

2026 NUST RESEARCH WEEK EXHIBITION

FROM CAUSES TO ACTION

An Action-Theoretical Meta-Perspective in Etiological Criminology

Textual Companion to Posters 1 to 4

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Version 2.0

A multimodal exhibition package:

- a) Posters 1-4 with corresponding textual cover texts.
- b) Four corresponding audio covers.
- c) From Causes to Action – Extended Discussion (with bibliography)

This document provides a readable counterpart to the four posters and their narrated audio covers. It is intended for visitors who prefer to read along, revisit the argument at their own pace, or access the exhibition materials after the event. The visual, verbal and textual elements are designed as complementary forms of the same four-part argument. For viewers with deeper interest in the topic, the package contains also an extended scholarly text **From Causes to Action – Extended Discussion** with bibliography.

From Causes to Action

An Action-Theoretical Meta-Perspective in Etiological Criminology

A MULTIMODAL EXHIBITION PACKAGE

1 The Puzzle

Why this act, by this person, in this situation?



A cause of crime is **not yet** an explanation of an act.
How do criminogenic conditions become action?

2 From Situation to Action Alternatives

How do circumstances become possible actions?



At the point of action, alternatives are weighed through expectation and utility.

3 The Action Model

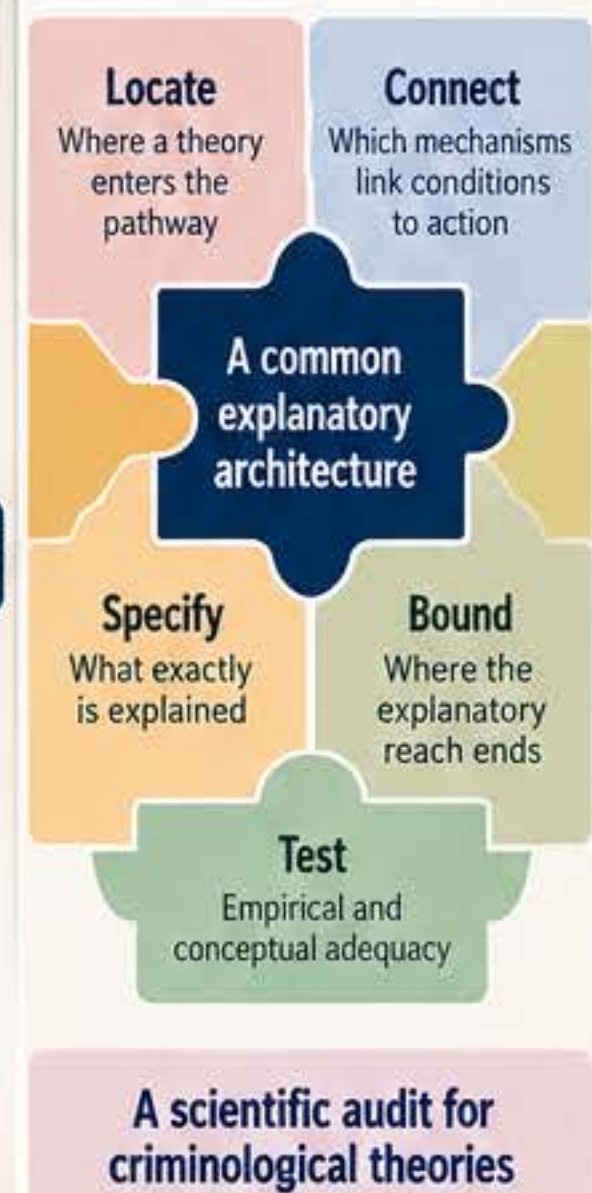
From alternatives to action



The action model traces how conditions become action-relevant before action occurs.

4 What This Adds to Scientific Explanation

Locating and comparing theoretical contributions



The approach does not replace existing theories. It provides a framework for locating, comparing and evaluating what each theory explains.

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Institutional Research Week 2026

27 - 30 OCTOBER 2026

Structured Abstract

Problem: Criminological theories identify many conditions associated with offending, but causal conditions do not by themselves explain why a particular actor acts in a particular situation.

