

## CO-OFFENDING AS SOCIAL EXCHANGE

### *Explaining Characteristics of Co-Offending*

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*Studies in the past have already revealed some interesting characteristics of co-offending, but relatively little attention has been paid to explaining them. This paper is focused on the explanation of these characteristics. A comprehensive theory is proposed, based on the idea that co-offending may be viewed as an event in which material and immaterial goods are exchanged. The basic concepts of such a social exchange theory are formulated in this article, and a causal model based on this theory is deduced. The paper also shows how the proposed theory may explain the well-known characteristics of co-offending.*

#### *Introduction*

One of the most remarkable aspects of crime is that it is often not a lone enterprise. Instead, many offences are committed by two or more people together. This is especially true of youth crime: the majority of delinquent youths commit at least some of their offences in company (see, for example, Shaw and McKay 1931; Erickson 1971; Zimring 1981; Warr 1996). Adult offenders also, more often break the law in the company of other offenders. Reiss and Farrington (1991) report that at least one other offender was involved in 51 per cent of all convictions of the 32-year-old delinquents they analysed.

The perpetration of an offence by more than one person is usually referred to as 'co-offending'. Co-offending embraces the actual collective execution of an offence. Most authors limit this to cases of offending where offenders are committing a crime together at the same time and place. Some authors, however, also treat criminal cooperation at different times and places as co-offending (for example, Tremblay 1993). It is important to note that co-offending is not the same as having delinquent or criminal acquaintances or friends. One can associate with offenders but still not co-offend with them. So, a distinction must be made between the set of co-offenders in a particular case and the network or group from which the set of co-offenders is taken. Warr (1996) uses the terms 'offending groups' and 'accomplice networks' to distinguish between these two.

The phenomenon of co-offending raises many questions. In the first place, descriptive questions can be asked. Are there typical co-offenders or solo-offenders? How successful is co-offending compared to solo-offending? Which co-offenders combine in offending groups? How is co-offending instigated? Second, intriguing theoretical questions come to mind. Why do lawbreakers co-offend when they could commit their crimes alone? Why

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After submittance of this paper, some other interesting publications with regard to co-offending have been published (Carrington 2002; McCord and Conway 2002; Waring 2002; Warr 2002). These publications could not be processed in this paper, but their details are in the reference list.

do they take the disadvantages of co-offending for granted? Why do co-offenders choose the companions they do? These questions are intriguing because they imply that the so-called anti-social activity of offending must have many social aspects. Co-offending can tell us about the relationships and social patterns that govern the collective behaviour of offenders.

Answering these questions poses a challenge for criminology. Although a number of interesting studies on co-offending have already appeared (see Zimring 1981; Reiss 1986 for general reviews; Reiss and Farrington 1991; Warr 1996 for important recent contributions), relatively little is known about co-offending compared with the individual characteristics of offenders. Furthermore, the theoretical debate on the subject is underdeveloped compared with the abundance of perspectives on the aetiology of criminal behaviour (some rare examples of theoretical elaboration focused on co-offending are Tremblay 1993, and McCarthy et al. 1998).

The study of co-offending is also very relevant for policy makers and law enforcement agencies. It can assist in the apprehension of offenders because it may reveal much about offenders or offending groups (see also Canter 2000). It can be useful in channelling attention to the most important offenders within criminal networks or to the most dangerous offending groups. Insights into the factors behind co-offending may enhance crime prevention. It may also assist in judicial decision making by differentiating between types of co- and solo-offenders.

In this article, I will give a short review of the most important characteristics of co-offending that are already known. I will then address three current perspectives on co-offending and their shortcomings. I will also suggest a new, comprehensive theory about co-offending based on social exchange mechanisms. The basic concepts of such a theory are formulated and a causal model of the influences on co-offending is deduced. To conclude, I will show how the known characteristics of co-offending can be explained using this theory.

### *Characteristics of Co-Offending*

Although many questions are left unanswered, the existing literature reveals some interesting characteristics of co-offending.

The first and most obvious characteristic of co-offending, but one that is nevertheless important, is that *offenders vary in their preference for co-offending or solo-offending*. This does not necessarily imply that offenders exclusively co-offend or solo-offend. Hindelang (1971, 1976) found that many offenders switched between co-offending and solo-offending. However, although there seem to be few typical co- or solo-offenders, the literature shows that offenders do differ in their preference for co-offending. Hindelang also reported that most offenders *usually* commit their offences either alone or with others. In other studies, the chance to repeat co- or solo-offending is found to be higher than the chance to switch from the one to the other (Reiss and Farrington 1991; Warr 1996).

A second characteristic of co-offending is that it *varies between offence types*. In many studies, differences in 'group violation rate' and in the average number of co-offenders are found between offence types (for example, Erickson 1971; Hindelang 1971, 1976; Erickson and Jensen 1977; Warr 1996; Hakkert et al. 1998). In general, drug-use and vandalism are most often committed together. Serious offences against the property of

others (i.e. burglary, robbery) are also often committed by more than one person. General assault and other violent crimes, as well as minor thefts and shoplifting, have much lower rates of co-offending.

A third, frequently confirmed, finding about co-offending is its *relationship with age* (see, for example, Sveri 1965; Hood and Sparks 1970; Zimring 1981; Reiss and Farrington 1991). Young offenders co-offend more often than their adult counterparts. They are also accompanied by more co-offenders. At the age of 20, the majority of offenders commit their offences alone. Reiss and Farrington (1991) found that the relationship with age could not be attributed to a higher attrition of co-offenders. Instead, offenders changed from solo- to co-offending as they grew older.

