below), there is the person, the physical/social place they are located, the setting, which is what is perceived by the five senses, and the “perception of action alternatives,” the situation, which results from how the person interacts with the setting. These include the relevant action alternatives. These will vary from person to person. Two people, in the same situation, may see remarkably different action alternatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 12.1. Key Elements of the Situational Model</th>
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<td><strong>Element</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Person</td>
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<td>Setting</td>
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<td>Situation</td>
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<td>Action</td>
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¹ Which I have not read.
**Perceiving and choosing**

The situation is **perceived** and those perceptions may then set in motion a choice process.

The perception/choice process may or may not lead to an act which is a crime.

The perception/choice process is driven by the person’s propensity for or against specific actions which are crimes, and by the crime-relevant features of the setting to which the person is exposed.

SAT uses what is called the causal fork as a causal mechanism to describe the perception/choice process.

The causal fork describes **an interaction** not an additive effect of these two different elements.

As Wikstrom says in the *Handbook* article (221):

> Crime propensity is activated by criminogenic exposure and criminogenic exposure is made relevant by crime propensity. The general nature of this interaction is that the influence of exposure depends on a person’s propensity: the importance of criminogenic exposure amplifies with increasing crime propensity (the nature of the interaction between propensity and exposure is developed in more detail in subsequent sections).

This is a **moderating** effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986); the impact of the setting feature (exposure) depends on the person attribute (propensity) and vice versa.

**The Peterborough Study**

Wikstrom has been collecting data from a large sample (~ 700) of adolescents, every year or every other year, in the small town of Peterborough in eastern England, for several years. It is a panel design, the same youths/young adults are interviewed year after year. Interviews are face-to-face. Peterborough is a small city in a surrounding rural area, quite multi-ethnic, with considerable poverty and crime. In addition, there was an initial city-wide survey to gauge community features like collective efficacy. Perhaps most unique about PADS (Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study) is the use of space time budgets to find out who was where when.

For more details consult the PADS website: [http://www.pads.ac.uk/](http://www.pads.ac.uk/)
References


Additional Wikstrom Readings


