

Exploring the Person-Situation Interaction in Situational Crime Prevention

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Abstract

The efficacy of situational crime prevention is premised on the assumption that crime occurs as a result of a person-situation interaction (Clarke 2008). However, it is argued in this paper that just what is meant by an *interaction* between person and situation is not always made clear in the situational crime prevention literature. There are two distinct meanings of interaction in this context. The first meaning – the sense in which the term is most often used in relation to situational crime prevention – is that the relationship between the person and the situation is *reciprocal*. An individual's behaviour is affected by and in turn affects his/her immediate environment. The second meaning – which has received less explicit attention in the situational crime prevention literature – is that the relationship between the person and the situation is *interdependent*. The effect of the immediate environment on behaviour depends upon the individual in question. Giving consideration to the full meaning of the person-situation interaction provides a more nuanced account of the role of the immediate environment in criminal behaviour.

The enduring contribution that Ron Clarke has made to the field of crime prevention is to highlight the role of the immediate micro-environment in the performance of criminal behaviour. He was one of the first to see the potential that the manipulation of situational factors offered for intervention at the level of environmental design. Better than anyone else, Clarke was able to translate the logic of situational prevention into a comprehensive set of concrete, practical and effective interventions that were accessible to in-the-field practitioners.

Clarke's model of prevention is built on a solid psychological principle. During the 1960s, the decade before Clarke's first writings on situational prevention appeared (Clarke & Martin 1975), one of the most vigorous debates in psychology concerned the cross-situational consistency of personality traits. Traditional dispositional personality theorists conceptualised traits as generalised behavioural tendencies that predicted how individuals behaved across different areas of their life. Someone who was aggressive in one situation was seen to be likely to be aggressive in many other situations as well. A person performs aggressive acts because he/she has an aggressive trait. Behavioural theorists, notably Walter Mischel (1968), argued instead that behaviour is highly variable and is a response to different situational demands and expectations. A person can be aggressive in one circumstance and not in others depending upon the context. It is the situation that causes the behaviour not the person. The variability of behaviour makes the very notion of a trait unsustainable. This theoretical position is known as situationalism.

As is the case with many debates, it soon became apparent that the truth lay somewhere in the middle. The correlation between measures of personality traits and

their related behaviours is typically found to be in the order of .4 (Nisbett 1980), a strength of association that can be described as medium. The size of this correlation suggests that behavioural patterns develop around stable trait cores, while the level of unexplained variance is evidence for the role of situations in the behavioural expression of traits. Most personality theorist now agree that the performance of behaviour is best understood as the result of an interaction between dispositional and situational factors.

It is the person-situation interaction that ultimately explains the efficacy of situational interventions in crime prevention (Cornish & Clarke 2008; Clarke 2008). If crime is the product of both the characteristics of offenders and the locations in which they commit their crimes, then addressing the situational side of the equation is at least as valid as is the traditional focus on attempting to change offenders' dispositions. Moreover, given a choice there are distinct advantages in preferring to focus prevention efforts on the situational characteristics of the crime event rather than on the psychological characteristics of the offender. As a general principle proximal causes exert more direct and modifiable effects on behaviour than do distal causes (Clarke 2008; Ekblom 1994).

The focus of this paper is not on the relative importance of the person and the situation in behaviour, but on the on the word 'interaction'. An interaction means more than that dispositions and situations are both important in the commission of crime. The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology gives two possible meanings for interaction as it relates to behaviour (Reber, Allen & Reber 2009). An interaction may refer to a 'reciprocal effect or influence' or to instances in which 'the effect of two (or

more) variables are interdependent'. Confusingly, both of these definitions have been used with respect to person-situation interactions in situational crime prevention, typically without the difference between the two meanings being made clear.

Interactions as reciprocal relationships

An interaction as a reciprocal relationship is the most common usage of the term in everyday language. Central to this concept of interaction is the idea of bidirectional causation. According to this definition, in a person-situation interaction the environment affects the individual and the individual in turn affects the environment (Figure 1). The morning alarm rings and the waking person fumbles to press the snooze button. Immediate environments can include other people such that the behaviour of one person acts as the stimulus for the behaviour of another.