A fourth characteristic is that co-offending is *usually instigated by one of the co-offenders*. However, Reiss and Farrington (1991) found that there is no general tendency among offenders to recruit less-experienced companions, although a few frequent offenders can be identified as 'recruiters'. Warr (1996) pointed out that instigation is a better way of describing how co-offending evolves. In about 80 per cent of co-offending cases, offenders report that one person took the initiative. On average, these instigators are older and more experienced than the joiners are. However, many offenders switch back and forth between the roles of instigator and joiner; only a minority of the frequent offenders are *either* instigators *or* joiners.

A fifth characteristic is that co-offending can either be *a simple or complex operation*. In many cases, co-offending differs from solo-offending only in the number of participants, not by the nature of the operation. Shoplifting and vandalism do not usually involve a division of labour (Van Dijk, Van Soomeren, and Walop 1984; Klemke 1992). Also, most of the burglars or robbers do not operate in a very sophisticated way (Lejeune 1977; Cromwell et al. 1991; Wright and Decker 1994). However, the more professional offenders make plans in advance and carry out an extensive division of labour, with different roles like look-out, driver, first in, spokesperson, back-up (Einstadter 1969; Shover 1973, Walsh 1986; Kroese and Staring 1993; Kruissink and Wiersma 1995, Donald and Wilson 2000).

A sixth characteristic is that co-offending *usually takes place in small offending groups*. Many studies report that co-offenders usually form dyads or triads and that only a small minority of offending groups consists of four or more persons (for example, Shaw and McKay 1931; Sveri 1965; Hood and Sparks 1970; Zimring 1981; Reiss and Farrington 1991). Burglars and robbers themselves report that the usual group size is two or three (for example, Walsh 1986, Kroese and Staring 1993) and also property offences committed by gang members are usually perpetrated by small combinations (Miller 1967; Decker and Van Winkle 1996).

A seventh characteristic is that co-offending *takes place within relatively homogeneous offending groups*. Offenders tend to associate with co-offenders who are similar to themselves in various aspects. For example, co-offenders often correspond with each other in age or criminal experience. Young offenders particularly are predominantly accompanied by their contemporaries; adult offenders are accompanied more often by much older or younger persons (Reiss and Farrington 1991; Kleemans 1996). Offending groups are also often of the same sex and ethnicity. Warr (1996) finds that more than three quarters of the offending groups consists of co-offenders from the same sex; Reiss (1986) reports that only 6 per cent of the victims of violent co-offenders report a racially mixed composition.

An eighth characteristic is that co-offending *takes place within changing constellations*. Only a minority of persistent offenders is arrested more than once with the same co-offender (Sarnecki 1986; Reiss and Farrington 1991). Young delinquents themselves also report that the majority of offending groups changes after one event (Warr 1996), although specialized groups are somewhat more stable. Interviewed burglars and robbers often indicate that they have no fixed co-offenders but seek out companions depending on the particular situation (Shover 1973; Maguire and Bennett 1982; Walsh 1986). However, there are also (more professional) burglars and robbers who do have fixed partnerships with co-offenders whom they can trust (Kroese and Staring 1993; Kruissink and Wiersma 1995).

Taken as a whole, these characteristics suggest that co-offending is a rather fluid, varying and dynamic phenomenon. This image contradicts many popular conceptions of co-offending, such as criminals conspiring in stable and hierarchical groups, actively recruiting new members. Furthermore, these characteristics of co-offending each call for an explanation. What causes differences between offenders and offences in co-offending? Why is co-offending related to age? Why is co-offending sometimes simple and sometimes organized? What makes co-offenders switch between instigation and joining? Why does co-offending usually take place in small offending groups that are often homogeneous but very unstable? A proper theory of co-offending should be able to answer these questions.

### *Three Current Perspectives on Co-Offending*

Three 'basic' perspectives are present in the literature on co-offending:<sup>1</sup> the 'group influence', 'social selection', and 'instrumental' perspective.

In the *group influence perspective*, co-offending is viewed as the necessary result of the group influence leading to criminal behaviour. Taking this view are those criminologists who connect co-offending with the 'group character' of youth crime (for example, Shaw and McKay 1931; Erickson and Jensen 1977; Sarnecki 1990), or with differential association theory (for example, Warr 1996).

In the group influence perspective, co-offending as well as criminal behaviour itself is seen as the result of processes within the group. These processes can be social learning or the acquisition of delinquent definitions (as in Akers 1973 and Sutherland 1947), or group pressure felt by the members of the group (as in Matza 1964, and Short and Strodtbeck 1965).<sup>2</sup> People co-offend because the group in which they became delinquent also leads them to join in criminal activities within the group. By doing this group members obtain social rewards. Co-offending is also expected by the other group members and withdrawing from it would cause sanctions, varying from subtle disapproval to expulsion.

<sup>1</sup> Actually, these perspectives are reconstructed from the literature. Criminologists writing about co-offending often implicitly adhere to assumptions without explicating them.

<sup>2</sup> In social psychology, different kinds of group processes are also described. These can consist of actual enforcement of group norms (Sherif 1936; Schachter 1951), but group members also conform to the majority view without any actual enforcement of group norms (see Asch 1951; Aronson 1994).

