

#62 (RON CLARKE)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime features conversations with influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Ron Clarke is a criminology legend, he originated the situational approach to preventing crime and co-developer with Derek Cornish, the rational choice perspective. A critic of mainstream criminology, he nonetheless was rewarded the prestigious Stockholm prize in criminology in 2015. We sat down in his kitchen and chatted about his career.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm Jerry Ratcliffe, and this is Reducing Crime. Please excuse this episode being a bit inside baseball, but I had a rare chance to sit down with Ron Clarke. He discusses his background in the episode, so I won't dwell at length here. But basically, Ron Clarke is best known for his development of the theory and application of situational crime prevention, and co-development of the rational choice perspective on crime with his friend Derek Cornish. He's the author or joint author of more than 300 books, monographs and papers - most with a strong, practical bent. He was among the first to realize that the secret to crime prevention wasn't often unrealistic, broad societal changes, but the careful and detailed analysis of the micro-environments associated with crime followed with targeted and tailor-made interventions. It's been written that those of us who know him know that he is scathing of criminological papers that are inaccessible and self-indulgent, and this is true.

He has no time for mainstream criminology's lack of practical application. I must have channeled a little bit of Ron in a similar message when I gave the annual Jerry Lee lecture earlier this year. Given the similarity of the message, I've posted a link to that video on the podcast's page by Ron Clarke's episode, but you can basically find my Jerry Lee lecture online by Googling it. It says something about the influence of Ron's work, that even though he can be a little dismissive of mainstream academic criminology, he was still awarded Criminology's highest honor, the Stockholm Prize, in 2015. Now in his eighties, he retired some years ago to Sanibel Island in Florida. However, his home was devastated by Hurricane Ian in 2022, and Ron and his wife Sheelagh, temporarily relocated back to New Jersey. I arranged to have dinner with them both, but first took advantage of the opportunity to sit down with him in their kitchen for a chat. Just me, Ron, and as you will hear, their dog Pedro.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've never been that fussed about the whole academic thing really, have you?

Ron Clarke:

Not really, no. I mean, my academic experience has been so different from most people's anyway. I've escaped all the rubbish about having to get tenure and promotion and all that. That sort of just fell into place. I didn't spend a lot of time worrying about that, much of the academic stuff is it's got to be done and we've got to write those detailed papers, but they are really rather boring aren't they?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think that's an understatement. I think if you look at most practitioners, you ask them to read an academic journal article, I think they'd sooner take a bullet in the chest with a bulletproof vest on.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's like, "go on. Just test fire the gun at me". I would sooner do that than read an academic journal article.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I feel their pain because I'm kind of the same. You know, you read the introduction and it's okay. You read a bit of the literature, it's okay, and then before you know it, you flip a page and it's a pile of equations.

Ron Clarke:

Yes. I can't understand most of them. In fact, I do skip that stuff and just look at the intro and the conclusions, and that's about it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was funny. I was talking to Ken Pease just the other day.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And what was really interesting is that you and Gloria Laycock and Ken Pease, all started in the psychology realm.

Ron Clarke:

Yes, we were. All of us.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So is it something about starting with psychology that you then transitioned to being more practically oriented people?

Ron Clarke:

I think it's actually got quite a lot to do with working for the [UK Govt] Home Office, which all three of us did. I'm pleased I worked with the Home Office because there was always the emphasis on being useful, and that really meant being practical. And so I think that was a very good discipline. It helped me a lot to be focused on being practical.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You were raised in Africa to begin with. You had an education in Africa until you were eleven, and then came to the UK and went to school. But you started doing the psychology side, so an academic route didn't initially really appeal to you?

Ron Clarke:

I was a victim of the practice in England of specializing children at a very young age. And I was pushed into doing arts. You know, it's either arts or science, and I shouldn't have been pushed into arts because most of that arts stuff bored me terribly. Like Latin, I had to do a lot of Latin.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I got taught how to sing a song in Latin. I mean, I can't tell you how many times I've found that immensely useful in my life.

Ron Clarke:

In fact, it began earlier than the Home Office. My first academic job, even before I got a PhD, was in an approved school, training schools.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's right.