Aim/Objectives: The exhibition proposes a common action-theoretical explanatory architecture for locating and comparing the contributions of otherwise heterogeneous etiological theories.

Methodology: Major structural, place-based, strain, learning, control, developmental and person-based explanations are reconstructed according to where their causal propositions enter the pathway from conditions to action.

Findings/Expected Results: The reconstruction distinguishes environmental and actor histories from the immediate situation, perception, interpretation, available actions, expectation and utility, agency, action and consequences.

Conclusion/Practical Implications: The approach does not replace existing theories or seek one cause of crime. It provides a scientific audit for identifying missing mechanisms, level-jumping and deterministic compression, while clarifying what each theory explains and where its explanatory reach ends.

Keywords: action theory; criminological theory; causal mechanisms; theory integration; scientific explanation

Poster 1

The Puzzle: Why this act, by this person, in this situation?

Poster 1 begins with an explanatory puzzle. Criminology has accumulated a large body of theories and evidence concerning conditions associated with offending. Structural disadvantage, inequality and blocked opportunity; strain and frustration; neighbourhood organisation and collective efficacy; learning and reinforcement; social bonds; and developmental or individual differences all matter. Yet the existence of such conditions does not by itself explain a particular act.

The two actors at the top of the poster make the problem concrete. Even where background characteristics and exposure to a criminogenic opportunity, provocation or pressure appear similar, one actor may offend while another does not. The point is not that the established theories are mistaken. Rather, the explanatory question remains incomplete until we can show *how* the conditions identified by a theory become relevant to an actor in a particular situation.

This distinction separates **association or causal contribution** from **action explanation**. A condition may increase the probability of offending across persons, places or periods without itself performing an action. Poverty does not steal a phone. A weak social bond does not assault another person. Reinforcement does not literally make a decision. These concepts identify conditions that may shape actors, environments, opportunities, expectations or orientations. To explain conduct, however, their contribution must eventually be connected to the person who encounters a situation and acts - or refrains from acting.

The argument follows a long-standing problem in social-scientific explanation: relations observed at an aggregate level cannot simply be transferred to individual action. Coleman (1990) and Esser (1999), among others, make the micro-foundation of macro-level explanation explicit. In the earlier Schulz model, the explanatory sequence was formulated in terms of the reconstruction of the actor's situation, a theory of action providing a logic of selection, and the aggregation of individual actions into collective outcomes. The present exhibition applies that general explanatory requirement to etiological criminology.

This is why the poster ends with the question: **How do criminogenic conditions become action?** The remaining posters do not offer another competing cause of crime. They develop a common explanatory pathway within which the contributions of different theories can be located. The aim is to preserve what those theories contribute while making visible the additional explanatory work required between a distal condition and a concrete act.

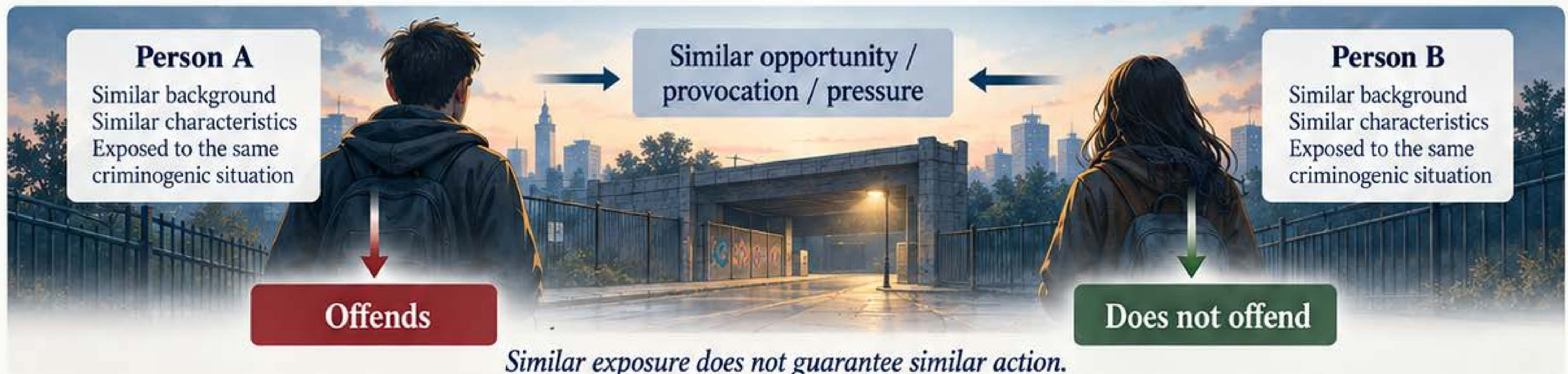
That brings us to the second poster.