Figure 1 about here

Applying this definition in its broadest sense, virtually all criminal behaviour (indeed, all operant behaviour) can be said to arise through a person-situation interaction.

Looking at situational effects on the person, the impact may occur at the motivational, cognitive and behavioural level. First, the very impetus to offend may be created by situational pressures and provocations. A crowded, airless nightclub may induce stress that increases the probability of aggression (Homel & Clark 1994). Next, the decision of the motivated offender to proceed with an offence is governed by an assessment of the opportunities offered by the situation. A burglar will select a house showing signs that the owner is away over a house showing signs of occupancy (Macintyre 2002).

Finally, the precise modus operandi adopted by the offender is a direct response to the

particular situational contingencies encountered. The type of sex acts performed on victims by child sex offenders depends upon the age and gender of the child (Leclerc, Proulx, Lussiere & Allaire 2009). Looking at the other side of the equation, an interaction then requires that there is an overt response to these situational influences that acts in some way upon the immediate environment. The consequences of crime can almost always be measured in terms of situational impacts – a victim is harmed, property is damaged or removed, an illegal pornographic image is downloaded, a syringe is emptied, and so on.

More interestingly, interactions defined by reciprocity are typically not single events but are iterative processes in which the outcome of one action affects the next action, the outcome of which affects the next action, and so on. Thus, a conversation between friends is an iterative interaction – each response is a reaction to the previous response (assuming the participants are listening to each other). So too is the playing of a computer game where the actions of the player determines the playing strategy adopted by the computer program and vice-versa. Cornish (1994) makes the point that the crime event is a multi-staged process comprising a beginning, middle and end. Crime does not involve a single decision by the offender, but instead there is a connected chain of decisions based on an ongoing evaluation of the available options. The crime event unfolds as a dynamic process and may take many different paths depending upon the nature of the environmental feedback.

Iterative person-situations interactions can be fitted within a multi-staged crime-event framework. Indermaur (1996), for example, examined the interactions between robbers and their victims. He interviewed 88 perpetrators and 10 victims of violent

property crime about the progression of the offence from beginning to end. The behaviour of the perpetrator depended upon the reactions of the victim. In particular, signs of resistance from the victim were pivotal points in the transaction inducing in perpetrators a sense of 'righteous indignation'. Indermaur advised victims of violent crime to adopt non-confrontational responses to the robber's actions in order to reduce the violence of the offence.

I suspect that for most writers and practitioners in the situational crime prevention field, the reciprocal relationship that an offender has with his/her immediate environment is the main way that the person-situation interaction is interpreted. While I have no issue with the validity of this interpretation, it needs to be recognised that this is just another way of describing the situationalism proposed by Mischel (1968) and other behaviourists. The person-situation interaction in this sense is a within-individual phenomenon – the nature of the individual changes according to the situation he/she is in. This process takes no account of the role that stable individual differences play in behaviour. As figure 1 suggests, behaviourists make no distinction between the person and their behaviour. Incorporating a role for personal traits into the person-situational interaction is a necessary step in the resolution of the debate between dispositionalists and situationalists. This brings us to the concept of interaction as the interdependence of variables.

Interactions as interdependent relationships

Interactions as interdependent relationships occur when the effect of one factor on an outcome variable is dependent upon the effect of another factor. In terms of the person and situation, there is a non-interactive relationship when each exerts an

independent influence on behaviour (figure 2). A person-situation interaction occurs when the effect of the situation on behaviour depends upon the nature of the particular person in question (figure 3). That is, different individuals react differently to the same situation, with some individuals dispositionally more susceptible to criminogenic environments than others.