Ron Clarke:

For delinquents.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And this is after you got your bachelor's degree?

Ron Clarke:

No, after I did my master, I did a master's degree in clinical psychology at the Maudsley.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay, the hospital in London?

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Ron Clarke:

I'd got into psychology in order to escape the label of being an arts person, and I found it generally a lot more interesting than what I'd been doing. The job I got was externally funded by the Home Office. They wanted more practical research being done on the schools. They had had research going on, the usual stuff like academics coming in and getting a sample of delinquent kids to do some puzzles and stuff.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of that stuff's kind of nonsense, isn't it?

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, it's so much driven by the environment, not by the individual kids, I think was, and you were starting to get a glimpse of that, weren't you?

Ron Clarke:

I learned it too late. Because I spent the first few years of my job in the approved schools being a clinical psychologist, and it didn't work. I did all right by that. I got quite a lot of published papers in the British Journal of Criminology and so on, but it wasn't very interesting, really what I was doing. It was basically standard clinical psychology work, and it didn't get me anywhere. But I purely by chance, I found some Home Office statistics that were routinely kept that no one had told me about on absconding. And I was really surprised at the very large differences in absconding rates between different schools. And I thought, my goodness, this is interesting.

But at that point, I had just about completed my time at Kingswood schools, and I was writing my PhD at that point, which was mostly clinical psychology stuff. I mean, basically the simple problem was trying to find any differences between boys who ran away and those who didn't, in the hope this would teach you what kind of treatment to provide. And the fact is I found almost nothing that differed the two groups. So all of that was wasted really, except at the end I discovered that there was tremendous variation in the number of absconders from different schools, which was a eyeopener to me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because the kids were all the same pretty much in the schools, weren't they?

Ron Clarke:

Pretty much the same.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Close enough, right.

Ron Clarke:

And they were also mostly allocated to go to the schools nearest their home.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it wasn't anything about their specific characteristics that put them in different schools, they were pretty much all the same?

Ron Clarke:

The schools had very differing absconding rates. And one of the main sets of variables were opportunity variables that I could measure. And that led me to think more and more about the effect on people's behavior of their immediate environment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But this must have gone against pretty much how most of British criminology was thinking at the time?

Ron Clarke:

Yes, it did.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And pretty much how I think most of British criminology currently thinks, to be honest.

Ron Clarke:

It's true. It is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So why do you think nobody had paid really any attention to the situational factors? Why was this just not a thing?

Ron Clarke:

I don't know. It's an interesting question, actually. Well, mostly the people working in these fields, people who were like psychiatrists or psychologists, and they were focused on individual differences. There wasn't a body of people that was looking at the environments. There still isn't.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But it still feels kind of niche within academia and criminology, doesn't it?

Ron Clarke:

Yes, oh it is. And I was actually a bit frustrated by all of this because I thought, "This is important. And why are we being channeled into doing this individual differences stuff?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because increasingly, as you were finding that, it's really difficult to get people to change their individual motivations and drivers.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, I know they're finding interesting studies, but is there anything that's really practically valuable?

Ron Clarke:

I often just think, "Oh my God, what a waste of money." People being trained to do this stuff and believing it's useful, but in fact, it's mostly not useful at all.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's hard to pull out the practical benefits that really kind of say, "If we do this, there's going to be less engagement in crime."

Ron Clarke:

Yes, yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't, I should be more engaged with that, but I don't really see it.

Ron Clarke:

And I found that frustrating. I thought, for goodness's sake, I thought, what a waste of money that people have been trained just to do this. Why aren't there specialties looking at the environment and the situations?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You moved to the Home Office in 1967. And the Home Office research unit, which became the research and planning unit. And there were a lot of people working in criminology. What were most people working on? That was a big department at the time, wasn't it?

Ron Clarke:

It was a very big department, very primitive kinds of researchers, who were simply finding out how many people in the prisons had tonsillitis or something.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. There you go. As you do.

Ron Clarke:

It was all driven by that sort of bean counting. The studies were boring. Really boring.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Had no practical value or terribly badly written or?

Ron Clarke:

No, they weren't badly written. They were quite well written actually. Because they had no big intellectual questions they were asking.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It sounds all very safe and government.