The group influence perspective makes it easy to understand why so many offenders break the law in the company of others. Social rewards and pressures make them do so and these outweigh eventual risks. Co-offending in large groups with a low degree of organization is the logical form of criminal behaviour within this perspective. Within the group influence perspective, the finding that the oldest and most experienced members of an offending group are relatively often instigators (Warr 1996) can be explained by the greater potential these members have for exerting group pressure.

The group influence perspective, however, does not account for the wide variety in co-offending. Why should offenders differ in their preference for co- or solo-offending when they are all subject to group influence, and why do differences between offence-types exist? Group influence also goes against the small size and instability of most offending groups. When co-offending is regarded as the result of social pressure or rewards, larger and more stable offending groups should be the norm.

Overall, the group influence perspective is most applicable to co-offending with a clear 'group character', like youths committing vandalism, or gangs fighting each other. It is less applicable to the more advanced forms of co-offending in small offending groups.

In the *social selection perspective*, co-offending is viewed as a by-product of the tendency of offenders to select each other as friends or companions. This perspective is quite unpopular among criminologists writing about co-offending, but Reiss and Farrington (1991) use it to generate hypotheses about the selection of co-offenders.

The social selection perspective is built on the ideas of those criminologists who reject group influence (for example, Glueck and Glueck 1950; Hirschi 1969; Kornhauser 1978). They assume that criminal or delinquent groups form because offenders select each other: 'birds of a feather stick together'. Their argument also accounts for co-offending: this happens automatically when offenders stick together by social selection. In the social selection perspective, criminal behaviour is the result of individual characteristics of the offender (for example, lack of control or self-control). They associate with other offenders because they share the same characteristics, or other factors,<sup>3</sup> and because of their individual characteristics they are also prepared to join in criminal activities. Therefore, offenders who are prepared to break the law will often spend time together and therefore will co-offend when the opportunity arises.

Like the group influence perspective, the social selection perspective makes it easy to understand why many offenders break the law in the company of other offenders. They are already together by social selection. The homogeneity of offending groups is also explained directly by the mechanism of social selection: offenders prefer to associate with co-offenders who are like themselves. Furthermore, the social selection perspective offers a possible explanation for the instability of offending groups. When there is no special reason to co-offend, it is logical that the constellation of offending groups is directed by coincidence.

However, the social selection perspective does not account for the wide variety in co-offending. When co-offending is simply a by-product of social selection, it is hard to understand why offenders differ in their tendency to use companions and why such large differences between offence types exist. The social selection perspective is also not very

<sup>3</sup> Social selection can also evolve from other similarities, like value homophily (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1957), the same daily activities (Feld 1980), or simply physical proximity (Festinger et al. 1950).

useful in explaining the small size of most offending groups or the complex and planned forms of co-offending: these characteristics contradict the notion that offenders take the opportunity whenever it occurs.

Overall, the social selection perspective is most applicable to spontaneous and unorganised co-offending, such as youths shoplifting or impulse robberies. It is less applicable to the more complex forms of co-offending and to co-offending in small groups.

In the *instrumental perspective*, co-offending is viewed as the result of the decision that co-offending leads to an easier, more profitable or less risky execution of a crime. Criminologists who write about specific crimes like burglary and robbery can be reckoned among this perspective because they describe co-offending as a way of making it easier and better to commit the offence (for example, Letkemann 1973; Walsh 1986; Kroese and Staring 1993). Also, some criminologists theorizing about the choice of criminal cooperation or suitable co-offenders (Tremblay 1993; Kleemans 1996; McCarthy, Hagan, and Cohen 1998) can be reckoned as taking this perspective.

In the instrumental perspective on co-offending, committing crimes together as well as criminal behaviour in general is seen as the result of a decision-making process.<sup>4</sup> In this process, the advantages of co-offending are weighed against the potential costs. Co-offending can ease the execution of the offence and increase the expected catch. However, working together also implies that profits have to be shared and that there is a greater risk of betrayal: co-offenders could take all the profits for themselves or talk to the police. Co-offending is chosen when it is expected to be easier and more rewarding than solo-offending.

The instrumental perspective explains why most offending groups are small. Larger groups do not contribute very much to the execution of offences, while they increase the risks of betrayal and decrease the share in the catch. The instrumental view on co-offending is also well equipped for advanced forms of co-offending, because these are potentially very rewarding. Furthermore, differences between individuals and between offence types may be explained using the instrumental perspective. The advantages of co-offending vary among offenders with dissimilar capacities and possibilities and the profitability of companions vary among offence types.

However, the instrumental perspective is not useful to understand the occasions when co-offending takes place in large groups. In these cases, co-offending is not instrumental and does not outweigh the costs of it. The same is true for co-offending that is simple and involves no planning or role differentiation. Furthermore, the instrumental perspective does not account for the finding that older experienced offenders are more often the instigators in offending groups. Co-offending should be the most profitable for the least experienced offenders. In addition, the instability of offending groups is not logical within the instrumental perspective: fixed teams of co-offenders who are capable and trustworthy should be more rewarding.

Overall, the instrumental perspective is most applicable to the more complex forms of co-offending, like those of bank robbers using a division of labour or professional burglars working in teams. It is less applicable to offending groups that are unstable, spontaneous or large.

