

FROM CAUSES TO ACTION

An Action Theoretical Meta Perspective in Etiological Criminology

Extended Companion



Dr Stefan Schulz

Deputy Director (Criminal Justice)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8335-073X>

sschulz@nust.na

m: +264 (0)81 2560 820

www.nust.na

Department of Social Sciences

Namibia University of Science and Technology

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Abstract

Criminological theories frequently identify conditions associated with crime, conformity, victimisation or criminal justice response. They do not always specify how those conditions become consequential in the situated action of persons, or how repeated actions become collective outcomes. This Extended Companion develops an action theoretical meta perspective for making those transitions

explicit. It treats actors as situated rather than unconstrained, and expectation $\times$ utility as an analytical model of comparative action selection rather than a claim that conduct is always deliberate calculation. The framework positions, rather than replaces, etiological theories: structural, situational, learning, control and developmental accounts may contribute different explanatory resources to a common pathway from conditions through actors and situations to action, consequence, aggregation and feedback. Its purpose is to clarify scope, specify mechanisms, expose missing links and formulate testable propositions. The Companion also identifies its limits. A shared explanatory grammar does not make theories interchangeable, establish a mechanism from association, reliably predict an individual action or justify retrospective certainty about motive. Its value depends on disciplined evidence and explicit limits of inference.

Keywords: *action theory; agency; expectation $\times$ utility; explanatory integration; etiological criminology*

Central proposition.

Conditions do not perform actions; actors do, under conditions that become action-relevant through situated perception, evaluation and selection.

Section 1: The Explanatory Problem

1.1 What requires explanation

Criminology has accumulated a substantial body of knowledge about conditions associated with crime.

Individual dispositions, family relations, peer networks, social learning, material inequality, neighbourhood

Anchor proposition. Criminological explanation is strengthened when transitions between conditions, actors, situations, action and collective outcomes are made explicit

conditions, institutional practices and opportunities have all been linked to patterns of offending, victimisation, criminalisation or criminal justice intervention. This diversity is not an embarrassment to be removed. It

reflects the fact that the phenomena gathered under the word crime are diverse and occur across several levels of social life. The first discipline of explanation is therefore to identify the *explanandum*: the particular thing to be explained. An individual act, an individual's developmental pathway, a concentration of offences in a place, a recorded crime rate and a criminal justice decision are related but not identical objects of explanation. An account that helps explain one may not explain another. A theory of why one person commits a particular act does not, without further argument, explain why recorded crime rates differ between communities or periods (Coleman, 1990; Esser, 1999). This is the starting point of the present Companion. The question is not simply, "What causes crime?" It is: *How do the conditions identified by criminological research become consequential for what a person does in a particular situation, and how are individual actions connected to wider social outcomes?* The more demanding formulation does not dismiss familiar criminological conditions. It asks that their explanatory role be specified with sufficient precision.

1.2 Conditions, associations and explanation

An empirical association is often an important beginning. It may identify a condition worth explaining, a population exposed to a risk, or a possible component of a causal pathway. It does not follow, however, that the association itself tells us how the condition produces the outcome. Nor does it follow that the condition is sufficient, necessary or equally consequential in every setting. The distinction is especially important where a broad condition has many possible effects and where persons exposed to the same condition act differently. Consider the statement that economic deprivation causes crime. Deprivation may restrict legitimate opportunities, generate insecurity or strain, shape everyday exposure to risk, alter access to services, and affect relations with institutions. Each of these may matter. Yet deprivation does not itself select an offence. It can be part of the background against which a person encounters a situation, interprets its possibilities, identifies or fails to identify alternatives, and acts or refrains from acting. The same deprivation may also be

associated with care, endurance, mutual support, political action, withdrawal from danger or non-offending. A satisfactory explanation must therefore specify the pathway, not merely name the condition.

The same point applies to peer association, family adversity, personality, neighbourhood disorder, policing or institutional exclusion. None is rendered unimportant by this observation. The analytical question is rather what each condition does in the proposed explanation: whether it shapes development, supplies models or incentives, affects the objective situation, influences perception and emotion, restricts feasible alternatives, changes anticipated consequences, or alters the recording and processing of conduct. Explanation becomes stronger when these roles are separated rather than compressed into a single causal label.

This concern is consistent with the general argument that causal explanation in the social sciences requires more than the identification of regular co-variation. Mechanisms do not replace empirical evidence; they organise the account of how a proposed cause could make a difference under specified conditions, and thereby make causal claims more open to investigation and criticism (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010).

1.3 From conditions to situated action

The central proposition of this Companion is not that social or individual conditions are passive until an actor appears. Conditions enable, constrain, expose, protect and shape development. They may make some courses of action objectively possible, costly, dangerous, habitual, visible or attractive. What they do not by themselves provide is a complete account of the transition from those conditions to a particular act by a particular person at a particular time.

That transition requires attention to the actor in a situation. An actor confronts a situation with a history of learning, dispositions, capacities, relationships, commitments and vulnerabilities. The situation presents material arrangements, other persons, rules, opportunities, risks and meanings. The actor does not encounter these conditions as an empty vessel. Nor is the actor outside them, freely inventing the world at will. External arrangements and individual histories jointly shape what is noticed, understood, felt, considered possible and regarded as worth doing.

The action-theoretical emphasis on a subjective definition of the situation should not be misunderstood as an invitation to treat reality as merely subjective. Roads, distance, heat, surveillance, the availability of a weapon, the presence of others, rules, money, time and institutional power can materially constrain or enable action. Their consequences nevertheless depend in part on how they enter the actor's situation: whether they are recognised, misrecognised, feared, valued, resisted or ignored. Section 2 develops this relation between objective conditions and situated interpretation in greater detail.

At the point of action, alternatives are not simply present in the abstract. They are perceived and evaluated through expectations about likely consequences and the value attached to those consequences. Section 3 will formulate this analytical moment through expectation $\times$ utility ($E \times U$). At this stage, it is enough to stress the

limited purpose of the model: it directs attention to how conditions may become consequential for action selection. It does not assume that every person reasons consciously, possesses complete information, or acts as an unconstrained economic calculator.

1.4 Individual action and collective outcomes

The explanatory problem does not end once an individual act has been addressed. Criminology also seeks to explain aggregate patterns: concentrations of violence, changes in offending, victimisation distributions, prison populations and recorded crime rates. These patterns cannot be read directly from individual propensities. They arise through the aggregation of many actions and interactions, as well as through exposure, reporting, surveillance, police deployment, legal definitions, organisational resources, case-processing practices and institutional decisions.