Ron Clarke:

Yes, and basically the research unit was left to its own devices as long as it didn't rock the boat.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But then you became the head of it, didn't you?

Ron Clarke:

I became the head of it, yes. I'd always stressed to people outside in the academic world that everything we did was published.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Like it or lump it. It was published.

Ron Clarke:

Yes. Because the major criticism was all we did was serve government. And I was very keen to show that that wasn't just what we were doing. We were asking more basic questions. The basic questions were the ones that really were worthwhile. As I was moving up the stream in the Home Office, I was promoted fairly rapidly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Understandable, you're a smart bloke. I see a future if you keep this up, anyway.

Ron Clarke:

And I actually got more and more irritated by the insistence of people outside the Home Office that it was all just bean counting. A lot of it was, but the stuff I was interested in was more basic, I believed. I found it very irritating that outside academics couldn't see this. So I found that increasingly patronizing-

[Pedro the dog barks]

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That wasn't, sorry, we can't do anything with the dog barking.

Ron Clarke:

Shut up, Pedro.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What was the solution to that? Is it just academic arrogance that everybody thinks whatever they're doing is the right thing to do?

Ron Clarke:

Some of it was that, yes. And also they were determined to believe that what we were doing was fairly useless because it was simply serving the system, not questioning the system.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's no merit in then trying to improve the system and actually make it more efficient, more fairer? None of that?

Ron Clarke:

There wasn't at that time, there probably would be now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Ron Clarke:

There was a lot of emphasis on effectiveness that was measured by re-convictions. Which is fair enough, you know, if you can't do the basic job of reforming people, what's it doing?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you mention reforming people then, what did you conclude from it all at the end of it? Is it easy? Can people be reformed?

Ron Clarke:

Yes, you can change people's behavior, but by very simple ideas actually. For instance, absconding was very much favored by opportunity. That if it was easy to abscond, then you got more absconders. What annoyed me was that the academics didn't see that this was useful to point out repeatedly, that opportunity really did matter. And I did lots of studies which showed that, and I carried on doing opportunities studies while I was in the Home Office more generally. So for example, the work I did on steering locks, which is called a mundane now, but at that time it was new to show that steering locks really did reduce car theft, quite dramatically.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's amazing that academia doesn't pick on this chance to be practically beneficial to society. That's the part I find so strange. Because I look at current academia and there is still all of this emphasis on root causes. It's all about you'll only make people safe if we improve the education system, reduce unemployment, reduce poverty, and those are good things do. But has anybody not been trying to do that for the last hundred years?

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There are other ways to reduce crime that are affordable and practical and...

Ron Clarke:

Well, I think in the long run, that message has got through, but I don't think it's really got through to academics. That emphasis on opportunity, which I've pushed a lot, in lots of different contexts, is the real reason that the crime rate has dropped so much, at least for the things we can measure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I got the sense knowing you over the years that you've never really felt that you found your home within academia intellectually.

Ron Clarke:

No, I didn't. I was a fish out of water, really. It didn't suit me particularly. The only thing that made it pleasant was that of course, I got to know a lot more people who were a bit like me, the echo group, for instance.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. The environmental criminologists. Yeah.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I read somewhere that some of the work that you started to identify with is things like the architect Oscar Newman's work on Defensible Space and C Ray Jeffery's work on crime prevention through environmental design. That strikes me as really practical work, but it's still very much peripheral to how much of criminology is certainly is taught in the United States.

Ron Clarke:

It is, and it's frustrating that criminologists, I mean, I find the American Society of Criminology quite a frustrating organization. It doesn't emphasize the things that you can change. I found academic criminology really disappointing and irritating.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, there's a lot of complaining about public criminology and the public not listening to criminologists. And I'm rather like yourself sitting a bit on the outside going, no, I understand why the public don't pay any attention. You haven't got anything useful, practically useful to say.

Ron Clarke:

No, it hasn't. Yes. And it's irritating because stuff, for instance, on opportunity is so clear in the relationship between the unwanted behavior and the actions you've taken.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But you started to find some collegiality.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you worked a lot with Marcus Felson.

