

Felson, Marcus K.: Crime and Nature

Crime and Nature is a book in which Marcus Felson formulates a perspective on crime that is inspired and influenced by the way the life sciences describe and explain their subject matter. It is *not* a book on ‘environmental crime’ or the violation of laws that protect the environment, nor is it concerned with genetic, hormonal, neurological or other physiological correlates of crime. Like other theoretical perspectives that Felson has helped develop, such as routine activities theory and situational crime prevention, the perspective on crime that is articulated in *Crime and Nature* deals with the tangible and observable aspects of criminal behavior, and is not concerned with the variation in criminal propensity between individuals that is at the heart of etiological theories of crime. According to Felson, all attempts to distinguish “criminal man” have failed and been a waste of time. This view echoes the dominant position among ecologists and naturalists, who generally consider inter-individual differences irrelevant for understanding their subject matter.

Crime and Nature borrows core concepts from ecology, like ‘habitat’, ‘parasitism’ and ‘foraging’, and uses them to help explain criminal phenomena. The starting point of the perspective is that the seven basic requirements of life — organization, adaptation, metabolism, movement, growth, reproduction and irritability— can be fruitfully applied to understand crime.

This entry provides an overview of how Felson applies concepts from ecology and related fields to crime. It discusses his answers to the following questions (book chapter numbers in parentheses): What is crime and what are its stages? (chapters 2-3) What are the micro and macro environments that influence crime? (chapters 4-8) How does crime interact with its environment? (chapters 9-10) How can the relationships between offenders and their environment be characterized? (chapters 11-14) How do offenders search and approach targets and how do they defend themselves against other offenders and against law enforcements? (chapters 15-20) How can criminal acts be classified? (chapter 21). The entry concludes with a short note on the early reception of *Crime and Nature*.

Definition and Three Stages of Crime

Any theory of crime needs to define its subject matter. According to Felson, a useful definition of crime reconciles local variation with global uniformity, and mirrors how naturalists define and update their subject matter. He proposes the following 15-word definition : “Crime is any *identifiable behavior* that an *appreciable number of governments* has *specifically prohibited* and *formally punished*.” This definition allows the analyst to ignore oddities such as specific behaviors that have been prohibited in only one place at one specific time, and to exclude behaviors that some people consider harmful, amoral or distasteful but that are not prohibited by authorities. In line with the basic assumptions underlying the ecological perspective, Felson only defines crimes, not criminals.

Crime and Nature analyzes criminal events as part of a logical sequence of events, most of which occur near in time and space, and some of which may involve other illegal behavior. This sequence can be divided into the *prelude*, the *incident* and the *aftermath*. The *prelude* includes the processes that directly precede and lead into the crime. The *incident* is the illegal activity itself, and the aftermath includes escape and the processing of stolen items. Often, the *aftermath* of one incident forms the prelude to another incident, which gives rise to chains of crimes committed by the same or different persons. For example, the proceeds of a burglary are traded against illegal drugs, but that transaction fails and leads to an assault.

Micro and Macro Environments of Crime

Crime and Nature emphasizes that the environment has a decisive influence on whether, where, when and how crimes take place. Crime needs its environment, as there can be no crime if there are no victims, targets, accomplices, people to sell stolen goods to, vehicles to escape from the crime site, and so on.

The macro context of crime is referred to as *the ecosystem*, a term used in ecology to refer to the complex web of ongoing interactions between all organisms in a geographic area. When applied to crime, read it as *society*. Between the micro level of the *criminal act* and the macro level of *the ecosystem*, various levels can be distinguished. In the order of increasing size and complexity, they are a *setting*, a *habitat*, and a *niche*.

A *setting* is “a location for recurrent use, for a particular activity, at known times.” (p. 102), such as a house, a bar, or a street corner for the gang who hangs out there. A *habitat* is a somewhat larger spatial entity that contains at least several settings. Examples are an airport, a university campus or a shopping mall. The concept of a crime *niche* is not necessarily geographical as it goes beyond particular places. It includes everything that supports a particular type of crime. For example, a crime niche for burglary includes everything that supports the commission of burglary, ranging from meeting places for offenders, places to stash stolen items and people to sell them to, cell phones for offenders to communicate, tools to break into properties, and vehicles for transportation, to mention just a few. *Fundamental niches* are potential resources that could be used for crime, while *realized niches* are the resources actually used to commit crime. In sum, crime feeds on the opportunities and resources that are available in its environment.

Mechanisms of Interaction

Competition and *adaptation* are mechanisms by which crime interacts with its environment. *Competition* occurs when organisms in the same community need the same scarce resource. Criminal activities sometimes compete with one another—usually in the illegal markets for drugs, sex, and gambling— or with legal activities. A prostitute may compete for customers with other prostitutes and with legal destinations for the customer’s money. *Adaptation* occurs when an organism changes in response to changes in its environment that challenge its survival. Adaptation of crime takes place when criminal activities respond to measures taken by potential victims or law enforcers to stop them. It characterizes the ‘arms race’ between crime and crime prevention. Where criminal opportunities are blocked by situational crime prevention measures, criminals adapt by finding ways to circumvent or bypass the block. Subsequently, crime prevention adapts and searches for new strategies against the adapted crime, and the process repeats itself continuously.