This does not create an unbridgeable divide between individual and structural explanation. It creates a requirement for explicit links. Macro conditions may shape the situations actors encounter; repeated action may reproduce or transform those conditions; institutions classify, filter and record conduct; and the resulting patterns may feed back into later opportunities and perceptions. Coleman's (1990) account of macro-to-micro and micro-to-macro transitions, and Esser's (1999) logic of situation, selection and aggregation, remain useful reference points for this task.

The distinction also protects against a common inferential error. A higher rate of recorded offending in an area is not, without further evidence, a direct description of the characters or motivations of the people who live there. Equally, an individual-level relationship cannot simply be scaled up into an explanation of an area-level pattern. The relevant social, institutional and interactional processes must be shown.

1.5 The limited purpose of the meta perspective

The action-theoretical meta-perspective proposed here is a framework for making these transitions visible. It does not offer another total theory of crime. Nor does it suggest that existing etiological theories are interchangeable, or that all disagreements among them disappear once they are placed within a common vocabulary. Their differing assumptions, mechanisms, evidence and scope conditions remain substantive matters for inquiry.

Its more modest purpose is to provide a common analytical scaffold. Within that scaffold, a theory's explanatory contribution can be repositioned: we can ask what it identifies as a relevant condition, what it says about the actor or situation, whether and how it specifies action selection, what outcome it can properly explain, and which connections remain unaddressed. This is not an exercise in rebuilding the original theory. It is a disciplined way of clarifying its explanatory assignment and avoiding the silent addition of assumptions that the theory itself did not make.

The sections that follow develop the scaffold from its foundations. Section 2 considers persons, environments and situations. Section 3 examines the action-selection mechanism. Section 4 then asks how selected etiological theories may be repositioned, compared and evaluated without effacing their differences. The explanatory problem, therefore, is not an introductory obstacle to be cleared away. It is the organising question of the Companion as a whole.

Section 2: From Conditions to Situated Action

2.1 Conditions do not arrive one by one

This formulation follows the basic model of sociological explanation associated with Esser (1999). A social situation does not pass directly into an observable act. Conditions enter an actor's orientation; the actor defines the situation in a particular way; and action follows through a process of selection. The distinction is analytical. In lived experience, these processes may be rapid, habitual, emotionally charged or partly outside conscious awareness. It remains useful because it prevents the explanation from jumping without specification from a social condition to an individual act.

Two cautions are immediately necessary. First, external and internal conditions are not independent

Anchor proposition. Conditions do not act by themselves. They become action relevant through the situated perception and interpretation of actors.

containers. Development occurs in environments, and environments are entered, interpreted and sometimes changed by persons. Second, the distinction does not place

“society” on one side and an autonomous individual on the other. The actor is socially formed and socially situated, while still participating in the reproduction or transformation of the social world through action (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984).

2.2 The objective situation

The objective situation refers to the conditions that exist independently of a particular actor's immediate interpretation of them. For present purposes, these conditions can be grouped into three overlapping domains. The first is *material and spatial*: distance, transport, housing density, heat, lighting, the design of roads and buildings, communication technologies, money, the presence of other people, time, the availability of objects, and physical danger. The second is *institutional and relational*: family roles, school routines, employment, policing, legal rules, service provision, organisational practices, authority relations and unequal access to resources. The third is *symbolic and cultural*: recognised meanings, reputations, norms, scripts, identities, moral expectations and categories through which people understand what is happening.

These domains are analytically distinguishable but empirically intertwined. A poorly lit path is a material feature; whether it becomes a site of fear, a routine shortcut, an opportunity for predation, or a place avoided after dark depends also on social knowledge, prior experience, the presence or absence of guardians, local reputations and institutional responses. An employment rule is institutional; it may nevertheless reshape a household's material resources, time pressures, social relations and sense of future possibility. A cultural script can guide conduct, but it is enacted through persons under material and organisational constraints.

The term objective must therefore not be taken to mean socially neutral, permanently fixed or equally important for all actors. It means that the situation contains features that are not created merely by an actor's present belief. Material conditions push back. A road remains long even when a traveller wishes otherwise; institutional power does not vanish because it is denied; a locked gate limits entry unless some further condition changes. Such realities shape the field of possible action, even though their practical consequences still depend on how an actor encounters and understands them.

2.3 The actor's biographical condition

No actor enters an objective situation without history. Knowledge, learned expectations, habits, emotional dispositions, capacities for self-regulation, values, attachments, identities, memories of prior treatment, health, developmental experiences and current commitments all condition what becomes relevant. These are not merely private possessions. They have been formed, supported, strained or revised through earlier relationships and environments. The actor is therefore neither a blank screen on which the environment writes nor a fixed personality moving unchanged through successive settings.

This point is important for etiological theory. Family processes, social learning, social bonds, strain, developmental transitions, trauma, biological dispositions and social disorganisation can each make contributions to the actor's biographical condition. They may alter attention, emotional readiness, trust, coping repertoires, normative commitments, competencies, expectations or the range of alternatives regarded as realistically available. Their place in an explanation must be identified; none should be silently treated as the action itself.

The actor's condition also provides a reason why apparently comparable circumstances need not result in identical conduct. One person may recognise a situation as threatening, another as manageable, and a third as an opportunity. One may be able to draw upon a relationship, skill or valued commitment that another cannot mobilise. This does not imply that every action is idiosyncratic. Shared institutions and cultural repertoires often create recognisable, recurrent definitions of familiar situations. It does mean that the explanation of variation cannot stop at the outward similarity of settings.

2.4 Defining the situation

Figure 1 maps the extended pathway from conditions and actor history to situated action. Its central vertical connection compresses the full transition; the lateral sequence makes the intervening mechanism visible, moving through perception and interpretation to the alternatives that are available and feasible for the actor. The feedback line extends the model over time, showing how consequences may alter later conditions, orientations and situations.

The definition of the situation is the situated integration of objective conditions and the actor's biographical condition. It is the process through which the actor comes to grasp, however partially, what is going on, what matters, who is involved, which rules or expectations apply, what alternatives are available, and what consequences may follow. In Esser's (1999) formulation, this is the logic of the situation: the link between the conditions in which the actor is placed and the meaning those conditions acquire for that actor.