Ron Clarke:

Yes. With Marcus and, well, [Herman] Goldstein actually, I got to know him quite early on in my academic career.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I met him once. Lovely man.

Ron Clarke:

Yes, he was. Yes. And Kelling, I got to know quite well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. George Kelling's work's been very much misunderstood I think. I think he's shouldered some of the blame for zero tolerance policing, which bears very little relationship to what his ideas that he came up with.

Ron Clarke:

Absolutely, it doesn't. Anyway, I, to get back to the point I was trying to make earlier.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I'm sorry.

Ron Clarke:

No, no, it's perfectly all right. Was that I thought that what we were doing in that small group of people in the Home Office that I worked with, I thought this was much more interesting and useful than what was normally being done in criminology.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Ron Clarke:

Because you could show very direct results between opportunity reducing measure and the thing you were trying to control.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. You started to really develop and push situational crime prevention.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I think you single-handedly put it on the map. You were able to fund and drive studies. I mean, I just wonder where we would be if you hadn't had that opportunity, heading up that unit in the Home Office to be able to do that and had the freedom to do that. It seemed wonderfully opportune.

Ron Clarke:

Well, thank you. I mean, I think it was very useful because I was able to fund stuff that bore out these ideas by people who were not necessarily in the Home Office.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was it easy to find academics who thought like this?

Ron Clarke:

Well, I found them, but in some strange places.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. The pub down the road, Ken Pease.

Ron Clarke:

Yes, and Barry Poyner. He was an architect, but he was very, very practical.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Gloria? [Laycock]

Ron Clarke:

I mean, Gloria was already in the Home Office when I got there. But she was-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Gloria Laycock, yeah.

Ron Clarke:

In prison, she was in the prison department.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. We'd better clarify that. She was in the prison department, not in prison. Yeah.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah. And I met her on the street one day in Horseferry Road and talked to her a bit, and she said that she was very fed up with her job, found it very boring. So I said, "Why don't you come and ask for a transfer to the research unit? Because I think you would find some of the things going on there much more useful and interesting than what you are being asked to do at the moment." And she fitted in very well with the times. Her PhD was on escapes from prison, which fitted into the absconding work and-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The opportunity structure.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that's important for people to find an intellectual community? Because I know that we still have the group of environmental criminologists, but it's a relatively small group compared to much of mainstream criminology. And I just think it's really tough. I'm lucky to be at Temple where we have a few people, but I think it's really tough for people who are just sort of toiling away in this field on their own. Surrounded by more traditional criminologists.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Who kind of don't get it.

Ron Clarke:

Exactly. Also, the sad thing is that some of these people who are very clever, many of them, retreat into doing more technical papers. And I've noticed this with quite a few people who, not Ken.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Ken Pease, yeah.

Ron Clarke:

Ken is quite different. But quite a few of the bright young people retreat into doing technical stuff.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of statistics.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not a lot of practical value, yeah.

Ron Clarke:

That's because of the pressures on them to produce academic papers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, the tenure system, and keeping the employment. And in the UK, the research evaluations that take place on a regular basis, that does drive a lot of churning stuff out.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm speaking a lot of the time with practitioners. They don't know any of this stuff.

Ron Clarke:

No.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It doesn't get on their radar at all.

Ron Clarke:

No, it doesn't.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In the end though, you still found a home in academia. You ended up moving across the pond to here, to the United States.

Ron Clarke:

Well, Mike Huff and I spent a lot of time on police effectiveness. We wrote several papers on it, mostly fairly critical.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Can I ask, what was the reception like for that? Because there wasn't much police effectiveness evaluation research taking place at all.

Ron Clarke:

No. And what there was mostly American.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Ron Clarke:

So we wrote a couple of papers saying, if you look at the overall evidence on effectiveness of police, it's mostly American, and it's mostly showing that much of it is not very effective. And we kept pushing that line that they've got to do things differently.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, you must have been making friends then.

Ron Clarke:

Yes. Especially-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You still kept a job?