<sup>4</sup>The instrumental perspective on co-offending can be connected to a rational choice or decision-making perspective (see Simon 1983; Cornish and Clarke 1986; Clarke and Felson 1993).

In conclusion, none of these three perspectives explains all characteristics of co-offending. Instead, each of them seems to be valid for a certain type of co-offending but not for the others.

It is desirable, therefore, to develop a more comprehensive view on co-offending. A strategy to do this is to take a more general perspective on human behaviour. Valuable insights are offered by the social exchange perspective, a tradition in both sociology and psychology (see such classic works as Lévi-Strauss 1949; Homans 1957, 1961; Blau 1964; Thibaut and Kelly 1959). In this perspective, social exchange is regarded as the key to understanding social behaviour. People exchange all kinds of material and immaterial goods and by doing so they build and maintain relationships. Because co-offending supposes social interaction between offenders, it can also be studied from a social exchange point of view. Social exchange theory can help to understand when and why co-offending takes place and can help to analyse the social interactions and relationships between co-offenders.

#### *A Social Exchange Theory of Co-Offending: Basic Assumptions and Concepts*

The most important notion of a social exchange theory of co-offending is of course the idea that co-offending can be viewed as social exchange. On each occasion when crimes are committed in the company of other offenders, goods are exchanged between offenders. These 'exchange goods' can be material, a share in the catch or a payment, but also immaterial, such as social approval and acceptance. Future commitments can also be viewed as 'exchange goods'.

The reason why people co-offend is then easy to understand: it is a way of obtaining *rewards* through the exchange of goods that cannot be obtained by solo-offending. Because the exchange is not limited to the material 'catch' of the offence, co-offending can occur even when it is not necessary to carry out a specific crime. Therefore, social exchange makes it easy to understand why so many offenders are joined by companions when they break the law.

Social exchange is rewarding because it fulfils all kinds of human *needs* or *desires*: physical, economic, social, and psychological. The social exchange perspective assumes that people strive to satisfy their desires (Homans 1961). Like all individuals, offenders strive to get material and immaterial rewards that satisfy their desires. Of course, this is not the only mechanism behind human behaviour. All kinds of factors, such as social bonds, moral attitudes, and perception of risks control the pursuit for rewards. Nevertheless, the general motivation behind co-offending is that it provides desired material and immaterial rewards.

People base their decisions not only on rewards but also on *costs* and risks. These are also important in explaining the participation or non-participation in the social exchange of co-offending. In general, people agree to exchange goods when they expect it to be *profitable enough*. The same is true for co-offending.

Co-offending is *profitable* when the rewards exceed the costs. All rewards and costs are important. Not only the resulting rewards of co-offending (a higher catch), but also rewards during co-offending (for example, doing things together) and rewards in the long term (for example, higher status). Not only resulting costs (for example, sharing the catch), but also costs during the offence (the investment of time and energy) and in

the long term (for example, a higher risk of getting caught). Of course, offenders do not have perfect information on rewards and costs; they base their decisions on the rewards and costs that they perceive.

Co-offending should also be profitable *enough*. This is partly determined by general social exchange mechanisms like reciprocity and distributive justice (see Homans 1961; Blau 1964). Co-offenders must expect that their investment in the offence will be repaid and that they will receive an equal share in the result of the offence. Satisfaction with the profits of co-offending is also influenced by one's 'level of comparison' (Thibaut and Kelly 1959). The profits of co-offending should be equal to what one is used to getting and should be similar to the profits one gets with other co-offenders.

### *The Exchange Goods of Co-Offending*

Foa and Foa (1974) developed a categorization of exchange goods based on the degree to which exchange goods are tangible and personal.<sup>5</sup> This same scheme can be adapted to classify the exchange goods of co-offending.

The exchange goods of co-offending can be divided into six categories: services, payment, 'catch', appreciation, acceptance, and information. The category of 'services' is fundamental to co-offending: these are the co-offenders' activities that make the offence possible. Services usually consist of actual help during the offence but may also include providing devices (for example, a gun or a crowbar) and being present during the offence. The category of 'catch' consists of the share in the money or goods from the offence. Usually this 'catch' is divided afterwards, but sometimes a cheating co-offender takes all or most of the 'catch' for himself. The category of 'payment' consists of all the material rewards that one co-offender gets from another as payment for his service. Usually this is money, either paid in advance or when the offence is completed. The category of 'appreciation' consists of the social rewards for the actions of the co-offender. It is an expression that someone has done something valuable or good. The category of 'acceptance' contains the social rewards for the person of the co-offender. It ranges from simple toleration to membership and affection. The category of 'information' contains all the knowledge one gets through co-offending; practical knowledge about techniques but also knowledge about the trustworthiness and capacities of the other co-offenders. Table 1 offers a schematic overview of the six categories of exchange goods.

In all cases of co-offending, co-offenders deliver services. However, these services can be exchanged with goods from all the other exchange categories. Various combinations of exchange categories are possible during co-offending. The nature of different forms of co-offending can be described on the basis of combinations of exchange categories.

In the basic 'instrumental' forms of co-offending, services are exchanged with a share in the catch. In another instrumental form of co-offending, services are exchanged with payments. This is the case when someone is 'hired' for special skills, like breaking safes or using violence.

<sup>5</sup> They believed similar goods are exchanged more easily than dissimilar goods and used their classification system to predict the relative ease with which types of goods could be exchanged.



