

# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Vila, Brian J., Lawrence E.  
Cohen, and Richard S. Machalek:  
Evolutionary Expropriative Theory

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Originally developed by Lawrence E. Cohen and Richard S. Machalek and published in the [p. 983 ↓] *American Journal of Sociology* in 1988, a general theory of expropriative crime has been tested by Bryan Vila and Cohen in 1993 and revised and extended by Vila in 1994. Currently referred to as evolutionary expropriative theory (EET), this perspective is more aptly termed a paradigm in that it presents a conceptual blueprint that purports to organize a range of phenomena and generate more specific theories about the causes and nature of crime. The aim of this paradigm is to provide a comprehensive explanation of crime that encompasses the individual and ecology in a dynamic, interactive, and evolving set of processes.

## Conceptual Framework

According to the original formulation, the scope of EET pertained to expropriative crime or crime that is directed toward obtaining a material resource (e.g., property) from another person. Although broad in scope, EET draws heavily from the field of evolutionary ecology. Cohen and Machalek were explicitly interested in the behavioral strategies individuals employ within a range of interdependent ecological conditions to obtain the thing they desire. As such, concepts related to pathological states as determinates of crime are not the primary mechanisms involved in understanding expropriative crime. Thus, expropriative crime is seen as normal. Cohen and Machalek also believed that sociological theories of crime needed to take into account evolutionary principles into their theorizing. Therefore, how behavioral strategies evolve in a given population is of utmost concern. One way, according to these theorists, is to invoke culturally mediated processes over time or cultural evolution. Behavioral strategies are therefore embedded in the ongoing cultural evolution of a population. Cultural evolution can be thought of as the transmission of ideas, values, attitudes, and practical methods to extract needs and desires from a given habitat or ecology across or within generations. Cultural evolution is analogous to biological evolution and is thought to be a neglected mechanism for situating the study of crime. It is important to point out that behavioral strategies vary across individuals because of the conditioning ecological effects that provide a range of differential options. In other words, the behavioral options available to persons are not necessarily evenly distributed

and therefore the strategies will themselves potentially vary from person to person. The primary unit of analysis in the study of expropriative crime is the behavioral strategies themselves. Although a unique departure from traditional criminological theories, Cohen and Machalek offered no empirical tests derived from this conceptual framework.

If we accept that expropriative crime be viewed as a normal or steady state in a system, under what ecological conditions will expropriative crime increase? Cohen and Machalek (1988, p. 497) advance several predictions with regard to this question: “1) more opportunities for expropriation exist because of productive innovation, 2) expropriative strategies are transmitted with greater facility, 3) the execution costs of employing expropriation are lower, and 4) competition among expropriators is less intense or the yield of expropriative strategies is greater.” From this, one can see that increases in expropriative crime are directly tied to greater opportunities when conditions of greater production exist, learning of these behavioral strategies increases, cost benefits are favorable, and there are less expropriators around and therefore less competition. One can deduce the rational economic underpinnings of this theory as well as its learning or cultural transmission component.

## Empirical Support

In a 1993 article, Vila and Cohen offered an empirical test of the original Cohen and Machalek formulation. Acknowledging the difficulty of a direct test of the original theoretical perspective, Vila and Cohen developed a game-theoretic analysis that assessed the logical structure of the conceptual framework and performed a series of computer-based simulations on the model in an effort to evaluate potential real world effects in relation to its major deductions. Game-theoretic models attempt to assess the dynamic behavior of a complex system by using a simplified model to understand the general behavior of the complex system. One example of a game-theoretic analysis is the prisoner's dilemma. The prisoner's dilemma is comprising two persons who are separated from one another by law enforcement and have been involved in a crime. Each prisoner has the option of telling the authorities the other prisoner was guilty or maintain silence. If both prisoners are silent, [p. 984 ↓ ] then they will each receive a moderate sentence. If both prisoners talk, then each prisoner will receive a long sentence. If one talks and the other does not, the one that speaks goes free and the

other receives a long sentence. Since both prisoners are separated neither knows what the other will do. Multiple iterations can be played out to examine the short-term and long-term outcome of such a simple scenario. Results of game-theoretic analysis and computer simulations generally supported the logical basis of EET and the primary hypotheses generated under this paradigm. However, as Vila and Machalek report, results also suggest that several revisions are necessary to advance this perspective.