Figures 2 and 3 about here

Interaction used in this way is the same sense that the term is used in statistics. According to this usage, behaviour is a function of person and situation (behaviour = $f[\text{person, situation}]$) rather than merely the sum of their independent effects (behaviour = person + situation). To illustrate the point, imagine that the function describing the interaction between person and situation is a simple product (behaviour = person x situation). Imagine, too, that it is possible to accurately calibrate the criminal propensity of an individual and the criminogenic nature of a situation. Let us assign some arbitrary values to these two variables: individuals who are low on criminality are rated as one and individuals who are high on criminality are rated as five; likewise, situations that have low-criminogenic features are rated one and situations that have high-criminogenic features are rated five. The outcome of additive and multiplicative combinations of person and situation are shown in figures 1 and 2. In the additive, non-interactive condition an increase in the criminogenic nature of the environment has a uniform effect on both low- and high-criminality individuals. High-criminality individuals are always more likely to commit crime than are low-criminality individuals and the difference between the two remains constant across situations. In the multiplicative, interactive condition high-criminality individuals are

marginally more likely than low-criminality individuals to commit crime in low-criminogenic environments, and low-criminality individuals are marginally more likely to commit crime in high-criminogenic situations than in low-criminogenic situations. However, when high-criminality individuals enter high-criminogenic situations the conditions are created for the 'perfect storm'. (Of course the exact shape of the lines in figures 1 and 2 depend on the initial values used to measure criminality and criminogenic situations, and the mathematical function describing the interactive relationship between them.)

figure 4 & 5 about here

Person x situation effects for crime have been demonstrated by Lynam, Caspi, Moffitt et al (2000). They took measures of impulsivity and self-reported delinquency from a sample of 508 inner-city boys aged 12-13 years. The researchers compared the relationship between these two measures as a function of the socio-economic characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which the boys lived. They found that the relationship between impulsivity and delinquency was stronger in poor neighbourhoods than in better-off neighbourhood, but that there was little difference in delinquency between non-impulsive adolescents in the poor and better-off neighbourhoods. A follow-up longitudinal study when the boys were 17 years confirmed these findings. Thus there is an interaction between impulsivity and adverse situational factors, and delinquency is especially likely when both are present.

Not all behaviour involves a person-situation interaction. Psychologists use the term *strong situations* to refer to conditions in which the environmental forces are so

powerful as to induce uniformity of behaviour among individuals (Cooper & Withey 2009). There are many situations in which most people behave in a law-abiding way irrespective of their dispositions. For example, almost everybody acts in the same reverential way at a funeral. On the other hand some situations can be overwhelming and induce ordinary people to commit crimes they would otherwise not contemplate committing. For example, the breakdown of order following natural disasters may lead to widespread looting that involves both antisocial and normally law-abiding individuals.

The person x situation effect is explained by the *specificity* model of personality. According to the specificity model, while people do possess traits, trait differences between people only become meaningful in certain circumstances. Moreover, in some cases those circumstances can be very specific and encountered only occasionally. Consider the case of two friends, one with a high level of dispositional aggression and the other with a low level. They are chatting peaceably at a bar when they are accosted by a drunken patron. All other things being equal, the probability of an overtly aggressive response to this provocation will be higher for the aggressive friend than for the non-aggressive friend. The non-aggressive friend can probably also be induced to retaliate at some point, but it will take much stronger situational pressure for this to occur. At the same time, prior to the provocation, there was little outward difference in the behaviour of the two friends. The specificity model can help explain why individuals with criminal dispositions do not offend all of the time – and why they do offend when they do – as well as why normally law-abiding people can sometimes commit crimes that are apparently out of character.

Implications for situational crime prevention

Person-situation interactions as reciprocal relationships have from the start formed a conceptual basis for situational crime prevention and little more needs to be said about them here. Person-situation interactions as interdependent relationships, however, have been examined in less detail and, if taken seriously, suggest that some account needs to be taken in situational crime prevention of offender dispositions. Going down this road represents a new direction for situational crime prevention, and has been something that Ron Clarke has consistently resisted.