Relationships

Crime and Nature applies four relational concepts from ecology to crime: *symbiosis*, *mutualism*, *parasitism* and *passive assistance*. *Symbiosis* is the general term that

encompasses the other three concepts. “Crime symbiosis is a close and prolonged relationship between two parties, providing illicit benefit to at least one of them.” (163: 164). Quite often, both parties are involved in related criminal activities, for example drug dealers and their customers or thieves and fences. Sometimes, only one of the parties is involved in criminal activities, while the other presents a fully legitimate activity, such as the owner of a restaurant where offenders meet to prepare an offense.

When both parties benefit from the relation, such as the prolific thief and his long-term fence, it is called a *mutualism*. *Parasitism* is a relation in which one party benefits while the other party is harmed. The racketeer, who demands payment in exchange for ‘protection’ against crimes that he himself instigates unless the payment is made, and his victim form an excellent example, like many other forms of repeated or ongoing victimization committed by the same offender. *Passive assistance* refers to a situation where one party benefits from the other without helping or harming the other party. Passive assistance is a large category that includes crime that benefits from legal activities. For example, many illegal activities are facilitated by telecommunication services, but the proportion of calls involving illegal activities is negligibly small, Passive assistance also occurs when legal activities benefit from criminal activities (e.g., some doctors make a living from treating victims of violent crimes).

Attack and Defense

To survive, all living beings must eat and not be eaten. They must develop strategies that are good enough to provide them with what they need and that also prevent them from being attacked by predators. The perspective outlined in *Crime and Nature* applies the concepts of *foraging* and *vigilance* to crime. Criminal foraging applies how offenders search, choose and attack their targets. It displays tactical diversity in terms of *diet breath*, *hunting method* and *geographical range*. *Diet breath* refers to variety in the type of targets an offender is after. Many property offenders prefer cash money above anything else, but will easily broaden their set of acceptable items of cash is not available. *Hunting method* refers to how an offender searches and attacks a target. Robbing a victim may be quick but dangerous, burgling the victim takes more time and effort but might be less risky. *Geographical range* is the size of the area where an offender searches for targets.

Wide area foraging may increase the number of potential targets, but could be more risky and more energy-consuming. Many offenders' foraging trips start and end at a central setting, which is their home. Unless they are driven to offend almost constantly for need of drugs, they normally commit crimes in and around the places they are familiar with through their legal daily activities.

Like foraging animals need to be vigilant in order not to be eaten themselves, offenders must be prepared and defend themselves from being stopped and apprehended by the police or other law enforcement agencies, and from being attacked by potential victims or other offenders.

Taxonomy of Crime

Naturalists use a variation of Linnaeus taxonomy of living things to order their observations and communicate about them (kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species). For the same reason, Felson's Crime and Nature proposes a crime taxonomy, one that is explicitly presented as open to future enhancements. The taxonomy classifies crime "in terms of the trip towards the crime target and the main features of daily life that enable or impede that trip." (p. 329). Thus, it classifies crime in terms of its physical story. The taxonomy uses five levels that all represent a step in accessing the target: paths, barriers, tools, convergences and targets. Paths are legitimate infrastructures that an offender uses to move towards targets, such as highways, the internet or the position an offender holds within an organization. Barriers are things that stand in the way of committing the crime, for example 'no trespassing' signs, doors, fences and guards. Tools are objects that help an offender to successfully commit the crime. They include tools for entering locked locations, such as a crowbar or a (false) permit or keys, tools for transport (e.g., a van or a motorcycle) and tools for enforcement (weapons). A convergence refers to the level of interaction between offender and target. The degree of convergence varies from situations with no contact between offender and target to situations that characterize the most obtrusive crimes. At the former end of the continuum are situations of trespass, observation and retrieval that require no contact between offender and target, and at the other extreme are attacking and hijacking the crime target.

The target of crime is what the offender is after. Many offenders want money, but some are after specific products or information, or after a specific person.

Reception

The first edition of *Crime and Nature* appeared in 2006 and it may be too early to assess the impact. It has not yet been reviewed or commented upon broadly. It was the subject of an “Author Meets Critics” session at the American Society of Criminology meeting in Atlanta in 2007. One recent paper (Morselli & Royer, 2008) explicitly tests a foraging hypothesis developed in *Crime and Nature*.

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See also: Brantingham Patricia L. and Paul J. Brantingham: Environmental Criminology ; Clarke, Ronald V.: Situational Crime Prevention ; Cohen, Lawrence and Marcus Felson: Routine Activities Theory ; Cornish Derek B. and Ronald V. Clarke: Rational Choice Theory ; Eck, John: Places and the Crime Triangle ; Felson, Marcus K.: Crime and Everyday Life ; Vila, Brian J., Lawrence E. Cohen, and Richard S. Machalek: Evolutionary Expropriative Theory

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