FROM CAUSES TO ACTION

An Action-Theoretical Meta-Perspective in Etiological Criminology

1 | The Puzzle | Why this act, by this person, in this situation?



Criminology identifies many conditions associated with offending.
The harder question is how they become action-relevant in a particular situation.

A cause of crime is *not yet* an explanation of an act.
How do criminogenic conditions become action?

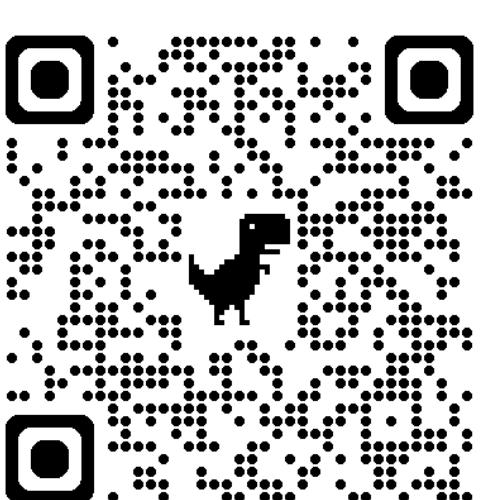


Next: From situation to action alternatives
How do circumstances become possible actions?

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Poster 2:

From Situation to Action Alternatives

How do circumstances become possible actions?

Poster 2 moves from exposure to action-relevance. The immediate situation is produced where an actor with a particular history encounters an environment with particular opportunities, constraints, cultural cues, supervision and material features. Neither side can be understood adequately in isolation. The environment supplies what is encountered; the actor brings capacities, dispositions, values, knowledge, learning history and a current state.

The first transition is therefore not from environment directly to behaviour, but from **situation to perception and interpretation**. Actors do not respond to the totality of objective conditions. Some features become salient while others do not. What is noticed must also acquire meaning. The same unattended phone, insult, peer invitation or police presence may consequently be understood differently by different actors, or by the same actor at different times.

Perception and interpretation delimit the **available or imagined actions**. This point matters because an alternative that is not perceived cannot enter a choice process. The action set is therefore neither a simple property of the environment nor solely a property of the person. It emerges through the actor-in-situation.

The poster then introduces **expectation × utility ($E \times U$)** as a common action-theoretical currency. Expectation refers to the actor's perceived likelihood that an action will produce a consequence. Utility refers to the subjective value or cost of that consequence for that actor. The worked example illustrates why neither component alone is sufficient. A highly valued consequence has little motivational force when it is regarded as very unlikely; a highly probable consequence may likewise have little force when its subjective value is negligible.

$E \times U$ should not be read as requiring a conscious mathematical calculation. Esser's action-theoretical formulation explicitly allows framing, orientation, scripts, bounded rationality and simplified mental representations. Expectations and utilities may be learned, habitual, emotionally charged or only partly conscious. The analytical purpose is to identify what the actor anticipates and how those anticipated consequences matter to that actor at the point of action.

This provides a bridge to established criminological theories. Learning may shape expectations and utilities; social bonds may make relational losses salient; strain may alter the value of particular outcomes; place conditions may affect perceived opportunities and sanctions; developmental processes may shape capacities and time horizons. The common question is not whether one of these theories is the single correct explanation, but **where and how its proposed causal contribution becomes action-relevant**.