Of course, the interdependence of the person and situation in the commission of crime has not escaped situational crime prevention theorists. Cohen and Felson (1979) in their routine activity approach implicitly recognise the person x situation interaction in their description of the three necessary elements of a crime – a likely offender, a suitable target and the absence of a capable guardian. Felson (2002) describes the best candidate for a ‘likely’ offender as ‘a young male with a big mouth who gets into many accidents, does poorly in school, loses jobs, and makes many visits to the emergency room’ (p. 21). That is, whether crime occurs depends upon the convergence of a criminogenic situation (a suitable, unguarded target) and an individual with a predisposition to antisocial behaviour. In a similar vein, Ekblom (1994) discusses the ‘conjunction’ of proximal criminogenic elements that leads to crime. He notes that individuals do not encounter situations randomly and that high-criminality individuals may actively seek out high-criminogenic environments. For example, young people attracted to excitement are likely to place themselves in inner-city bars and discos where there is a relatively high potential to become an offender (or victim).

More recently, Cornish and Clarke (2003) delineated three types of offenders based on the strength of their criminal dispositions and the different roles played in their crimes by the immediate environment. The first type is the antisocial predator. These offenders possess ingrained criminal dispositions and actively seek-out or create criminal opportunities. They utilise situational data to make rational choices about the relative costs and benefits of criminal involvement. The second type is the mundane offender. These offenders are less criminally-committed than are antisocial predators, and engage in occasional, low-level crime. They may be defined by their inability to exercise self-restraint. They are opportunistic in their offending patterns, succumbing easily to the temptations offered in the situation. The third type is the provoked offender. Provoked offenders are conventional in their value-systems, and probably do not have a criminal record. Provoked offenders are reacting to a particular set of situational conditions – frustration, irritation, social pressures and so forth – that induce them to commit crimes that they would otherwise not commit. Their crimes include ‘crimes of violence that erupt in the heat of the moment; or impulsive ones committed by offenders overcome by temptation, or a temporary failure of self control’ (Cornish & Clarke 2003: p. 70).

Cornish and Clarke’s typology can be interpreted in terms of the person-situation interaction by unpacking the dispositional and situational elements. Offenders vary in the strength of their criminality, from provoked offenders, through opportunists, to predators; situations vary in their criminogenic qualities, from those that challenge offenders by requiring them to create opportunities, through those that provide easy temptations, to those that actively provoke crime. The hypothetical interaction is

shown in figure 6. Notice that when interpreted in this way, offender types are not restricted to offending in the situational condition by which they are defined. Predatory offenders are most likely of the three types to offend in all three conditions. This brings to mind the case of one of Australia's most notorious criminals, Neddy Smith, who was ultimately convicted of murdering a stranger in a road-rage incident.

Figure 6 about here

The question from a situational crime prevention point of view is not so much whether or not a person x situation interaction occurs but what is to be done about it. Cornish and Clarke are clearly reluctant to take the matter much further than the typology described above. They have had this to say:

‘The rational choice perspective has had rather little to say about the nature of the offender. In accordance with good-enough theorising the original depiction of the offender was of an individual bereft of moral scruples – and without any defects such as lack of self-control that might get in the way of rational action. He (or she) was assumed to arrive at the crime setting already motivated and somewhat experienced in committing the crime in question, and to evaluate criminal opportunities on the basis of the likely rewards they offered, the effort they required, and the risks that were likely to involve. Although this picture has been modified over the years (Cornish and Clarke, 2003) the offender as antisocial predator has remained the perspective's default view. There is a practical reason for this reluctance to qualify this bleak picture. In many cases situational crime prevention knows little or nothing about the

offenders whose activities it is trying to stop, reduce or disrupt. Under these circumstances the most effective measures may be those that credit the as yet identified offender with few qualities other than rationality.’ (Cornish and Clarke 2008: pp. 39-40)