Ron Clarke:

Well, I actually annoyed my bosses very much, because I insisted on publishing one of these papers. I think it was called Police Effectiveness. We got it published, but it was a big struggle. It was rewritten maybe 10 or 11 times trying to deal with the objections of various departments in the Home Office. Eventually they agreed to publishing the thing because I was so insistent on it. But they did their best to put it out at a time when it wouldn't be noticed. I think it was published on a bank holiday weekend or something.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go. That's how to do it. Yep. Everybody's down at the beach.

Ron Clarke:

That's how they know to do it. But the trouble was that Thatcher got in on her, increase the police numbers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Yep.

Ron Clarke:

Yes. And she came in and this report had just been published and there was a lot of irritation with me for having pushed it so hard. But basically it shows that what the police are doing is not going to be improved by having more police. You've got to change how they do things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And so this is the first term of Margaret Thatcher's conservative government. Very pro-police at the time.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just in terms of simplistic, raw pro-police, not really thinking about effectiveness.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was that a career killer for you?

Ron Clarke:

Yes, it was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, blimey.

Ron Clarke:

Because there was a big fight, as I've just said, and at the end of it all, we got it published. But my boss said to me, "Don't try that again, Ron." And I thought, well, I am going to try it again, because we can't keep producing things that don't ruffle any feathers,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because otherwise we just do the same old, same old.

Ron Clarke:

Same old, same old.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As somebody once said to me in policing, "It's all right. You can fail in policing as long as you fail conventionally."

Ron Clarke:

Yeah. So I thought, "Oh my God." And I kept getting offers of jobs in America, because at that time, early eighties, there was a lot of criminal justice departments starting up, very few senior people working in them. And I got a lot of letters saying, "If you ever would like to move to the states, come and join our little schools, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And I got one of these letters at the same time that Faulkner had said to me, "Don't try that again, Ron."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Ron Clarke:

This was from Temple actually.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep.

You came to Temple University for a bit.

Ron Clarke:

Yep. And I went over to Temple one weekend, got offered the job on the spot, accepted, and went back and resigned from the Home Office.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you bother telling Sheelagh at any time a part of this?

Ron Clarke:

Well, not really, but she's adaptable. It was okay, but-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

English marriages in the 1980s.

Ron Clarke:

It was a career. It did kill my Home Office career. Which was a pity, but probably about time I got out anyway.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. So you were at Temple for a while, and then you found basically the home where you were going to stay for your academic career.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You moved up to Rutgers in Newark.

Ron Clarke:

That was a financial thing. My oldest son got a place at Princeton.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Very cheap I hear, they're almost giving it away there, aren't they?

Ron Clarke:

And I was pretty determined not to let him go because he can go to Temple for free.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep, still can.

Ron Clarke:

Still can, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's good.

Ron Clarke:

But anyway, at that time I was quite friendly with Radzinowicz.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Very famous criminologist, yeah.

Ron Clarke:

Right. But he moved to Philly when his wife died, and he married a woman there who was a friend of Wolfgang. We used to go to their apartment in Rittenhouse Square for dinners quite regularly. And when I told them that what Henry had achieved, said, "Well, you know, we can't afford that." And they said, "You must afford it. You've got to afford it. You will find the money." And they really bullied me to-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

To sending your kid to Princeton? Twisted your arm. Go to Princeton. Go on.

Ron Clarke:

So he got to Princeton and then his brother, who's a little bit younger, got into Cornell.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're hemorrhaging money at this point.

Ron Clarke:

Yes, yes. So I needed more money, so that's why I moved to Rutgers. I often think the only reason I got the deanship at that point, it was the dean's job, was that I hadn't been around long enough time in American academia to have got enough enemies.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right? Yes. Well, especially the field you're working in is still, at the time, not popular. I wouldn't even say the situational crime prevention was not well respected. I think just people were very suspicious of it.

Ron Clarke:

Yes, they were.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because it was so different than what they were thinking about. And I think they worried that it was just supporting the system and-

Ron Clarke:

Yes, that's basically it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What was happening in terms of situational crime prevention around that time?

Ron Clarke:

Not very much. Only what I was doing and the few colleagues of mine.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Were you worried about that? Were you worried that it just wasn't, the field wasn't, Environmental criminology and situational crime provision wasn't going to take off?