Situational Action Theory is an important criminological parallel because it likewise insists on person-setting interaction and an action mechanism linking the situation to conduct (Wikström & Treiber, 2015). The present proposal, however, uses action theory at a meta-theoretical level: it does not require every theory to adopt one substantive account of criminal action.

The next poster places these elements into the complete action mode.



FROM CAUSES TO ACTION

An Action-Theoretical Meta-Perspective in Etiological Criminology

2 | From Situation to Action Alternatives | How do circumstances become possible actions?

ENVIRONMENT

opportunities • constraints •
place • supervision •
cultural cues

SITUATION

what is encountered
here and now?

ACTOR

learning history • capacities •
dispositions • values •
current state



PERCEPTION

What becomes salient?



INTERPRETATION

What does it mean?



AVAILABLE / IMAGINED ACTIONS

What can be done?

Expectation (E):

the perceived likelihood
that an action will produce
a consequence.

$$E \times U$$

EXPECTATION $\times$ UTILITY

Utility (U):

the subjective value or
cost of that consequence
for the actor.

WORKED EXAMPLE | Unattended phone

Action:	Expected consequence	Expectation (E)	Utility (U)
	Obtain phone	high	positive
	Peer approval	moderate	positive
	Arrest / sanction	low	strongly negative

The actor compares expected consequences and their utilities.

$E \times U$ does not require conscious calculation.

Expectations and utilities may be learned, habitual, emotional or only partly conscious.

High utility with low expectation has weak force. High expectation with low utility also has weak force.

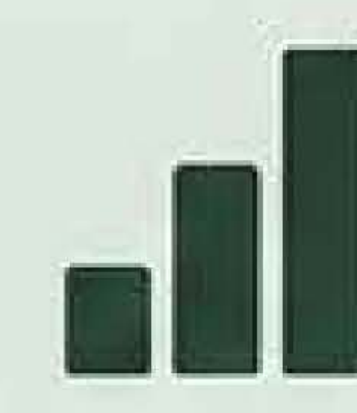
Action becomes more attractive when both are strong.



Exposure is not yet
action-relevance.



A situation becomes action-relevant
through perception, interpretation
and valuation.



Expectation and utility help
explain differential response.

At the point of action, alternatives are weighed
through *expectation and utility*.

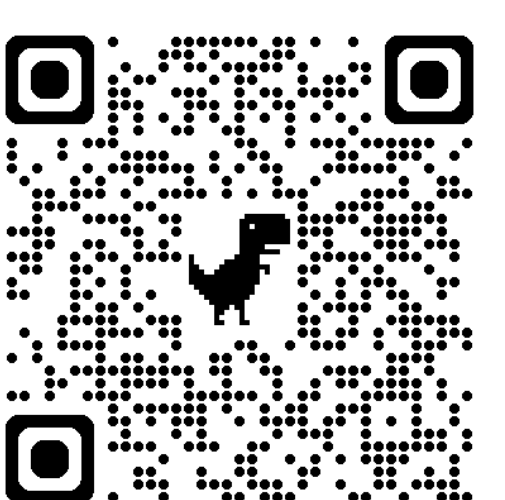


Next: The action model
From alternatives to action

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Poster 3

The Action Model: From alternatives to action

Poster 3 assembles the full action model. It begins with **environment + actor history**. Social conditions, place, learning and development are temporally prior influences; capacities and dispositions are carried by the actor into the present encounter. These histories matter, but they are not yet the action itself.

At the point of encounter, a **situation** arises. The actor perceives selected features, interprets their meaning, and constructs or recognises possible actions. Expectations and utilities attach anticipated consequences to those alternatives. Their comparative action value helps explain why one possibility becomes more attractive, acceptable or necessary than another. **Agency at the point of action** marks the transition from explanatory conditions to enactment or non-enactment.

The vertical pathway is deliberately generic. It is not offered as a new substantive criminological theory. Its purpose is to provide locations at which the explanatory propositions of existing theories can enter. Mertonian strain may shape goals, blocked opportunities and the utilities attached to outcomes. Person-based explanations may identify relatively stable differences affecting perception, interpretation and valuation.