TABLE 1 *Six categories of co-offending exchange goods*

Exchange category	Definition	Examples
Services	Activities needed for the execution of an offence	Supporting presence Execution of a task Providing devices
Catch	Share in money or goods taken from a victim	A share of the catch Keeping the catch
Payment	Money or goods offered by co-offenders	A sum of money Goods not from the victim
Appreciation	Socially rewarding someone's action	Showing gratitude Expressing satisfaction Admiration
Acceptance	Socially rewarding someone personal	Tolerating presence Offering membership Expressing sympathy
Information	Offering knowledge about persons or matters	Demonstrating techniques Telling about others Showing trustworthiness

In 'strategic' forms of co-offending, the goal is to obtain important information apart from the catch. Examples are co-offending to test a person or co-offending to learn a special technique. In these cases, information is exchanged besides services and a share in the catch.

There are also 'quasi-instrumental' forms of co-offending in which the 'social' exchange categories are involved. In many cases, co-offenders try to impress each other with their skills or with their bravado. Sometimes, participating in co-offending is required to be a member of a group. In all these cases, services and catch are exchanged with social appreciation and acceptance.

'Expressive' forms of co-offending also exist in which no catch or payment is exchanged. Youth groups committing acts of vandalism are a good example: members exchange services for acceptance, appreciation and information.

Furthermore, 'unequal' forms of co-offending can be analysed by the structure of goods exchanged. In hierarchical forms of co-offending, services are exchanged for appreciation from a leading person. 'Wannabes' can be satisfied with no share of the catch if they get acceptance in return. Thus, co-offenders can differ from each other in the exchange goods they receive from the offence.

#### *A Causal Model*

When co-offending is viewed as a social exchange, three necessary conditions have to be met. The first condition for co-offending is that an offender is willing to co-offend. In other words, the offender has to perceive the possibility of co-offending as 'profitable enough'. The second condition is that one or more potential co-offender is present or easy to contact. One cannot co-offend when no other offender is around. The third condition is that the co-offender is willing, and this is only the case when the offender has

something to offer to make offending with him 'profitable enough'. In other words, the offender has to be attractive to co-offend with.

Offenders vary in the degree to which they meet the three conditions for co-offending all the time. For example, some delinquent persons can only meet co-offenders at a certain time of day, while others are constantly in the company of delinquent associates. Some offenders are always willing to co-offend because they do not dare to offend alone, while others are only willing when there are significant financial rewards. Because of these differences between offenders, the three conditions for a co-offending event can be formulated as individual variables. Then, the co-offending rate of an offender is dependent on the *willingness* to co-offend, the *presence* of potential co-offenders, and the *attractiveness* to co-offenders. [These three basic influences on co-offending are presented in Figure 1.]

Each of these three basic influences is influenced by other offender characteristics. These indirect influences are described below.

The willingness to co-offend is influenced in the first place by the nature of the offenders' needs and desires. Because wishes and desires differ from offender to offender, offenders also diverge in their valuation of the rewards and costs of co-offending. The amount and ratio of *material and immaterial needs* and desires are especially important. Offenders who have mainly immaterial (social and psychological) needs, such as the wish to be accepted and appreciated or the urge to get thrills and fun, are always rewarded by co-offending. Offenders with mainly material needs, the desire to get more money or objects, are only rewarded when they get a lot of 'catch' out of co-offending. In addition, offenders with immaterial needs do not perceive the sharing of 'catch' as a great loss, while offenders with material needs do. For these reasons, immaterial needs and desires stimulate the willingness to co-offend, while material needs often weaken the willingness to co-offend by enhancing the demands on the profits of co-offending.

The willingness to co-offend is also influenced by a factor connected to the social exchange mechanisms of reciprocity and just distribution: *trust*. A basic problem in co-offending is that offenders never know if a co-offender will stick to an agreement or if he

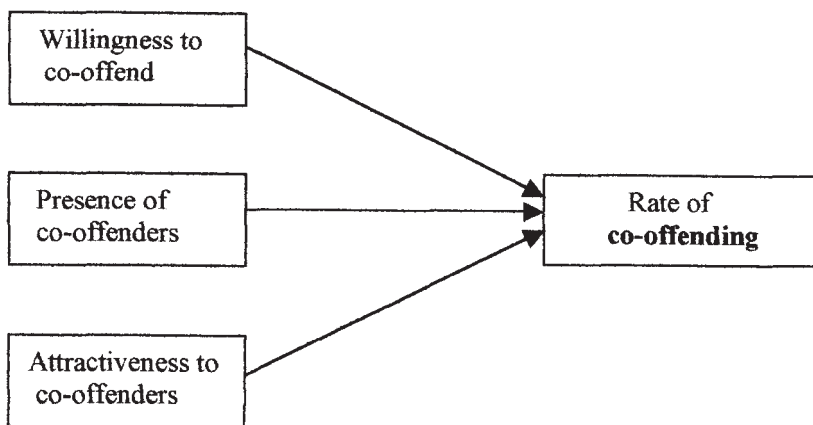


FIG. 1 The three basic influences on individual co-offending rate

will cheat (this problem can be formulated as a prisoner's dilemma, see McCarthy et al. 1998). When potential partners cannot be trusted, it is uncertain if the social exchange of co-offending will be reciprocal and just. Therefore, a high level of trust stimulates the willingness to co-offend.