Cornish and Clarke are arguing for parsimony and pragmatism, and they have a point. Ron Clarke in particular has always been suspicious of traditional criminological approaches that treat the problem of crime as an academic exercise and that ultimately sink under the weight of their own theorising. His main goal has always been to produce a crime prevention model that above all is useful. And for a model to be useful it needs to be in a form that is easily communicated to the end-users who actually implement crime prevention strategies. There has been good reason not to complicate situational crime prevention with unnecessary theoretical baggage and there is no doubt that Clarke’s single-minded focus on utility has served his cause well. However, as Ken Pease and Gloria Laycock point out elsewhere in this volume, this approach also comes at a price. They argue that it has inhibited the integration of situational crime prevention into mainstream psychology and criminology and thus has limited the take-up of the ideas advanced. For my part I believe that situational crime prevention is now sufficiently well-established that it is safe to move beyond ‘good-enough theorising’ without compromising Clarke’s original mission. To this end, exploring the person-situation interaction in more depth can provide a more sophisticated rendering of the intimate relationship between offenders and their crime scenes. My guess is that Ron Clarke would be happy enough for researchers to take up this line of enquiry as long as he does not have to be one of them.

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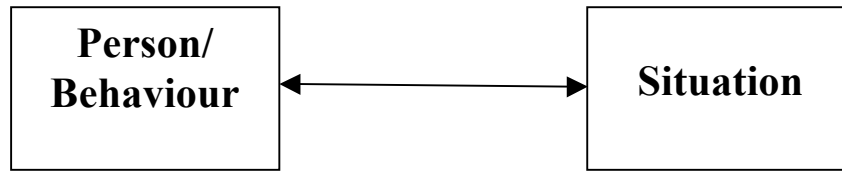


Figure 1 Reciprocal relationship between person and situation.

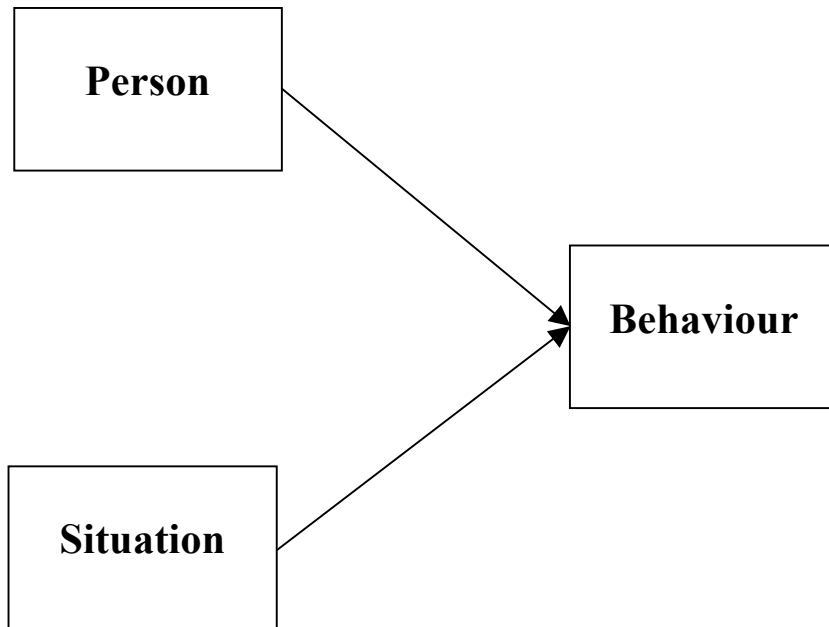


Figure 2 Relationship between the person, situation and behaviour in the non-interactive model