Definition does not necessarily mean explicit verbal interpretation. A situation can be read quickly through habit, affect, tacit knowledge, embodied skill, fear, attraction, moral discomfort or a familiar script. Nor need the definition be accurate. Actors may misunderstand danger, overestimate support, misread another person's intentions, fail to perceive an available lawful alternative or interpret a constraint as immovable when it is not. These possibilities matter precisely because action follows from the situation as the actor understands it, not only from an observer's

later reconstruction. At the same time, the subjective definition is not unlimited invention. It is disciplined by the situation's material, institutional and cultural structure. A person who believes a guarded entrance can be

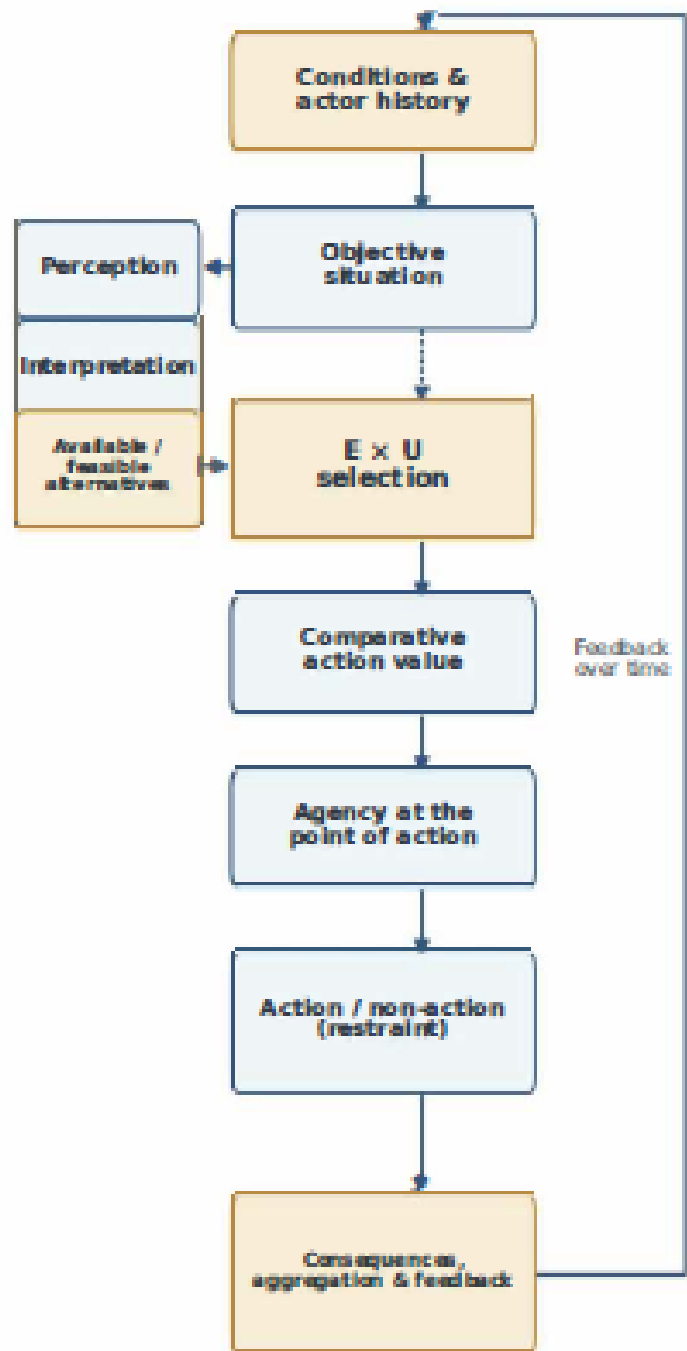


Figure 1. *The extended pathway from conditions to action, consequence and feedback.*

crossed without consequence may discover otherwise; a person who assumes no help is available may nevertheless receive it; a moral script may be contested by peers, authority or experience. The resulting relation is neither simple determinism nor unrestricted choice. It is situated agency: action under conditions that structure perception, possibility and consequence without mechanically dictating one response.

2.5 Persons select and transform environments

Person and environment are related not only because environments shape persons. Persons also move towards, avoid, remain in, or are excluded from particular settings. They may seek peer groups, occupations, leisure spaces, routines, relationships and opportunities that fit already learned preferences, commitments or capacities. Others have much less control over the environments to which they are exposed. This is why the observed association between a person characteristic and an environment can reflect environmental influence, selection into exposure, or a reciprocal process involving both.

The possibility of selection should not be used to deny structural constraint. Residential mobility, school placement, transport, employment, family responsibility, poverty, discrimination and state action distribute opportunities to enter and leave settings unequally. The analytical gain lies in refusing a false choice. Social environments can shape development and action; actor characteristics can shape exposure to environments; and repeated transactions between the two can stabilise or transform a pathway. Situational action theory similarly treats action as arising from the interaction between persons and settings rather than locating its source exclusively in either one (Wikström, 2014).

This dynamic relation is especially important when explaining persistence and change. A neighbourhood, institution or peer network may reproduce familiar patterns because incoming actors have limited resources or encounter the same opportunity structures. Yet changes in relationships, work, housing, treatment, supervision, education, material conditions or personal commitments may alter what a situation means and what alternatives can be acted upon. The framework is therefore compatible both with continuity and with desistance; neither should be treated as mysterious exceptions to a fixed causal rule.

