

The Rational Choice Perspective Theory and Prevention submitted

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Introduction

This paper is intended to present the criminological theory of rationality or decision-making of offenders. It will recall archaic "classical criminology" based on the utilitarian principles which tend to be undergoing a rebirth and challenging modifications. As in any other theory the aspect of controversy shall be outlined. In addition this paper shall introduce the interesting concepts of crime prevention and displacement.

Rationality and Classical Criminology

The rational-choice perspective is one approach that focuses on the rewards and risks derived from criminal behaviour. The perspective highlights offenders' logical thinking, their attitudes of how to process information and evaluate opportunities and alternatives. It stresses calculated decision-making, arguing that offenders choose how to act after deciding whether a particular kind of behaviour is beneficial or not. Hence offenders choose to commit crime or to adopt a criminal lifestyle in order to acquire certain needs and in weighing up opportunities, costs and benefits. (Cornish and Clarke, 1987).

Barlow, (1990), suggests that the choice is not only directed towards the type of crime to be committed but even against one victim rather than another. This crime-structuring strategy is indicated in Thomas Reppetto's (1976) study of residential burglary and robbery. Reppetto gives account of various interviews with offenders who confirmed that target preferences existed and were taken into account when criminals decided to commit crime.

"Burglars looked for unoccupied single-family homes (thus reducing the risk of being seen or heard), with easy access (thus reducing the amount of skill needed to gain entry), which appeared affluent (thus increasing the possible reward), and which were located in neighbourhoods where offenders felt they "fit in" (another way to reduce the risk of being noticed)." Reppetto, (1976).

According to Cornish and Clarke, (1987) and later Adler, Mueller and Laufer, (1995), the outset of the rational choice theory is solely credited to the teachings of Cesare Bonesana, Marchese di Beccaria (1738-1794) and to Jeremy Bentham, (1748-1832). Both Beccaria and Bentham who founded the

"Classical School of Criminology" and preached the utilitarian principles, assumed that individuals calculate their own actions in accordance with their likelihood of bringing happiness "pleasure" or unhappiness "pain". Alder et al, (1995) suggested that Jeremy Bentham developed a scientific approach to the making and breaking of laws and proposed a "precise pseudo-mathematical formula" to enforce his theory which he called "Felicitous Calculus". Bentham argued that human beings make calculations whether a law breaking action was beneficial and worth committing and thus declared that individuals could be classified as "huma calculators".

Siegal and Senna, (1991), argue that people are "human calculators", as these, weigh the benefits and consequences of future actions before deciding to commit a criminal action. Most would cease their actions if the potential pain associated with a behaviour, outweighed its foreseen gain. Even law-violating behaviour will become more attractive if the rewards seem far greater than the potential punishment.

According to Cornish and Clarke, (1987); Siegal and Senna, (1991), Cohen and Felson, (1979), law breaking behaviour is viewed as an event that occurs when an offender decides to take the chance of violating the law after considering (a) his or her own personal situation and motivation (such as need for money or peer approval), (b) after choosing the suitable targets (such as easily transportable goods) and (c) after establishing the absence of capable guardians to prevent them from committing the offence or being apprehended (such as police or neighbours).

This rationality aids the offender in weighing the probabilities of successfully completing a crime with the chances of being caught and punished. Siegal and Senna, (1991) provide an example where old offenders desist from accomplishing certain criminal offences after realizing that the risks of being apprehended are much greater than the benefits acquired from the crime.

Different Conceptions of Rationality
Contrary to what Reppetto, (1976) suggested regarding the rational burglar, Dermot Welsh, (1986) argues that not all such criminals are always rational and thus gives two examples. The primary example indicates that such criminals are not always rational (if they

were, it is argued they would not be content with the small gains they so often make through crime); and secondly, they are not rational because they get caught (if they were rational they would supposedly get away with the crime).

Walsh, (1986) continues that it is highly doubtful that economic criminals such as burglars and shoplifters could have access to the mass of information needed to make either victim selection or the crime itself totally rational.

Felson, (1983) suggest that criminal offences are divided at least into four types, namely:

- (1) "The exploitative (or predatory offence)" where the person takes or damages the person or property of another.
- (2) "The mutualistic offense (such as gambling or prostitutes)" where the offense links two or more illegal parties acting in complimentary roles.
- (3) "The competitive violation offences (such as fights, riots)" where two or more parties are involved in physical struggle against others.
- (4) "The individual offence (such as solo drug use)" where the offence is perpetrated by one individual.

Felson, (1983) continues that in each and every instance the offender uses a certain degree of rationality, although in every offence the rationality used differs according to the capabilities of the offender. Still offenders do not possess those abilities to effect the perfect crime. If these were well informed, forward looking and unrelenting, crime prevention and detection would be very tough indeed.

In commercial offences, for example, robbers tend to find the shortest route, spend the least time and seek the easiest means to accomplish criminal acts. So they tend to waste the least time and energies and need not expend tremendous efforts in order to identify a suitable unguarded target, which is often easy to find. This routine activity was argued by Zipf, (1950) in "Principle of Least Effort".

So much so Cornish and Clarke, (1986) suggested that the imperfect shoppers pick the best buy right under their nose, missing a better buy in small print in another stall. This comportment is also applied by offenders, who while on their "flaw-hunting" detect an interesting target, neglecting better ones not far from reach.

Hence, these seem to be rational but on the contrary they act irrationally.

As already mentioned earlier in this paper, offenders make up their decisions to commit law-breaking activities after evaluating the utilitarian principles, those which outweigh pleasure from pain. However, Bennett and Wright, (1984) concluded that offenders are behaving rationally as they see it at the time, but that what might be perceived as rational on one occasion might not be so perceived on another.

With the advance in knowledge and technology, criminal opportunities are gradually expanding, offering criminals a wider choice in selecting which criminal event more likely or less likely fits their necessities and desired benefits.

Barlow, (1990) argues that rational-choice is exercised within constraints, and people's access to criminal opportunities varies. Thus the distribution of crime.

Siegal and Senna, (1991) agree with Barlow's views and argue that a criminal act may be committed because the target looks inviting, unprotected and profitable. They also believe that no matter how "pathologically or socially maladjusted" criminals may be, they are able to process information that leads them to choose one target or crime method over another. The focus then is on the crime and not the offender and how the victim is predisposed to protect his property or self.

The latter authors then lay down some questions; "Why is a particular house in a wealthy middleclass suburb chosen by a teenage burglar? How does crime choice differ between neighbourhoods and area? Does the presence of lighting, security alarms, and/or guard dogs influence the decision to commit crime? Siegal and Senna, (1991).

Still it is argued, for example, that most people cannot know all the information necessary to evaluate all possible actions, but rather they instinctively react to opportunities that arise in ordinary situations, which they cannot resist. This limited rationality view as suggested by Barlow, (1990) holds that behavioral choices arise in people's lives routinely and some involve decisions to commit crime. These choices are formed by several factors, including the social distribution of opportunities and access to them; the knowledge, past experience, capabilities of individuals, the conditions in which they are reared and situations they find themselves involved in, and the precautions taken by victims and authorities to prevent them.