The presence of co-offenders is mainly influenced by the contacts and connections with other offenders. In the first place, having many *social relationships with other offenders* stimulates the presence of co-offenders. Delinquent friends and relatives are potential co-offenders and are usually easy to approach.

Other vague acquaintances may also be accessible as potential co-offenders and these in turn may know other people who could participate in co-offending. A wide social network of offenders offers many opportunities for finding people who could be co-offenders, but it also implies that an offender himself is asked by many others to co-offend with them. Therefore, a *large criminal network* stimulates the presence of potential co-offenders.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the effects of delinquent relationships or the wider criminal network, the presence of potential co-offenders is also influenced by the accessibility of other offenders and the regularity with which other persons willing to break the law are met. Distant criminal acquaintances or delinquent friends who live at the other side of the country are not very useful. On the other hand, fixed meeting places and meeting times make the availability of potential co-offenders almost certain. Therefore, *regular meeting places and times* stimulates the presence of potential co-offenders.

The attractiveness of an offender is partly dependent on the characteristics of the potential co-offender: his or her needs and desires, and his or her level of trust in co-offenders. It is also dependent on the capacities and possibilities of the offender to offer valuable material and immaterial rewards. In other words, an offender has to use his or her resources to make co-offending attractive.<sup>7</sup>

Offenders differ in their criminal capacities: some are very limited in what they get out of their criminal behaviour, while others are very experienced and successful. To be a successful offender, different forms of capital are required: physical capital (tools like guns and crowbars), human capital (knowledge, smartness, and criminal insight), and social capital (knowing other useful people). Together, these forms of capital can be referred to as 'criminal capital' (McCarthy and Hagan 1999). Having a lot of *criminal capital* increases the attractiveness to co-offenders. Offenders who have it can offer a large catch or payment and they can reveal information on successful ways to offend.

What an offender means to potential co-offenders, apart from his or her capabilities, is also important. Potential co-offenders may have strong immaterial needs: desires to be accepted and appreciated. To offer this, an offender has to be recognized as a significant person with whom one wants to be connected. Sharing a common background with potential co-offenders is the crucial resource for this. Furthermore, group status is a powerful resource; with it, one can offer appreciation and acceptance of high value.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that both sources of potential co-offenders, social relationships and loose contacts within criminal networks, have distinct qualities. Social relationships offer potential co-offenders who can easily be assessed and who are relatively trustworthy. The loose contacts inside the criminal network have the advantage that they offer a large 'pool' of co-offenders and they can give access to specialists (see Tremblay 1993, for a discussion of the distinction between weak and strong ties and their significance for the search for suitable co-offenders).

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting discussion of the importance of criminal resources, see Ekblom and Tilley (2000).

Together these immaterial resources can be referred to as 'group capital'. Having a lot of this *group capital* increases one's attractiveness to potential co-offenders.

The preceding remarks are presented schematically in Figure 2. In this figure, the personal characteristics influencing co-offending are displayed, as well as the three direct influences through which they operate. It summarizes the direct and indirect influences on the rate at which an offender commits his crimes alone or with others. With slight adjustments, the scheme also accounts for the influences on the chance that an *event* of co-offending will take place as well as for the influences on the *number* of co-offenders.