2.6 From situation to action selection

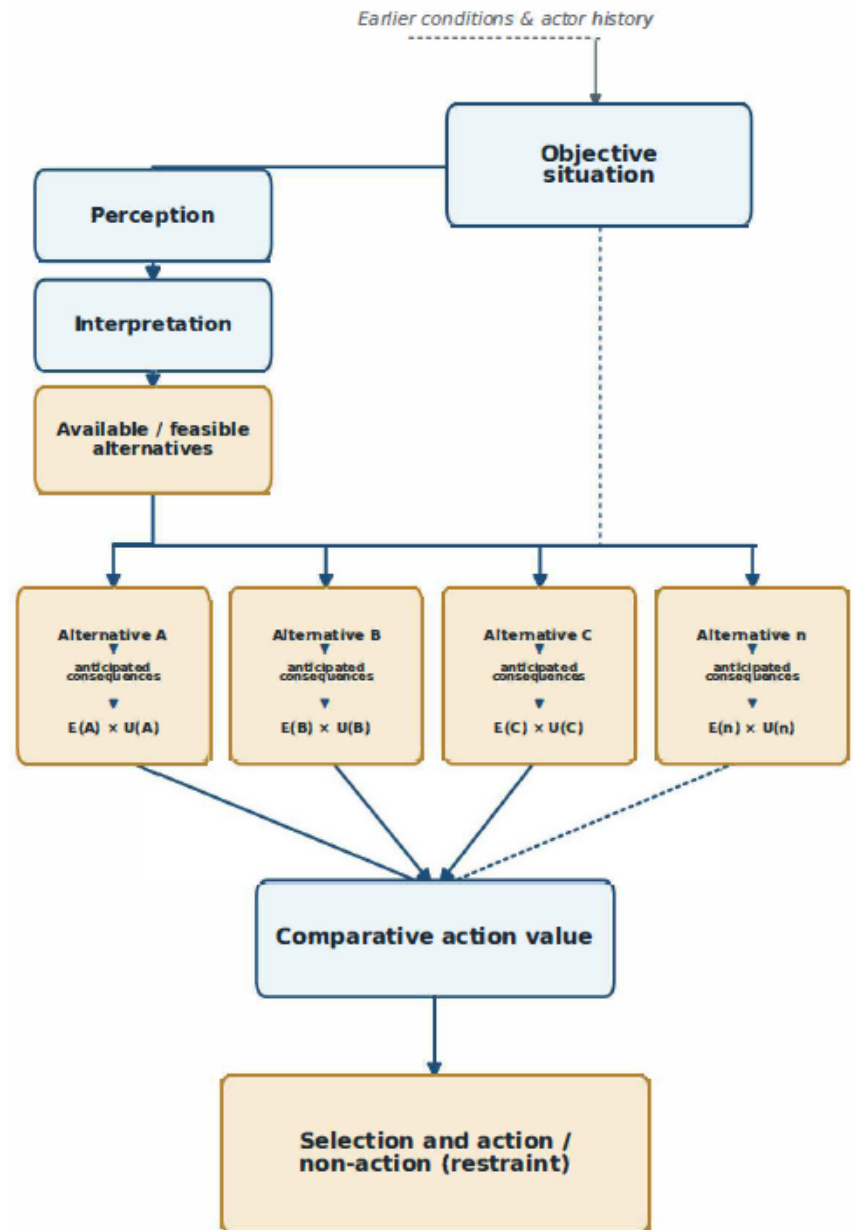
Figure 2 brings the analysis to the threshold of selection: conditions and actor history have become a situated understanding, and that understanding has made some alternatives more available or feasible than others. The next question is how an actor selects among those alternatives. Section 3 addresses that question through the $E \times U$ model. Its purpose is to specify the action-selection moment while retaining everything established here: the socially and materially structured situation, the actor's learned and developmental history, limited information, emotion, habit, moral orientation and constraint. $E \times U$ is consequently not a theory of disembodied calculation. It is a concise analytical device for asking how expectations and valuations help organise selection among perceived alternatives.

Section 3: The Mechanism of Action Selection

3.1 The point at which alternatives are selected

Sections 1 and 2 identified the explanatory task and described the transition from conditions to a situated actor. The next question concerns action selection. In a situation, an actor may perceive several possible responses: to act, refrain, delay, leave, comply, resist, seek help, negotiate, conceal, retaliate, offend or pursue a lawful alternative. The task is not to assume that every objectively possible response is equally present to the actor. It is to explain which alternatives enter consideration, what consequences are anticipated, how those consequences are valued, and why one course becomes more action-guiding than another. Expectation $\times$ utility, abbreviated here as $E \times U$, provides a compact analytical model for this point of the explanatory sequence. It expresses a simple proposition: the significance of a possible consequence depends both on whether the actor expects it to follow from an action and on the value or cost that consequence has for that actor. The model belongs to a wider family of expectancy-value approaches developed across decision research, psychology, economics and sociology (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Vroom, 1964). In the present Companion, it is used neither as a history of those traditions nor as a claim that they all amount to one theory.

Figure 2 should be read vertically. Each column begins with one perceived alternative, traces the



E = expectation of consequences; U = subjective value of consequences.
Selection compares the alternatives rather than presuming an overt calculation.

Figure 2. $E \times U$ as a comparative model of selection among perceived alternatives.

consequences anticipated from that alternative, and then indicates the expectation $\times$ utility weighting through which those consequences acquire practical force. The resulting weightings are compared across alternatives; they are not mechanically added into a single score.

Anchor proposition. $E \times U$ is an analytical model of comparative action selection, not a claim that people routinely perform an overt calculation.

Its more limited role is to make the selection mechanism visible. It asks how a person's

definition of a situation becomes connected to the action selected or rejected. The model therefore stands between conditions and conduct. It does not replace the developmental, social, institutional or material conditions that shape the actor and the situation; it provides an analytical location at which their consequences for selection can be specified.

3.2 Perceived alternatives rather than abstract possibilities

Action selection begins with the alternatives that the actor actually recognises as relevant. A person may be physically able to leave a place, ask for assistance, decline an invitation, report a threat, wait, or take an illegal opportunity. Yet one or more of these options may not be noticed, imagined, trusted, socially permissible, emotionally tolerable or practically achievable in the actor's situation. Conversely, an actor may consider an option that is objectively unlikely or unavailable. The explanatory set is therefore not every action an external observer can list after the event; it is the actor's perceived field of alternatives.

This point protects against a recurrent error in retrospective explanation. Observers often know of lawful or prudent alternatives that were theoretically open. That knowledge does not establish that the actor had those alternatives in view as genuine possibilities. A young person may not see an available institution as trustworthy; a victim may not see reporting as safe; an offender may not see restraint as compatible with immediate status demands; a public official may not see discretion as permitted within an organisational role. These are not excuses built into the model. They are hypotheses about perception, knowledge, confidence, identity, constraint and social meaning that require evidence.

The distinction is also important for non-offending. A criminal action is not automatically selected merely because an opportunity is objectively available. The lawful alternative may be more salient, morally compelling, safer, more rewarding, more consistent with a valued relationship or simply more practicable. Explaining restraint is therefore not a residual task after explaining offending. It is part of the same comparative problem.