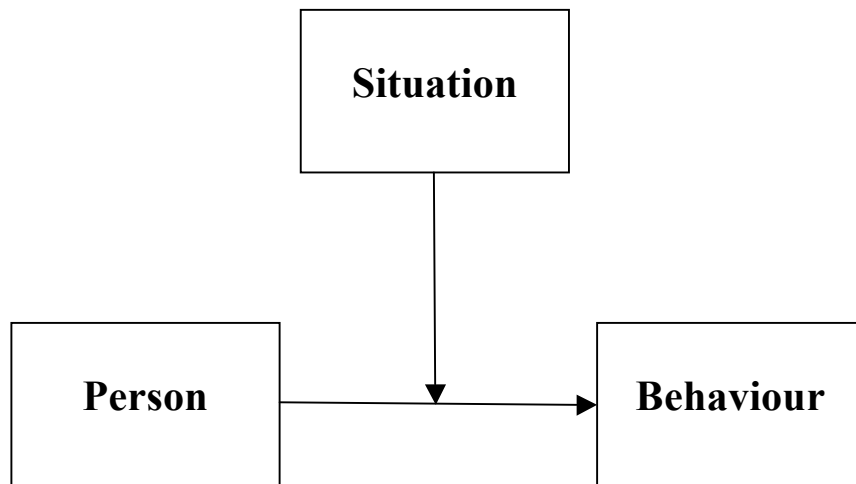


Figure 3 Relationship between the person, situation and behaviour in the interactive model

