



Target selection in rapists: The role of environmental and contextual factors



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ABSTRACT

Research on sex offenders has consistently emphasized the role of personal factors, while neglecting to consider the role of environmental and situational factors. The environmental perspective is primarily interested in crime, of which the offender is only one element, and the analysis begins with the location of the crimes, aiming at sorting out patterns in where, when and how crimes occur. Over the past few years there has been an increase in research on rapists' modus operandi, geographic decision-making, and target selection. This article aims at providing a comprehensive review of the work that has been done in the field of rapists' target selection and hunting behavior, from an environmental standpoint. After a brief introduction and review of the theoretical models in environmental criminology, empirical studies are presented that investigate the geography of sex offending, offenders' hunting behavior and hunting process, geographic decision-making in target selection, and the influence of routine activities and offender type in target selection.

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1. Introduction

“As the empirical science of crime, criminology has concentrated on criminogenic issues, that is, those things thought to cause crime by definition, by situation or by compulsion” (Brantingham & Brantingham,

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1984, p. 10). Throughout the years, the mainstream of research on crime has focused on criminal motivation, the desire or compulsion to commit crime. Two perspectives emerged: while some researchers view criminal motivation as something inherent in criminals, the product of some *internal* cause, others see it as the product of forces *external* to the individual, the pressures of the social and economical environment shaping criminal behavior in some individuals and law-abiding behavior in others (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1984).

Brantingham and Brantingham (1991) describe crime as a complex event, which occurs when four things concur: a law, an offender, a target and a place. These four elements constitute the four dimensions of crime, and must be understood and interpreted against a complex historical and situational backdrop of social, economic, political, biological and physical characteristics that sets the context in which all dimensions of crime are contained. Environmental criminology could be defined as the study of the fourth dimension of crime (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1991).

Research on sex offenders has consistently emphasized the role of personal factors, such as the offender's personality or implicit theories, on the offending process, while neglecting to consider the role of situational factors (Beauregard & Leclerc, 2007; Polaschek, Hudson, Ward, & Siegert, 2001; Ward, Loudon, Hudson, & Marshall, 1995). The environmental perspective, by contrast, is primarily interested in crime; the offender is only one element of a criminal event, and there is little immediate relevance to how he came to be the way he is. The focus is on the current dynamics of crime (Wortley & Mazerolle, 2008). It is assumed that some people are criminally motivated, and the analysis begins with the location of the crimes, aiming at sorting out patterns in where, when and how crimes occur (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1991).

A number of theoretical approaches have been identified within the environmental criminology field, namely the routine activity theory, the rational choice theory and the pattern theory, among others. All of these approaches share a common concern for context: Felson and Clarke (1998) state that individual behavior is a product of a person's interaction with their physical setting, and the setting provides varying levels of opportunity for crime. As Rossmo (2000, p. 112) explains, "Routine activity, rational choice, and pattern theories have different emphases—society, local area, and the individual, respectively. But all three perspectives converge on the nexus of setting and opportunity. Crime opportunities depend on everyday movements and activities. Society and locality can change and structure crime opportunity, but it is the individual who chooses to offend". These approaches greatly contribute to a better understanding of offenders' target selection processes, and constitute the framework for most research conducted on this subject.

2. Theoretical models in environmental criminology and target selection

2.1. Routine activity theory

At the core of the routine activity theory is the hypothesis that the probability of a violation, namely direct-contact predatory crime, occurring at any specific time and place might be taken as a function of the convergence of three minimal elements: (1) a likely offender, (2) a suitable target, and (3) the absence of a capable guardian against crime (Clarke & Felson, 1993). All of these three elements are necessary for the crime to occur (Felson, 2002). Criminal events are central to the routine activity approach; while it does not deny the existence of criminal inclinations, these are taken as given (Clarke & Felson, 1993).

According to Felson (2002), each crime type has its own, particular, chemistry, and all crimes also have a common chemistry. It is, thus, necessary to "for each setting, consider its presences and absences, its entries and exits, and how these make a particular crime likely to occur" (Felson, 2002, p. 33). Rossmo (2000, p. 112) states that "for a direct-contact predatory crime to occur, the paths of the offender and

victim must intersect in time and space, within an environment appropriate for criminal activity". The routine activity approach emphasizes the importance of the daily activities of offenders and targets: "everyday life tempts and impairs potential offenders, influencing their decisions about crime" (Felson, 2002, p. 35).

As Burke (2005) points out, target suitability is characterized by four attributes (VIVA): (1) the value or desirability of the target, calculated from the subjective rational perspective of the offender; (2) the inertia of the target, which includes all the physical aspects that can facilitate or inhibit the transportation of the target, such as weight, mobility, resistance, and locks, (3) the visibility of the target, which identifies the person or property for attack, and (4) the accessibility of the target (and the escape from it), which increases the risk of attack. The acronym VIVA describes the salient risk factors associated with crime (Rossmo, 2000).

Felson (2002) adapted Clarke's (1999) CRAVED model (Concealable, Removable, Available, Valuable, Enjoyable, Disposable) for hot products, and applied it to violent offenders: "a violent offender generally needs to *conceal* the violent act, as well as the steps before and after it. He must *remove* himself safely from the scene; *avail* himself of a convenient human target for violent attack; find a target of *value* in his own mind; *enjoy* the criminal act, or at least avoid pain to himself, and *dispose* of incriminating evidence, even the victim" (Felson, 2002, p. 32).

2.2. Rational choice theory

Rational choice theory views crime and criminal behavior as the outcome of choices, which are, in turn, influenced by a rational assessment of the efforts, rewards and costs involved in alternative courses of action (Cornish, 1993). It assumes that crime is a purposive and deliberate behavior, intent on benefiting the offender by meeting his needs (Clarke & Felson, 1993; Cornish & Clarke, 2008).

Furthermore, it is assumed that meeting the offender's needs involves the making of decisions and choices, however rudimentary these processes might be, and that these processes exhibit a measure of rationality, albeit constrained by limits of time and ability and the availability of relevant information (Clarke & Felson, 1993; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). The rational choice perspective offers a view of *bounded* rationality, acknowledging that in reality, action often needs to be taken under less than perfect circumstances, all the more so in the context of offending/criminal behavior (Cornish & Clarke, 2008). This is inherently a risky activity, offering a series of uncertainties, time pressures and differences in the individual offender's skill and experience in interpreting whatever information is available. Moreover, offenders often make mistakes by acting rashly, failing to consider all sides of a problem, ignoring or downplaying risks, or by acting under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Cornish & Clarke, 2008). As experience changes the subject's information processing, so may a criminal improve on his/her decision making over time (Rossmo, 2000). The learning process is an integral part of rational choice theory, in that this approach emphasizes the interactional, transactional and adaptive nature of human behavior (Cornish, 1993).

Cornish and Clarke (1986) consider that even in those offenses that appear to be pathologically motivated or impulsively executed, rational components can be identified. Cornish and Clarke (1987) state that, even though the motivation behind some expressive crimes may be pathological, their planning and execution may, nonetheless, be highly rational. Thus, pathological crimes involve non-pathological behavior (Rossmo, 2000); even those committed by psychotic individuals with unfathomable motives still exhibit some elements of rationality (Homant & Kennedy, 1998). Violent criminals, namely sexual offenders, display a substantial degree of rationality in the commission of their crimes (Miethe & McCorkle, 1998).

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