3.3 Expectations and utilities

As Figure 2 indicates, expectation is attached to a consequence of a particular perceived alternative, not to action in the abstract. Expectation concerns what an actor believes may happen if a particular response is taken or avoided. It includes, for example, anticipated gain, peer approval, shame, detection, sanction, injury,

relief, excitement, rejection, loss of a relationship, future opportunity or immediate safety. The expectation may concern whether a consequence will occur, how likely it is, how soon it is expected, and whether the actor believes it can be avoided.

Utility concerns the subjective value attached to anticipated consequences. It does not mean money, selfishness or pleasure alone. A consequence may carry positive utility because it offers belonging, status, protection, moral satisfaction, care for another person, achievement, relief from fear or consistency with identity. It may carry negative utility because it threatens guilt, shame, injury, exclusion, loss of standing, punishment, future goals or the welfare of a valued other. The term is useful precisely because it directs attention to the actor's valuation, which may differ sharply from the observer's.

The model is comparative. An action is not assessed in isolation but against the alternatives the actor takes seriously. A possible gain from offending may be outweighed by the expected loss of a valued relationship. A lawful course may be preferred because it preserves a future opportunity even when its immediate reward is lower. Conversely, a delayed sanction may have little influence if it is not expected, not attended to, not trusted as enforceable, or weakly valued compared with a proximate reward. The explanatory question is always: relative to the alternatives perceived, how did the actor understand and value the likely consequences?

3.4 Selection is not necessarily slow calculation

The vertical reading of Figure 2 is an analytical reconstruction, not a claim that actors consciously read through columns before acting. $E \times U$ is easily misunderstood as the claim that actors conduct an explicit calculation before every act. That is not its role here. In many situations, selection is rapid, habitual, emotional, socially cued, morally immediate or partly unconscious. A familiar script can bring a response to mind before competing options have been fully articulated. Anger may narrow attention; fear may magnify a threat; intoxication may weaken foresight; and a moral commitment may exclude an option before it is weighed as a live possibility.

The model should thus be treated as an analytical representation, not as a literal report of the actor's inner speech. It is compatible with bounded information, imperfect foresight, learned habits, affective arousal and socially acquired scripts. What it does not permit is an unspecified appeal to irrationality whenever the account fails. If an explanation proposes that anger, habit, intoxication, peer presence or moral commitment shaped selection, it must say whether that condition altered the alternatives recognised, the consequences expected, the value attached to them, or the capacity to enact a response.

Situated agency remains central. Agency does not mean a sovereign actor who can choose independently of history and circumstance. It means that conduct is performed or withheld by an actor under conditions, through a process in which possible responses acquire unequal practical force. The model therefore avoids

both extremes: it does not make the actor a passive endpoint of social causation, and it does not treat action as free from the conditions that make some responses more imaginable, compelling or feasible than others.

3.5 From selection to enactment and consequence

Figure 2 also marks the limit of selection: comparative weighting concerns which alternative becomes action-guiding, not whether it is successfully carried out. Selection and completed conduct must therefore be distinguished. An actor may intend to do something but be interrupted, lack the physical capacity, encounter resistance, discover that the opportunity has disappeared, or change course at the last moment. Equally, a person may begin to act before fully revising the implications of that action. An explanation of a completed offence consequently needs to attend to enactment as well as selection. Consequences then return to the pathway. They may reinforce a response, alter reputation, reshape relationships, change opportunities, generate sanctions, revise expectations, transform utility, or place the actor in a different subsequent situation. A reward that follows an act may strengthen its expected value; a credible and personally costly consequence may alter later anticipation; a new relationship or role may bring a lawful alternative into view. The model is therefore not a single, isolated moment of choice. It is an analytical account of selection within an ongoing sequence of action, consequence and feedback (Coleman, 1990; Esser, 1999).

3.6 What an $E \times U$ explanation must show

The selection model becomes empty if the selected action is simply assigned the highest expected utility after it has occurred. That procedure makes the explanation impossible to challenge: whatever happened is retrospectively treated as what the actor most preferred. A credible $E \times U$ account must distinguish at least five elements: the situation as perceived; the alternatives recognised; the consequences expected for each relevant alternative; the value attached to those consequences; and the eventual action or restraint. Where possible, those elements should be established independently of the outcome through observation, records, prospective measures, interviews, experimental designs or carefully corroborated accounts. This requirement does not demand access to a perfect inner record. It demands disciplined inference. The more an explanation relies on hidden expectations or utilities, the more clearly it should state the evidence, uncertainty and competing interpretations. The model may help organise a causal hypothesis, but it does not license the researcher to write motives into an actor after the event. Such care is particularly important in criminal justice settings, where an attractive explanation can too easily become an unwarranted judgement about character, blame or future dangerousness.

3.7 The common point of connection

$E \times U$ provides a common point of connection, not a common substitute for criminological theory. Different theories can be asked what they contribute to the conditions of action selection. A strain perspective may explain how structured goals, blocked opportunities and pressure alter the value of adaptations. Social

disorganisation and collective efficacy may help explain the organisation of supervision, opportunity and informal control in settings. Social learning may explain how associations, definitions, models and reinforcement shape behavioural repertoires, expectations and valuations. Social bond theory may help explain why attachment, commitment, involvement and belief alter the costs of offending and the attractions of conformity. Person-based and developmental accounts may help explain differences in attention, regulation, time horizon, perception and valuation.

These are not claims about what the theories originally say in every detail. They are prompts for the next analytical task: identifying where a theory enters the explanatory pathway, what it supplies, what it leaves implicit, and the limits of its explanatory reach. Section 4 will undertake that task without assuming that different theories are interchangeable or that placement within a common scaffold resolves their substantive disagreements. The purpose of the scaffold is clarity: conditions do not perform actions; actors do, under conditions that become action-relevant through situated perception, evaluation and selection.