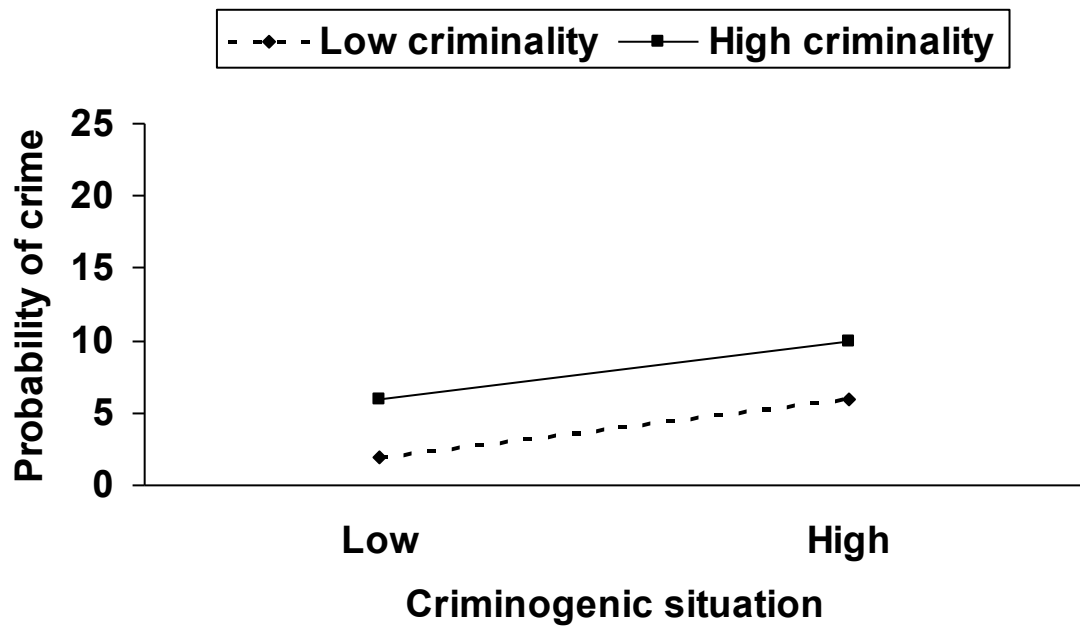


Figure 4. Probability of crime for a hypothetical person + situation model

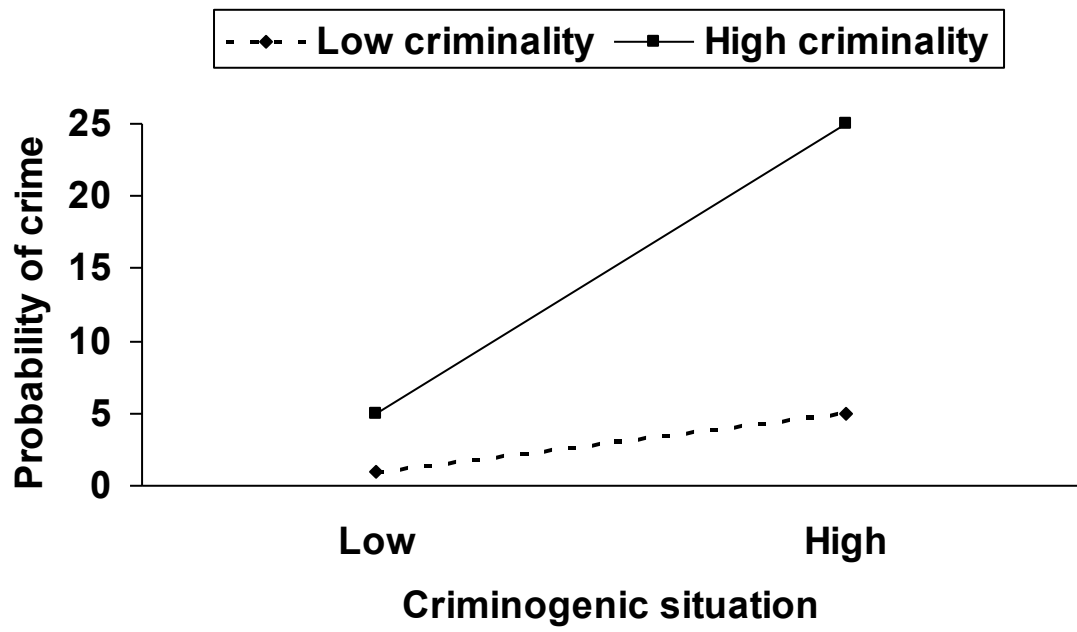


Figure 5. Probability of crime for a hypothetical person x situation model

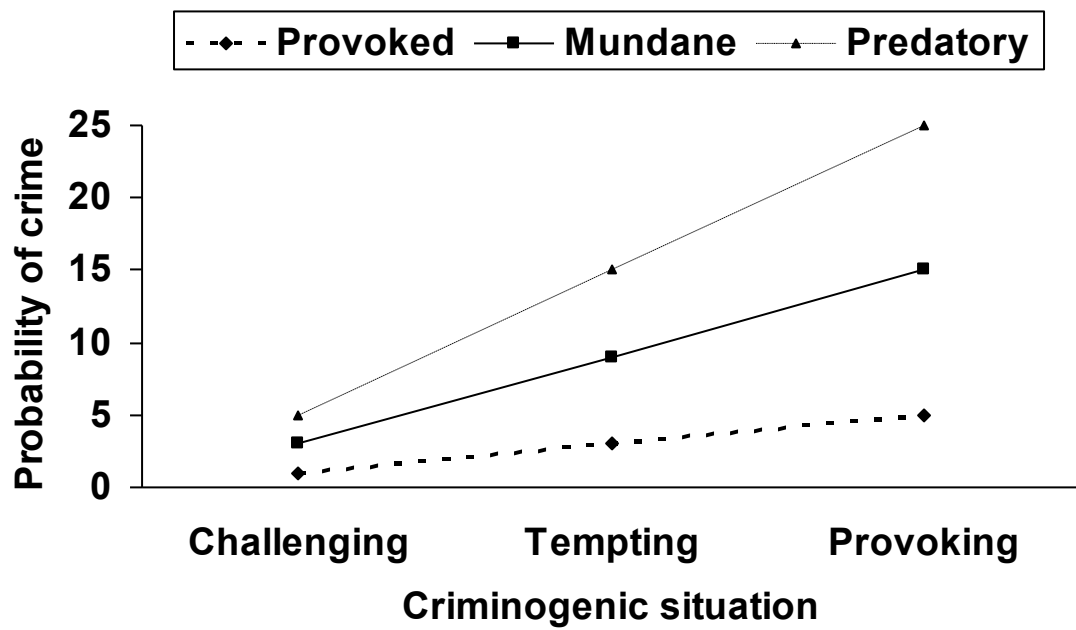


Figure 6 Hypothetical interaction between provoke, mundane and predatory offenders and the situation.