Akers' learning processes may shape definitions, behavioural repertoires, expectations and anticipated reinforcement. Social disorganisation and collective efficacy may alter opportunities, supervision and sanction expectations. Developmental theories such as Moffitt's help explain the formation of capacities, dispositions, time horizons and response tendencies.

The model therefore distinguishes **the history of a cause** from **its operation in an action episode**. A developmental account may explain how an actor acquired a disposition without yet explaining why that disposition became consequential in this situation. A neighbourhood theory may explain the distribution of opportunities and controls without yet explaining why a particular person acted upon one of them. A learning theory may explain how definitions and expectations were acquired while leaving the final situational selection process implicit.

The feedback arrow is equally important. Action produces consequences. Consequences can change learning histories, opportunities, relationships, reputations and future environments. Actors also select into and out of settings, while social structures constrain which settings are realistically accessible. Explanation is therefore recursive rather than a one-way movement from a fixed cause to a fixed effect.

The proposition at the bottom of the poster summarises the model: **conditions do not perform actions**. Conditions become explanatory when we can trace how they alter the actor, the environment, the situation, the perceived alternatives or their comparative value. Different theories may explain different parts of that pathway.

This is compatible with mechanism-based analytical sociology, which asks explanations to specify the processes connecting macro conditions, actors and outcomes (Hedström, 2005). It also overlaps with the action-mechanism emphasis of Situational Action Theory and later analytic criminology (Wikström & Kroneberg, 2022). The distinctive purpose here is not to subsume the theories into one substantive theory of crime, but to provide a **common explanatory grammar** in which their respective contributions and omissions become visible.

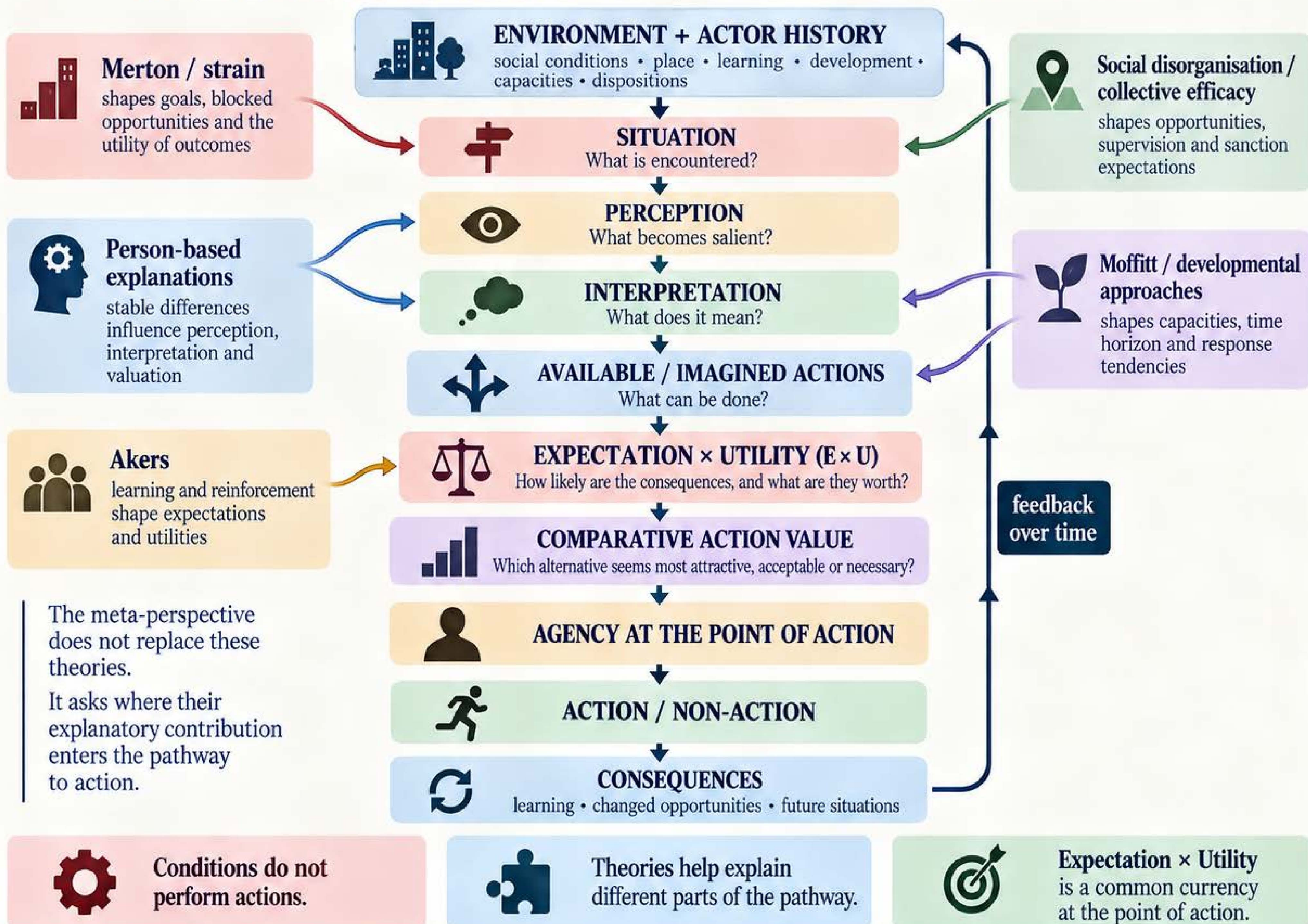
The fourth and last next poster reveals what the analytical meta-perspective adds to Scientific Explanation.