Section 4: Towards Explanatory Integration

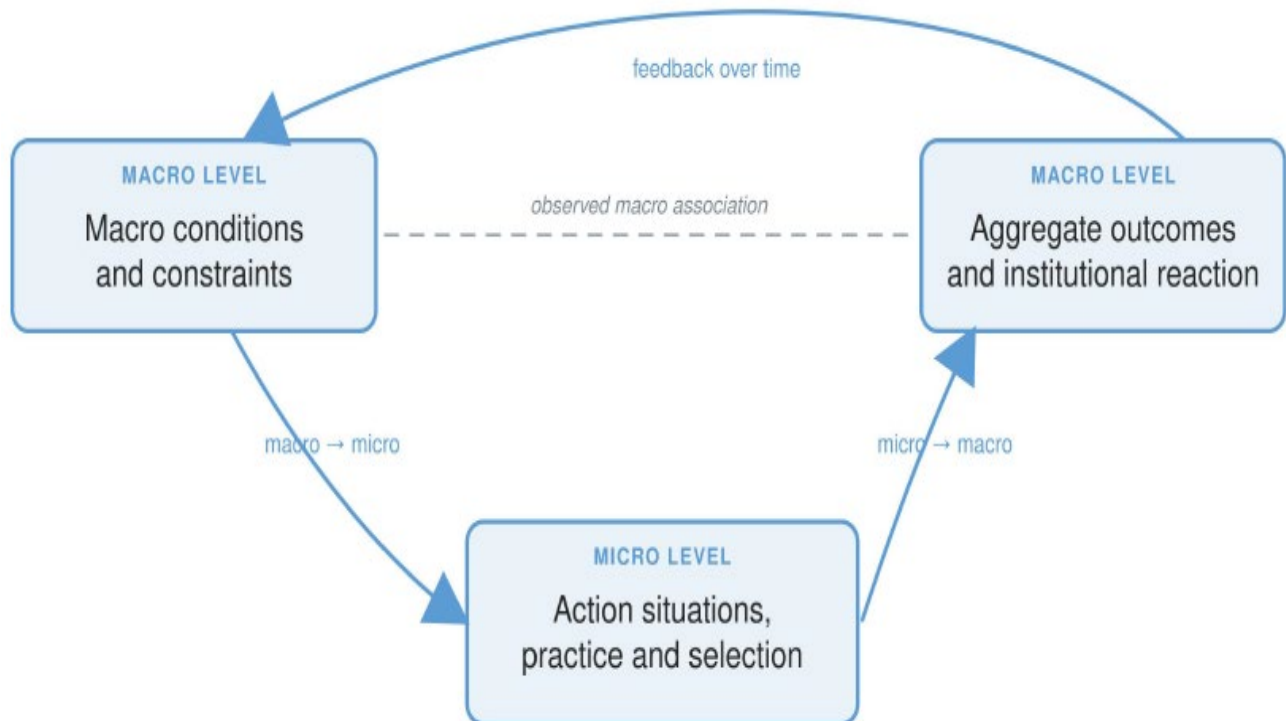
4.1 Integration without merger

The preceding sections have developed an explanatory pathway: conditions shape actors and situations; actors define situations; perceived alternatives, expectations and

Anchor proposition. Positioning a theory within the scaffold clarifies its contribution and limits; it does not retrospectively attribute new claims to its original author.

valuations bear on selection; actions are enacted or withheld; consequences feed into later situations and, when repeated and connected, into collective outcomes. The pathway does not decide in advance which criminological theory is correct. Its purpose is more modest and more exacting. It provides a common set of questions by which different theories can be located, compared and connected where a connection is warranted. Figure 3 visualises the macro–micro–macro movement in this pathway. Its central lesson is that neither transition is self-executing: the movement from wider conditions to actors and situations, and the movement from action back to collective outcomes, each require their own specified explanatory link. Theoretical integration is therefore not the construction of a single theory from every available concept. Nor is it a competition in which a general vocabulary absorbs the distinctive claims of earlier theories. Criminological theories differ in their explanatory objects, levels of analysis, causal priorities, empirical support and normative assumptions. Some address the patterned distribution of crime across settings; some explain social learning or social control; some focus on developmental change; others address a particular type of conduct or institutional reaction. These differences may be complementary, but they can also disclose a

genuine conflict that should remain visible (Bernard & Snipes, 1996). The action-theoretical scaffold is best understood as a meta-theoretical architecture and a programme for integration. It supplies a common explanatory grammar: conditions, actors, situations, perception, alternatives, selection, action, consequence, aggregation and feedback. It does not supply the substantive content of all these terms. Its scientific value depends on the mechanisms and evidence supplied by particular theories and investigations, rather than on the mere fact that a theory can be placed somewhere in the architecture (Coleman, 1990; Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010).



Composition, emergence, recording and feedback must be specified rather than assumed.

Figure 3. Macro–micro–macro explanatory movement. Macro conditions and constraints shape action situations, practices and selection; repeated action, aggregation and institutional reaction generate macro-level outcomes, which feed back over time. Each transition requires its own explanatory link.

4.2 What repositioning does

To position a theory within this scaffold is to state its explanatory contribution with greater precision. It asks, first, what the theory originally proposes and what outcome it seeks to explain. It then asks where the proposed process enters the wider pathway: does it concern structural or institutional conditions, the formation of the actor, the organisation of a setting, the definition of a situation, the field of alternatives, the

weighting of anticipated consequences, enactment, reaction, aggregation or feedback? This is a way of making scope explicit, not of measuring a theory by how many boxes it occupies.

Equally important is the distinction between original theory and analytical addition. An original account should be reported in its own terms and according to its own evidential claims. The scaffold may then reveal a transition that remains implicit: for example, how a setting-level condition could become consequential in an encounter, or how a learned definition could become action-guiding among several perceived alternatives. Making such a transition explicit is a repositioning within a common framework. It is not a retrospective claim that the original theorist already advanced the complete action-theoretical bridge. This distinction protects against a familiar error. A sentence such as “attachment changes the value of disappointing a parent” may be a useful action-theoretical hypothesis; it should not automatically be presented as Hirschi’s own formulation of an $E \times U$ mechanism. Likewise, a proposal that neighbourhood organisation affects the visibility of lawful alternatives may be a productive extension of a collective-efficacy account, but it remains a proposition to be examined rather than a conclusion licensed by placement alone. The Companion uses the word repositioning for precisely this disciplined analytical work.

4.3 Questions for a disciplined positioning

Figure 3 helps keep the required transitions distinct when a theory is positioned within the scaffold. A theory can be positioned through six connected questions. What is the explanandum: an event, a pattern, a developmental trajectory, a response by an institution, or a recorded outcome? What conditions or processes does the theory identify? At what explanatory level do those processes operate? Through which actor, situation or interaction could they become relevant to concrete conduct? What action or outcome is thereby explained? What further aggregation, institutional or feedback process would be needed before the account could explain a collective pattern?