## Reformulation

In 1994, Vila reformulated the original Cohen and Machalek theory into a broader paradigm with the aim to explain all types of crime such as expressive (e.g., sexual assault), economic (e.g., illicit drug distribution), and political (e.g., terrorism). This general paradigm synthesized findings from multiple fields that have studied crime and antisocial behavior and also encompasses macro and micro explanations. Compared with other theoretical criminological perspectives that are partial explanations of crime, the revised EET boldly organizes biological factors (which were largely absent from the original formulation), developmental or life-course principles, and micro-ecological and macro-ecological factors into a evolutionary viewpoint on all forms of crime. Vila rightly critiques many criminological theories for their disciplinary parochialism. What this means is that most theorists construct theories that are congruent with their disciplinary training (i.e., sociologically trained criminologists developing sociological theories of crime). In addition to broadening EET to include the interaction from multiple levels of analysis and research findings from multiple disciplines, the revised EET retains the crime as strategy contained in the original formulation. Vila argues that this does not simply mean that humans are rational cost-benefit calculators only, but that individuals think and behave strategically “without any conscious awareness” due to socialization and learning effects. These “strategic styles” exhibited by persons can be aggregated into subpopulation and population styles, and that is how individual and society is seamlessly integrated. In terms of etiology, biological factors are reciprocally influenced by sociocultural factors and developmental factors that provide the propensity for the motivation for crime. Motivation to crime is expressed and influenced by differential ecological opportunities that are conditioned at the macro level. Based on this reasoning, Vila suggests several crime control strategies. These include protection and

avoidance to reduce opportunities, deterrence to reduce motivation, and nurturance to reduce the individual developmental pathways to antisocial behavior.

## Critique

Developing a general paradigm of crime is needed and commendable. EET in its revised version provides a unique synthesis of broad scope and potential utility. Strength is its transdisciplinary and sensitivity to evolutionary principles (the theory of evolution is probably the most successful paradigm ever). Further, the crime control strategies suggested are plausible and internally consistent with the overall paradigm. Despite these strengths, EET has not been very successful in drawing in converts. Few criminologists have worked within this paradigm and explicit empirical tests of theories developed under its auspices are rare, even though the revised EET has captured many of the salient explanatory features necessary to explain crime in broad evolutionary terms. As such, EET is consistent with recent biosocial criminology which has ascended as one of the preeminent theoretical perspectives for contemporary and future criminology.

There are several reasons why EET is not popular. First, EET is complicated and abstract and thus invokes concepts from fields in which criminologists have little training or are perhaps antagonistic toward (criminologists have been notoriously averse to biological approaches). Criminological scholars are typically highly invested in specific theoretical strains (sociological derived theories have been hegemonic in modern criminology). EET may be so broad that it is clumsy and difficult to apply. Second, as a paradigm EET cannot be directly tested—although theories explicitly generated from the paradigm can. Third, few datasets have all the variables necessary to execute statistical modeling of specified constructs and thus as a practical matter only partial tests can proceed. [p. 985 ↓ ] Alternative tests such as game-theoretic analysis, non-linear dynamics, and computer simulations are highly mathematical and typically not part of criminological training; this is perhaps another reason why other researchers have not worked in this theoretical vein. Although EET has not fully realized its potential as a general theory of crime, it does offer a “big picture” interdisciplinary perspective worthy of reading and serious consideration.

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*See also*

- [Cornish, Derek B., and Ronald V. Clarke: Rational Choice Theory](#)
- [Felson, Marcus K.: Crime and Nature](#)
- [Wilcox, Pamela, Kenneth C. Land, and Scott A. Hunt: Multicontextual Opportunity Theory](#)
- [Wilson, James Q., and Richard J. Herrnstein: Crime and Human Nature](#)

#### References and Further Readings

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