

An Introduction to Criminological
Theory and the Problem of Causation

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This book is dedicated to Ben, Shadd and Alison for inviting me to the Cropwood Conference on the Effects of Imprisonment in 2004 and to John Irwin, Barbara Owen, Craig Haney, Paul Hirschfield, Pat Carlen and Joe Sim who I met there.

I would not have walked this path without the encouragement and the kicks up the arse that you all gave me.

And, of course, Kate.

PREFACE

This book arose from my own confusion when first introduced (indoctrinated?) into the field of criminology. Moving from one discipline to another always results in two fundamental issues: firstly, being confronted by one's own lacuna of knowledge – you quickly become starkly aware of how ignorant you are of the new field of study. The second is that you cannot help but compare the new subject, and its ways of doing things, to the one that you have just left. The conjunction of these two epistemic positions resulted in a Gordian knot of befuddlement. The issue? Criminology has some problems!

Before coming to criminology, I had begun studying philosophy with the Open University before then going on to study Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The one thing that really marks out philosophical discourse is the examination and explication of assumptions which underpin the ideas with which we wrestle. Some may see this as academic pedantry (I have some sympathy for that) but what it does do is ensure that you make manifest the logics with which you construct your argumentation as well as attempt to remove/eliminate semantic ambiguity. I carried this mindset with me into the study of criminological thought – where often I found myself trying to uncover, and discuss, the assumptions with which criminology is laden. I must have been a nightmare to teach. For instance, when studying rational choice theories of crime, I wanted to know what was meant by rationality in any given theory – it is not a straightforward notion and is an assumptively and value laden concept. I also wanted to know what role *akrasia* (Aristotle's theory of weakness of will) had in terms of rational choice theories? As I noted – a nightmare to teach.

However, the questions and confusion remained – often the more I read the more these issues became entrenched. Nevertheless, I was (being a geeky academic) determined to untangle my befuddlement. One of the fundamental issues I had, which I needed to untangle, has resulted in this book. It seemed evident that there had been a major shift in modes of thinking in terms of causes of crime, yet there seemed to be little literature that expounded an adequate reason for this shift. That theory had changed was a given, and the theories themselves were laid out in various texts and to varying degrees, but the process of that change, the mechanics if you will, had not really been explored. Upon investigation, I became aware that the logics of causation were not really discussed in any systematic way in even the most advanced theories on the causation of crime. As with the concept of rationality, the assumptions underpinning causation were not being made explicit; as such the problems inherent to causal theorising were not being adequately addressed in criminology.

Here, then, are the central two themes of this book: what are the philosophical problems of causation and how have these issues impacted on the course and history of criminological thought. The book itself is designed to be an introductory text to these issues. Causal reasoning and the problems associated with it are incredibly complex. This book does not presuppose any knowledge of logic nor the philosophy of science and is thus aimed at both students of criminology and criminological theorists. The argument contained herein is set out in a simple linear format examining why a poor understanding of causation is a serious issue for criminology; what the main causal conception within criminology has been; what the problems are with this conception; how an implicit rejection of this conception has shaped the history of criminology; and the proposal of a form of causal reasoning that would suit contemporary theories of crime causation and which solves some of the identified problems.

How to use this book. The exploration of these themes is designed to help the reader think about the complexity and difficulty presented by causal reasoning when considering theories of crime, designing their own research and writing up method chapters or even analysing data and constructing a theory of crime. The book consolidates the problems of causation into a small, reader friendly format that will also be useful for those working in the field of policy development in terms of how research and theory can be assessed as well as for those who may have to give expert testimony on crime causes. Whilst it may be possible to dip into individual chapters to glean information as you need it, to use the text as a reference

guide if you will, I would recommend reading the argument through fully first. Also, the book is to be enjoyed – and to this end, I have made this examination of a crusty old philosophical problem accessible (hopefully) to all.

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