These questions prevent two opposite mistakes. The first is reduction: treating a structural, developmental or cultural account as if it were merely an account of individual preference. The second is shortcut: treating a condition, risk factor or aggregate association as if it performed the action by itself. A pathway may contain more than one level of explanation without reducing all levels to one another. The task is to specify the transitions—how a condition changes a situation, how the situation becomes defined by a particular actor, and how that definition bears on a selection or restraint (Esser, 1999). Omission is not automatically a defect. A theory of neighbourhood processes need not provide a full account of childhood development; a theory of individual self-regulation need not explain the historical formation of urban inequality. A limitation becomes consequential only when the omitted process is required for the theory’s stated explanatory claim. The scaffold therefore identifies boundaries as well as possible bridges. It can show where another theory may add value, but it does not compel the addition or guarantee that the theories can be joined.

4.4 Illustrative positions in the pathway

The following examples are deliberately selective. They show how established etiological theories can contribute different explanatory resources without being converted into versions of one another. A strain account, for example, directs attention to culturally structured aspirations, access to legitimate means and pressures associated with blocked or threatened goals. In a situated account, such conditions may help explain why particular adaptations acquire urgency or value; the concrete alternatives, perceptions and course of action still require specification (Merton, 1938). Accounts of social disorganisation and collective efficacy direct attention to the organisation of local relationships, informal social control and shared expectations for intervention. Positioned within the pathway, these accounts can illuminate how settings shape supervision, exposure, routine encounters, help-seeking, the credibility of intervention and opportunities for lawful or unlawful action. They do not, by themselves, establish how any one resident interprets a dispute or selects a response in an encounter (Sampson et al., 1997). Social learning theory contributes a more direct account of the formation of behavioural repertoires and definitions. Differential association, imitation, definitions and reinforcement can help explain which responses an actor knows, expects to be rewarded or sanctioned, regards as appropriate, and is prepared to enact. An action-theoretical positioning can make the transition to selection more explicit, while retaining the learning processes as the substantive explanation of how relevant expectations and valuations are acquired (Akers, 1998). Social bond theory directs attention to attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. Its contribution can be positioned in the formation and maintenance of ties, stakes in conformity and moral orientation. Within a particular situation, these may bear on the alternatives that appear legitimate, the anticipated costs of offending, the importance of relationships and the attraction of restraint. That analytical translation does not dissolve social bond theory into a choice model; it identifies a possible route by which bonds may become action-relevant (Hirschi, 1969).

Developmental and person-based accounts address another part of the pathway: how persons become differently prepared to notice, regulate, imagine and pursue courses of action across time. Moffitt's taxonomy, for example, distinguishes developmental patterns that cannot be inferred from one event alone. Such accounts may help explain variation in regulation, time horizon, skill, susceptibility to situational influence and continuity or change, while leaving the immediate encounter and its alternatives open to investigation (Moffitt, 1993).

4.5 Complementarity, competition and sequence

Against the separate links shown in Figure 3, the examples demonstrate three possible relations among theories. They may be complementary when they address different, linked segments of a pathway: a setting-level account may explain exposure and informal control, while a learning account explains acquired definitions and a situational account explains selection in an encounter. They may be sequential when one

process plausibly precedes another. Or they may compete when they offer rival explanations for the same link, outcome or empirical pattern. The relevant question is not whether theories can be named together, but whether their proposed processes are compatible, ordered, distinct and empirically supported.

A convincing integrated explanation must therefore do more than place named theories in adjacent parts of a diagram. It must state a transmitting process and identify what observation would support or weaken it. If collective efficacy is said to reduce violence, for example, the claim may involve changed guardianship, intervention, reporting, perceived safety, encounter patterns or norms of response. These are not interchangeable possibilities. They lead to different measures, time orders and predictions. The gain lies in specifying and testing the proposed links, not in accumulating variables under a shared label.

4.6 The evidential discipline of integration

Integration increases rather than reduces the evidential burden. Each bridge needs a stated direction, time order, mechanism and relevant alternative explanation. A structural condition should not be inferred from an individual outcome alone; an individual motive should not be inferred solely from an area-level rate; and an aggregate pattern should not be treated as direct evidence of the micro-process that allegedly produced it. The same care applies to feedback: a sanction, a reputation or a recorded incident may alter later action, but only through processes that must themselves be described and investigated.

The pathway is thus a device for producing more discriminating hypotheses. It asks whether a proposed condition changed exposure, resources, supervision, relational commitments, perception, the recognised alternatives, expected consequences, valuations, capacities for enactment, institutional response or a later setting. It also asks whether a protective route could account for restraint. By making these alternatives explicit, the architecture allows explanations to be revised, rejected or narrowed. It is not a vocabulary for making every result appear compatible after the fact.

4.7 From integration to implication and limitation

The explanatory contribution of the meta-perspective is therefore limited but practical. It helps distinguish levels, identify missing transitions, preserve the identity of theories, formulate testable bridges and state where competition remains necessary. It does not provide a finished explanation of crime, a universal mechanism, or a warrant for assigning every condition a place in every case. The next section considers the implications of this position for research, evidence, prevention and teaching, together with the limits that should govern its use.

Section 5: Implications and Limitations

5.1 What this perspective contributes

The argument of this Companion is not that criminology requires one final theory of crime. It is that explanation becomes clearer when the transitions between conditions, actors,

Anchor proposition. The scaffold links rather than replaces theories, and it supports hypothesis formation rather than certain prediction or retrospective knowledge of motive.

situations, action and collective outcomes are made explicit. The action-theoretical meta-perspective supplies a disciplined location for those transitions. It directs attention to the point at which conditions become action-relevant for a situated actor, while preserving the fact that different criminological theories explain different parts of the wider pathway. This contribution is practical. It enables a researcher, student or practitioner to ask what a proposed cause is meant to change: exposure, resources, relationships, supervision, the definition of a situation, the alternatives recognised, the consequences expected, the value attached to them, the capacity to enact a response, an institutional reaction, or a later setting. The question does not itself establish causation. It improves the question that must be investigated. In that sense, the perspective is a framework for mechanism specification and theory comparison, rather than a substitute for substantive research (Coleman, 1990; Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010).

5.2 Implications for research design and evidence

A first implication is that research designs should separate the links that an explanation requires. If a study proposes that neighbourhood conditions affect violence, it should distinguish the condition from the encounter, the encounter from the action, and the action from the recorded outcome. Measures of area disadvantage, informal control, peer association, fear, perceived alternatives, conduct, victimisation, reporting and official recording may all be relevant, but they are not observations of the same process. Combining them too early can conceal the very mechanism the study seeks to establish.