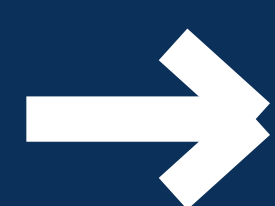
FROM CAUSES TO ACTION

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3 | The Action Model | From alternatives to action



The action model traces *how conditions become action-relevant before action occurs.*

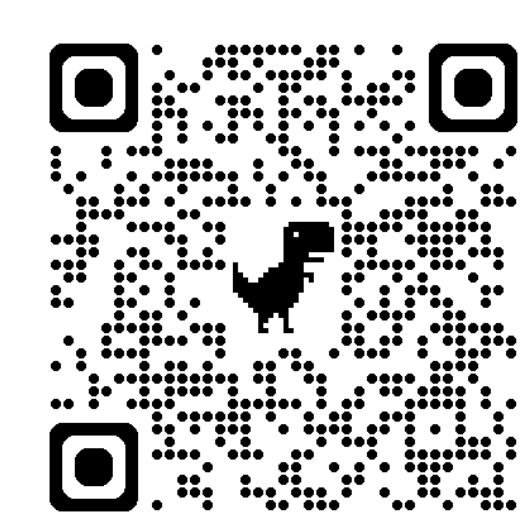


Next: What this adds to scientific explanation
From theories to an explanatory programme

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Poster 4

What This Adds to Scientific Explanation

Poster 4 asks what the architecture adds to scientific explanation. Its central claim is that theoretical integration need not require the construction of a single grand theory. An alternative is to place the propositions of different theories within a common explanatory architecture and ask what explanatory work each proposition actually performs.

The Akers example illustrates this method. Differential association and peer exposure locate the actor within patterns of interaction. Definitions and models provide meanings and behavioural examples. Reinforcement changes the anticipated consequences of conduct and can alter the attractiveness of available actions.

These processes become part of the actor's learning history and may subsequently enter a later situation through expectations, utilities, definitions and perceived alternatives. The reconstruction therefore preserves Social Learning Theory while making explicit the steps that must connect learning history to a particular act.

This leads to the **scientific audit** shown on the right of the poster. Five questions can be put to any etiological theory. **Locate:** where does the proposed cause operate? **Connect:** what links distal conditions to the proximal conduct to be explained? **Specify:** what process or mechanism is claimed to transmit the effect? **Bound:** what does the theory explain, and where does its explanatory reach end? **Test:** what observations should follow if the proposed mechanism is correct?

