

The Importance of Action Theory in Criminology

Chair: Kyle Treiber (University of Cambridge)

**1. *The Importance of Perceptions and Choices. Toward an Analytical Criminology.*
Per-Olof Wikström (University of Cambridge)**

The aim of this paper is to provide a rationale and agenda for a more theory-driven, analytical criminology. It criticizes the common risk factor approach to theory and theory testing and its inherent problem of distinguishing between correlates and causes and inability to provide proper explanation of crime and its causes. The paper highlights the importance of having an adequate theory of action that can help identify causal mechanisms (processes) and integrate levels of explanation. It provides a clear demarcation criterion to distinguish between correlates and potential causes in the study of crime. Finally, it stresses the need to clearly differentiate between causes and the causes of the causes when analysing crime causation.

**2. *Self-Interest, Sanctions and Actions in Control Theories of Crime*
Michael Gottfredson (University of California)**

The conceptual distinctions between compulsion and choice permeate criminology and the criminal law. Theories once were said to belong to one or the other perspective—the positive school or the classical school and the criminal law has always struggled with the concept of purposeful or intentional behaviour in the development of sanctioning systems. Contemporary research on the development of the tendency to engage in behaviour that favours short-term satisfactions but which entail longer term costs, on the effectiveness of external sanctions like deterrence in the criminal justice system, and on the similarities with crime of many non-crime behaviours are explored in an effort to bring individual action more directly to the foreground of theory.

**3. *The Role of the causal theory of action in criminological theories. The case of situational action and self-control theory*
Alfonso Serrano-Maillo (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia)**

Criminological theories at the individual level usually explain the tendency of certain individuals or groups of individuals to commit crimes, but fail to explain the mechanisms that lead an individual to commit an act of crime. In most criminological theories, the connection between the tendency and the act itself is a kind of black box. Something happens inside the individual that is usually left out of the theoretical picture. The idea that criminological theory would benefit from a theory of action is relatively old, though few are the systematic approaches to integrate it into a criminological theory. One exception is the important recent work by Wikström and his situational action theory of crime.

According to the causal theory of action, an intentional action is an event by pairs of *beliefs* and *desires* that form *intentions*. Intentions, especially *immediate intentions*, can result in an action that can be criminal. A special problem happens in the case of *acratia actions*, in which the action is not the one dictated by the *best decisive judgement*. According to the causal theory of action, an acratia action takes place because of a lack of “self-control” (or *self-control**) (a concept which is different from the one proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi). *Self-control** in this sense is the capacity to act in accordance with best decisive judgements. It is unlikely, though, that the majority of crimes are acratia actions.

In this paper, it is proposed that the causal theory of action (Brand, 1984; Davidson, 2001; Mele, 1992, 1995, 2003) is promising for the *development* and *test* of criminological, individual level theories. Wikström’s work is a very good example of these possibilities. Thus, it is argued that different criminological theories make different predictions about key elements of the causal theory of action. Special attention is paid to its role in situational action theory (the only theory that incorporates action theory to its mechanisms) and to its compatibility with self-control theory. At the same time, it is argued that it can be incorporated to learning or strain theories.