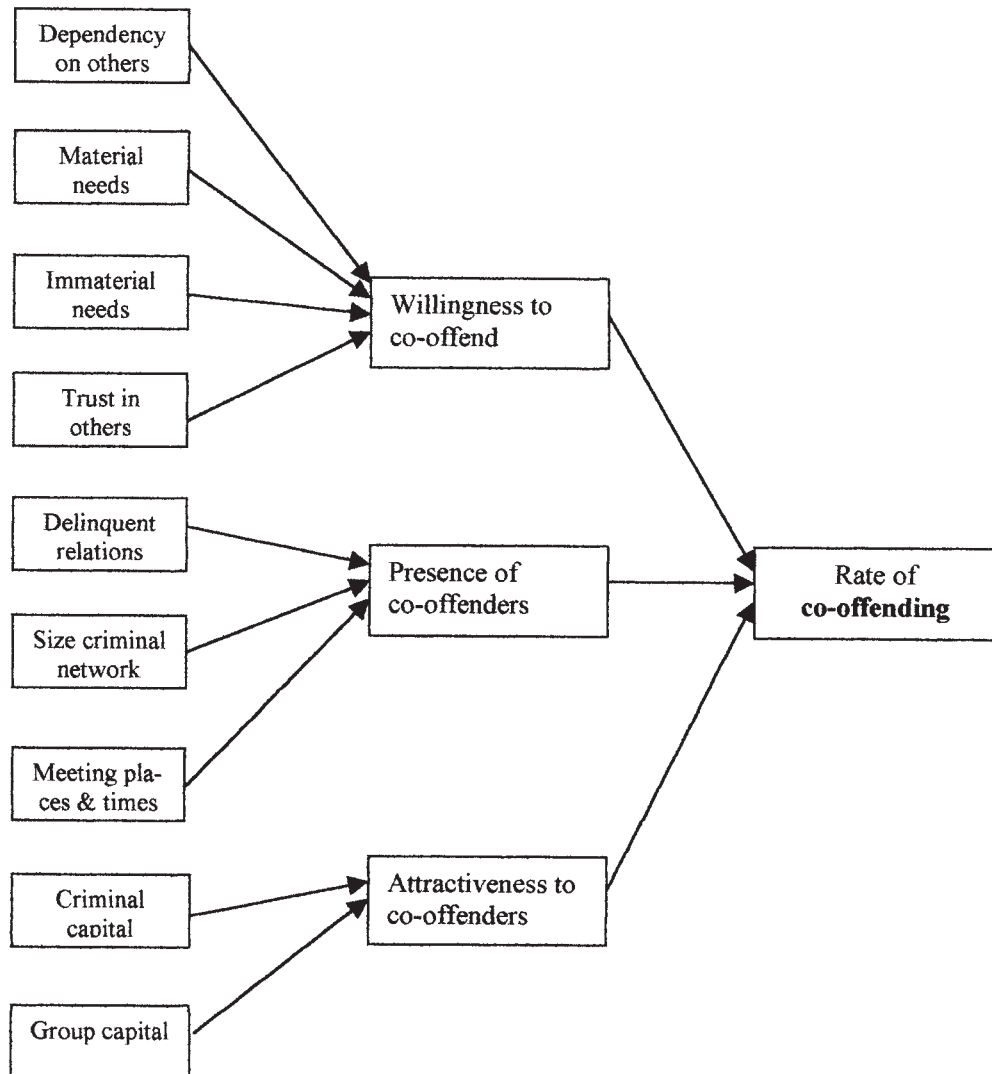


FIG. 2 Direct and indirect influences on individual co-offending rate

In Figure 2, only the direct and indirect influences on co-offending are shown. However, the causal structure behind co-offending is even more complex.

First, some of the independent personal variables will also have an influence on each other. For example, having many delinquent relationships will increase the chance that potential co-offenders will be trusted, because an offender is familiar with his or her friends and relatives. Having a wide criminal network may increase an offender's criminal capital because this will mean more useful contacts that can be used during a particular event.

Second, co-offending itself will have reciprocal effects *on* the personal variables in the model. For example, co-offending may increase criminal capital because an offender can acquire new techniques and new social contacts by committing offences with others (McCarthy and Hagan 1999). It may also increase group capital because exhibiting one's criminal potential in action will lead to higher status among co-offenders. Co-offending may also lead to a higher level of trust, but only when co-offenders keep their promises and remain silent if questioned by the police.

Third, the characteristics of co-offenders will influence co-offending and may interact with the influence of the offender's own characteristics. The offender's willingness to co-offend will be influenced by the co-offender's criminal and group capital. And the offender's attractiveness to others will depend on the needs of the co-offenders. Furthermore these needs will interact with the influence of the offender's criminal and group capital on his or her attractiveness: when co-offenders have high material needs, criminal capital will determine one's attractiveness; when co-offenders have high immaterial needs, one's group capital becomes more important. In the same way, the offender's needs interact with the influences of the criminal and group capital of the co-offender.

These complex mutual, interaction and reciprocal effects are not presented in Figure 1, but it is important to be aware of their existence. Co-offending results from a complex interplay between one's own characteristics and those of other offenders.

### *Application of the Theory*

Having formulated the social exchange theory of co-offending, it can now be used to explain the characteristics of co-offending reviewed earlier.

To begin with, the social exchange theory makes it possible to understand *why individual offenders vary* in their preference to co-offend. It is because they are not equally willing to co-offend, because they cannot rely equally on the presence of potential co-offenders and because they are not equally attractive to co-offenders. This in turn is because they may differ in their material and immaterial needs, their trust in co-offenders, their delinquent relationships, the size of their criminal network and the regularity of meeting other offenders, their criminal capital, and their group capital: i.e. they may differ in the variables presented in Figure 2.

The *variation between offence types can be explained* by comparing offence types with the needs they fulfil. The offences that have the highest co-offending rates are the ones that fulfil mainly immaterial needs: vandalism and drug use. Co-offending always adds to the rewards of these offences because it may lead to appreciation and acceptance for those who vandalize and use drugs. It may also add to the fun and excitement of doing it.

Property crimes, like theft and burglary, mainly fulfil material needs. For these offences, co-offending is only profitable when it leads to an expected catch that is bigger than the catch an offender can get by working alone. Therefore, it is also logical that those property crimes that pay off the most (burglary, robbery) have higher co-offending rates than low-profit property crimes (theft, shoplifting).<sup>8</sup>

It is also possible to *explain the relationship between age and co-offending*. This relationship may well be the result of changing needs and desires of offenders as they grow up and become adults. Children and young adolescents predominantly try to fulfil immaterial needs when they offend: they usually do it to be a part of a group or to impress their contemporaries. This stimulates their willingness to co-offend to receive social acceptance and appreciation. Older adolescents and adult offenders offend more often to obtain money or luxury items and they are less influenced by the need to belong to a group of contemporaries. Therefore, they co-offend only when it is more profitable.

A further explanation for the relationship between age and co-offending is that the presence of potential co-offenders decreases after the 'peak-age' of criminal behaviour (see, for example, Farrington 1986). It does so, simply because there are fewer offenders of the same age group available. Furthermore, the amount of time spent with peers decreases slowly at the end of adolescence (see Warr 1993), which implies less regular meeting places and times.

*Instigation by some (usually older) offenders is explained* by the differences between co-offenders in their needs and desires and in their group capital. In an offending group, the offender with the strongest needs and desires has the most reason to take or create a criminal opportunity, and this increases the chance that he will be the first to get a criminal idea. The offender with much group capital has the means to persuade others to co-offend: his acceptance and appreciation is highly valued. Since in offending groups older offenders have relatively more capital and more material needs, they relatively often take the initiative to co-offend. The crucial role of the relative position compared to others explains why instigation seems to be dependent on group constellation.