Ron Clarke:

I thought it just needed more evidence showing the link between basically the environment and behavior. I thought in the long run it'll come right. But it hasn't really.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think it's recognized now, but they're never the most attended sessions at criminology conferences.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How did you start your collaboration with Derek Cornish?

Ron Clarke:

Derek and I were at Bristol University together.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. Way back in the day.

Ron Clarke:

He was actually a year ahead of me, but he had a motorcycle accident, and so he dropped back and joined the same cohort as I did. He was doing philosophy and English as his majors, and I was doing philosophy and psychology. And we just got to know each other and became mates as it were. And I worked a lot with him. He's a very smart guy. And various things I've written I couldn't have done without him.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, the work that you did together, you guys really founded the rational choice perspective, which is a linchpin, it's a huge part of how we think about opportunity reduction and crime prevention.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Worldwide now.

Ron Clarke:

We built that together between us, and he contributed just as much as I did. But he's one of those very bright people, you get them in academia, who just can't publish. Not on their own.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep. That role in academia, that necessity. It's not for everybody. And it's not an indication that people aren't bright.

Ron Clarke:

No, it is not.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And a lot of incredibly bright, smart people do linger in places where, what is that, *Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard* by Thomas Gray? "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air." I had a classical education.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah. Anyway-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's probably for the best. Moving on. I'll definitely edit that out. I know two lines of poetry there. Yeah.

Ron Clarke:

Well, Derek's like this. The committee sat down with him and said, "You must stop working with Clark. Because most of your stuff is with him, and we don't know how much of it is him and how much of it is you."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, good grief. But it was a fantastic collaboration, you pioneered a core principle of opportunity theory.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah, but these people who were making the judgements were conventional academics. They were sociologists, which is worse.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right, yeah.

Ron Clarke:

And well, they didn't appreciate how clever he was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. So tell me, how would you sort of epitomize what the rational choice perspective is?

Ron Clarke:

Well, that's a good question. It's very difficult to answer. I would say something like it's an attempt to explain people's behavior by thinking very carefully about what they think they're doing and what they are trying to do. But often they're not aware of what are the forces acting on them. And it's trying to fill out that link as well as one can, through doing studies to back up this idea.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The notion that they're not independent from their environment.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're taking advantage of opportunities, but we can control, we can't control how they think, but we can control the opportunities that are presented to people to commit crimes.

Ron Clarke:

Which is the link with situational prevention. Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. I've wondered sometimes if this is why there's been less mainstream understanding of situational crime prevention, is that it doesn't come away with these nice, convenient, universal rules about human behavior. "Humans behave in this way." But it doesn't do that.

Ron Clarke:

No.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's much more specific. You can say, well, we can prevent crime at car parks, but how we do, in parking lots, but how we do that is very different than how we prevent crime in other places, in pubs and taverns. And it's this very specific thing, and it lacks, there isn't a universal rule. There isn't an $E=mc^2$.

Ron Clarke:

No, no. Yeah, I think that's got a lot to do with it. It's very hard to explain to people your point that preventing crime in a parking lot is very different from preventing a car being stolen, generally.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Ron Clarke:

It's a very different set of ideas. And I think it's that lack of generality that makes all of this stuff that I do a bit difficult to understand. Except when you go back to basics, like opportunity matters.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thinking about situational crime prevention and the rational choice perspective, where do you think have been successes?

Ron Clarke:

I got very interested in suicide.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

From a research perspective, not as a-

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Passing how to spend your weekend. Yes, okay.

Ron Clarke:

You've probably read the British Gas suicide story.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The British Coal Gas story is famous. Yes.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sorry to interject and break the fourth wall as it were. But even though I just said the British gas suicide story is famous, here's a brief summary, in case you haven't heard of it. In the 1950s and 1960s, a popular method to take one's own life in England and Wales was basically to stick your head in a gas oven and asphyxiate. It accounted for more than 40% of suicides. Between 1963 and 1975, suicides in most European countries increased, but in England and Wales, it decreased substantially. This coincided with the progressive removal of the harmful component, carbon monoxide, from the UK's gas supply, effectively removing the gas oven as a suicide option.