A second implication is temporal. Formation, selection, enactment, reaction and aggregation may occur on different time scales. Childhood learning can shape a later repertoire; a setting can organise a momentary encounter; an act can alter a reputation immediately; institutional reaction can affect opportunities over months or years; repeated action can contribute to a longer-run pattern. A credible account should therefore state when a proposed cause operates and when its alleged consequence should be observable. Cross-sectional association may identify a question, but it cannot by itself demonstrate the sequence that a mechanism claims.

A third implication concerns evidence. The strongest studies bring together sources that can bear independently on different elements of the pathway: observation of settings and encounters; prospective or repeated measures; administrative records interpreted with knowledge of recording practices; interviews that are corroborated rather than treated as transparent windows into motive; and designs that compare plausible rival explanations. No single method automatically reaches every link. Methodological pluralism is valuable when it is directed by a specified explanatory problem rather than by the accumulation of indicators.

5.3 Implications for E × U analysis

Expectation × utility is most useful when it disciplines the explanation of selection. It asks what alternatives were recognised, which consequences were anticipated, how those consequences were valued and why an action or restraint acquired greater practical force than its perceived competitors. It can guide interviews, scenario studies, ethnographic observation, experiments and prospective surveys; it can also help make sense of why an objectively available lawful alternative did not appear viable or persuasive in a particular situation. The model is not, however, a reliable instrument for predicting the action of a particular person. Researchers rarely have complete access to the person's definition of the situation, the alternatives that entered awareness, the expectations held at the time, the values attached to competing outcomes, or the unanticipated interruptions that followed. The problem is greater when an account is constructed after a serious event, when testimony is shaped by memory, justification, accusation, fear or institutional stakes. E × U can organise a hypothesis about selection; it cannot authorise confident knowledge of an actor's private reasons.

For the same reason, E × U must not become a calculus retrospectively fitted to the outcome. The selected action cannot simply be assigned the greatest utility because it occurred. Explanatory weight comes from independently supported evidence about situation, alternatives, expectations, valuations and enactment, together with attention to uncertainty and counterevidence. The model remains analytical even where selection was rapid, habitual, affectively charged or partly outside conscious reflection. What matters is not whether the actor performed a visible calculation, but whether the account specifies how relevant processes shaped the field of action and its comparative force.

5.4 Implications for prevention and criminal justice

Prevention can be considered across the pathway rather than only at the final moment of conduct. A measure may reduce harmful action by changing material opportunity, increasing safe and credible support, strengthening relationships, improving supervision, widening access to lawful alternatives, altering the credibility of intervention, building skills for self-regulation, or reducing the pressures that make destructive responses appear compelling. The framework does not tell us in advance which intervention will work. It requires an intervention claim to specify which part of the pathway it seeks to change and how that change is

expected to affect later action or restraint. This approach also cautions against policies built solely on the assumption that sanctions will deter. A sanction can matter only insofar as it is known or anticipated, judged credible, relevantly valued and connected to an available alternative. It may be outweighed by immediate danger, relational pressure, perceived necessity, impaired capacity, or the absence of a trusted lawful route. Equally, the absence of a sanction does not explain an offence by itself. The relevant question is comparative: what did the situation make visible, credible and practicable to the actor, and what did a proposed response change in that situation?

Such caution is particularly important in criminal justice. An action-theoretical explanation should not be confused with a judgement that conduct was excusable, nor should it be used to infer blame, character or future dangerousness from sparse information. Explanation and responsibility are related but distinct questions. A framework that seeks to understand how action became possible or likely must retain the dignity of persons, the reality of harm and the limits of inference from observed conduct.

5.5 Implications for theory comparison and teaching

The common pathway offers a disciplined way to compare theories without requiring students or researchers to choose prematurely between them. A theory can be examined for its stated explanandum, level of analysis, causal processes, implied actor and situation, account of action or restraint, treatment of aggregation and feedback, and empirical reach. This makes it possible to identify complementarity where theories concern distinct but connected processes, and competition where they make incompatible claims about the same process or outcome (Bernard & Snipes, 1996). The educational gain is not the ability to attach more labels to a diagram. It is the ability to distinguish faithfully between an original proposition, its logical requirements, an explicitly added analytical bridge, the evidence offered for that bridge and what remains unresolved. A theory is not weakened merely because it is partial. Its limits are often the conditions of its explanatory precision. The scaffold becomes misleading only when it silently converts a partial theory into a complete account, or treats a proposed connection as if it had already been established.

5.6 Limits of the meta perspective

The first limit is scope. The architecture is not a completed theory of all crime, deviance, victimisation or criminal justice. It cannot determine which causes matter in a given population, time or setting. It does not settle substantive disagreements among theories, and it cannot make incompatible propositions compatible through common vocabulary. A map of possible explanatory positions is not evidence that each position is occupied, nor that all proposed links can be joined.

The second limit is evidential access. Subjective situations are neither directly observable nor wholly private. They can be investigated through behaviour, language, records, repeated observation, experimental designs and carefully interpreted accounts, but each source is incomplete and fallible. The analyst must avoid two

errors: treating the actor's report as a final explanation, and treating the analyst's reconstruction as superior knowledge of what the actor must have thought. Both claims require corroboration and should remain open to revision.

The third limit concerns levels and aggregation. A patterned crime rate cannot be read back as a description of every resident's motives, and a series of individual actions does not automatically explain a collective outcome. Between action and aggregate pattern lie exposure, interaction, institutional classification, reporting, detection, recording, population composition and other processes of emergence. A macro–micro–macro account must specify these links rather than moving directly from an area characteristic to an individual act, or from individual conduct to a social pattern (Coleman, 1990; Esser, 1999).

Finally, the framework has no value if it merely adds an action vocabulary after the event. Its value is conditional on disciplined use: specify the explanandum, locate the proposed process, make transitions explicit, preserve the status of original theory, compare alternatives, state the evidence required, and identify what would weaken the account. When these conditions are not met, the language of mechanisms, situations and $E \times U$ can create an appearance of explanation without its empirical substance.

5.7 Closing position

Criminological explanation is strengthened when it does not stop at conditions or associations, but asks how conditions enter the situations of actors, how alternatives and consequences become understood and valued, how action or restraint is enacted, and how consequences accumulate and return. That is the limited claim of this Companion. Action theory serves here as a hinge and a common language for inquiry: it links rather than replaces, clarifies rather than totalises, and invites testing rather than retrospective certainty.

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