*Variation in execution of co-offending (simple or advanced) is explained* again by differences in offenders' needs. When co-offending is done to satisfy the social and psychological needs of offenders, no sophisticated cooperation is needed. On the contrary, spontaneous and risky actions offer the best opportunities for receiving acceptance and appreciation. Co-offending in order to obtain large sums of money or expensive goods does require careful planning and co-ordination. Therefore, 'material' offenders try to operate as professionally as they can. When co-offending is done to satisfy a 'mix' of desires, the execution of it is also mixed. This explains 'quasi-professional' co-offending, in which participants take unnecessary risks during a planned criminal action.

The finding that most co-offending takes place in *small offending groups can be explained* by the costs of co-offending and the importance of trust. When co-offenders mainly strive for material rewards, they will try to limit the number of co-offenders to reduce the need to share. The number of co-offenders is also kept small because the small size of the

<sup>8</sup>The finding that assault and violence have the lowest co-offending rates of all could be explained by the fact that violence is mostly used in emotional circumstances where no co-offender is available or needed to fulfil the immediate desire to relieve anger or take revenge. When violence has more 'expressive' objectives, it is more often perpetrated in large groups, as in cases of gang fights or soccer hooliganism.

offending group limits the risk that someone will talk to the police or that someone will take all the catch. The smaller the number of co-offenders the higher the level of trust.

The preference for a small number of co-offenders is amplified by difficulties in finding suitable or trustworthy co-offenders (see Tremblay 1993). It is also amplified because offenders may search for co-offenders with special skills or special status.

The *homogeneity of many offending groups can be explained* by the limited presence of co-offenders. To find criminal companions, an offender has to use his or her criminal relationships or contacts. The chances are high that an offender shares certain demographic characteristics with delinquent acquaintances, due to the mechanisms of social selection (these are mentioned earlier in this article). This mechanism also explains differences between offender groups in their degree of homogeneity. Young offender groups are more homogeneous in age because they often know each other from school, while older offenders associate with related offenders, or offenders known from such meeting places as bars and street corners.

The obvious and maybe most important *explanation for the instability of offending groups* is that different co-offenders are present each time a criminal opportunity occurs. Offenders will commit their crimes with whichever co-offenders happen to be present, because they cannot find any others at that time. In non-or quasi-instrumental forms of co-offending, most offenders will not find it worthwhile to seek out other co-offenders. A less obvious explanation is that some exchange goods do not require repeated co-offending. Acceptance and appreciation are already gained when an offender proves himself in an offending group, and for these exchange goods there is no need for a repetition. In addition, most information about co-offenders and their skills is revealed at the first meeting. Therefore, offenders will seek out new co-offenders in order to obtain acceptance, appreciation, and information they do not possess already.

### *Concluding Remarks*

This article shows that it can be very interesting to study an often-neglected side of crime: the fact that offences are often committed in company of others. The literature review reveals that we already know some basic characteristics of co-offending. These characteristics suggest that co-offending is a fluid, varying, and dynamic phenomenon and this calls for an explanation. Three theoretical perspectives can be derived from the literature: the 'group influence perspective', the 'social selection perspective', and the 'instrumental perspective'. However, each of these three perspectives appears to explain only a part of the known characteristics of co-offending. Therefore, a more abstract and general theory about co-offending is sought and formulated. This theory is based on the social exchange tradition found in psychology and sociology.

The central premise of the theory is that co-offending can be viewed as a social exchange. This appears to be a fruitful idea. With this theory, it is possible to understand *why* people co-offend. By co-offending, offenders often receive more material and immaterial rewards than by offending alone and they can perceive this as profitable because it fulfils their needs and desires. It is also possible to describe *how* co-offending takes place. Six categories of exchange goods are distinguished and these can be used to analyse different forms of co-offending. Furthermore, it is possible to model the *influences* on co-offending. Because the exchange of co-offending occurs only under

certain conditions, the personal characteristics of offenders affect their co-offending pattern.

It appears that the social exchange theory of co-offending can be applied very well to the characteristics of co-offending. Unlike the three existing perspectives on co-offending, this theory explains almost all the characteristics mentioned in the existing literature on the subject. It accounts for the variety and dynamics of co-offending and is applicable to different types of co-offending, while each of the three existing perspectives only covers a part of the forms co-offending can take. In this way, the social exchange theory is a more comprehensive theory of co-offending than the existing perspectives. This is because the concept of social exchange seems to be applicable to every case of co-offending. What is exchanged varies between the different forms of co-offending, but there is always something that is exchanged.

Of course, to assess the validity and significance of the social exchange theory of co-offending empirical testing should be done. However, because until now most of the literature on co-offending was empirically oriented, it is necessary to work on theoretical development first. Concentrating on a theory capable of explaining existing research findings already adds to our insights into the social mechanisms regulating co-offending. Criminologists can use the social exchange perspective to focus research about co-offending. Policy makers and law enforcement agencies can use the social exchange perspective to understand more about the characteristics of different forms of co-offending and can differentiate their tactics depending on the needs and desires offenders had wished to fulfil with their use of co-offenders. The scientific and practical treatment of co-offending should be as many-sided as the phenomenon itself.

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