The audit helps expose four recurrent problems. **Correlation without mechanism** identifies a relationship while leaving the process unspecified. **Level-jumping** treats a condition at one level - for example, neighbourhood disadvantage - as though it directly explains action at another. **Deterministic compression** reduces a contingent sequence of perception, interpretation and response to a single linear cause. **Missing actor or missing environment** occurs when either the actor's perspective or the situational context disappears from the explanation.

The meta-perspective therefore changes the question asked of criminological theory. Instead of asking which theory is the one correct theory of crime, it asks: **What does this theory explain, by what mechanism, at which point in the pathway to action, and what remains to be explained?** Theories can then be compared without forcing unlike concepts into a single vocabulary or discarding their substantive insights.

The programme is intentionally open. It can accommodate structural, learning, control, developmental, person-based and situational propositions, provided that their causal claims can be located and connected to action. Situational Action Theory is particularly relevant because it independently places person-environment interaction and an explicit action mechanism at the centre of crime explanation (Wikström & Treiber, 2015). The present proposal operates at a different level of abstraction: it treats action theory as a meta-theoretical explanatory architecture through which heterogeneous etiological theories can be reconstructed, compared and scientifically audited.

The aim, accordingly, is **not to discover one cause of crime**. It is to improve explanation by showing how causal conditions become action-relevant for particular actors in particular situations.



FROM CAUSES TO ACTION

An Action-Theoretical Meta-Perspective in Etiological Criminology

4 | What This Adds to Scientific Explanation

From theories to an explanatory programme



Integration need not mean combining theories into one grand theory.
It can mean locating their contributions within a common explanatory architecture.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: AKERS / SOCIAL LEARNING



The action perspective does not replace Social Learning Theory.
It asks what explanatory work the theory has completed, and what still requires explanation before the act occurs.

THE SCIENTIFIC AUDIT

Five questions for turning theories into an explanatory programme.

- 1** **LOCATE** | Where does the proposed cause operate?
- 2** **CONNECT** | What links distal conditions to proximal conduct?
- 3** **SPECIFY** | What is the causal mechanism?
- 4** **BOUND** | What does the theory explain — and where does its explanatory reach end?
- 5** **TEST** | What evidence should follow if the mechanism is correct?

WHAT THIS ARCHITECTURE HELPS IDENTIFY



Correlation without mechanism
A relationship is observed, but the process is unspecified.



Level jumping
Conditions at one level (e.g. social) are assumed to directly explain action at another level (e.g. individual).



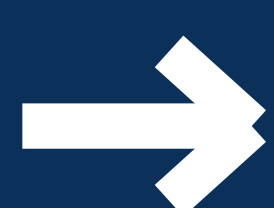
Deterministic compression
Complex, contingent processes are reduced to a single, linear cause.



Missing actor / missing environment
Either the actor's perspective or the situational context is omitted from the explanation.

The aim is not to discover one cause of crime.

The aim is to explain how causal conditions become action-relevant for particular actors in particular situations.

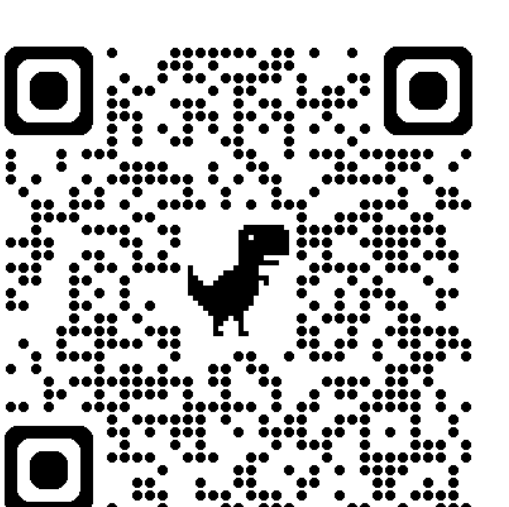


Exhibition conclusion
From causes to an explanatory programme

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- Selected works underpinning the action-theoretical architecture and the criminological theories represented in the poster sequence.**