So even though people were still highly motivated, removal of an easy and accessible opportunity did not result in substantial displacement to other arguably more difficult or painful methods of suicide. Instead, it seemed to reduce the number of suicides in total. Ron and his co-author, Pat Mayhew wrote, "The conclusion is that blocking opportunities, even for deeply motivated acts, does not inevitably result in displacement." The implications for criminology were huge. It showed that changing a person's motivation did not have to be central to crime prevention. Instead, removing the opportunity or the situational means could be a mechanism for crime reduction. Thus was born situational crime control. Okay. Back to Ron's story.

Ron Clarke:

I worked with Pat Mayhew, but nobody seemed to mind too much if Pat was doing it. Lot of people say to me, "Oh, I think that was a lovely paper." But of course, they don't really mirror it in their work. Somehow they enjoyed reading it, but it doesn't add up to anything for them. Malcolm Gladwell, he has six of our graphs in his book.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I think you also probably don't give enough credit to, there is a growth of environmental criminologists, and of course, we're not talking about people who care about oil spills in Alaska, but we're talking about criminology of the built environment. And the wider system, the growth of crime science stems from your work. We wouldn't have crime science, a lot of departments, without the rational choice perspective, and Marcus Felson's work on the routine activities theory. I mean, this stuff has been driving crime science now as well.

Ron Clarke:

Yes, it is, isn't it?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because it applies to more than just the built environment.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Any kinds of structures or environments we can design in crime or we can design out crime.

Ron Clarke:

That I think is true.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A few years ago you won the Stockholm Award, and the Stockholm Symposium. That must have felt like some justification of the work?

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, that's a considerable recognition.

Ron Clarke:

Yes. I must admit, I was very pleased to get that. It wouldn't have happened if Mangai Natarajan hadn't put together a very good case for it, and she got a lot of people involved with that. So I was very pleased to get that. And I've never had any kind of recognition or reward from the ASC.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No. And I've often pondered that, it is a very state organization.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's quite surprising. It's the home of very safe, very traditional, very uninfluential criminology. Sorry, ASC, but that's the truth. There you go.

Ron Clarke:

It is. More recently, they sort of said, "Wouldn't you like to be a fellow?" Or something like that, and I said, "No. No, thank you." I'm fine without it. And I am of course, because the Stockholm thing is more important and what's more it comes with money.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, that's kind of handy, seeing how your wonderful home in Sanibel got trashed by Hurricane Inn.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is devastating because Sanibel's quite beautiful.

Ron Clarke:

Yep.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think what what's nice to see is how many people have come from an environmental criminology, crime science kind of background, who are now working in the practical field. Because they're working in government, they're working in police departments. I think that's been a plus, wouldn't you say?

Ron Clarke:

Oh, yes. Yes. I think it has. But academically, I don't think we've done ourselves a lot of good from the point of view of academics.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What should we do differently?

Ron Clarke:

With more examples of the basic principles holding up.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I wonder sometimes if it's, we've got lots of research and evidence, it doesn't mean necessarily that mainstream criminal is engaging with that evidence.

Ron Clarke:

No.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I sometimes wonder it's that it's not the lack of evidence, just they want to do it in these very narrow defined ways that are incredibly difficult to change. Whereas here's a way to make people safer, but this doesn't change the system. Right? Because this really isn't working about the criminal justice system. This is about preventing people getting into the criminal justice system in the first place, by just redesigning environments so that it's hard to commit crime. But that doesn't change the system, and I think that's possibly it's lack of appeal.

Ron Clarke:

Maybe.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But I don't know.

Ron Clarke:

I don't know either. I think a lot of people are still suspicious of situational crime prevention. They still think it's simple minded and not really grappling with the things that matter in life.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But perish the thought that people are less victimized by crime, eh?

Ron Clarke:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You recently published a book of successful case studies, problem-oriented policing. It was edited by yourself and the marvelous Mike Scott, down at Arizona State University in the crime science series. It's a wonderful collection of chapters by some really great people involved in that. That must have been a lot of fun?

Ron Clarke:

It was very enjoyable. Mike was a tremendous person to work with.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And one of the things I've learned working with practitioners over the years is they really appreciate case studies.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because it becomes concrete to them rather than just sort of, here's some abstract ideas about how this might work. It's like, no, here's somebody actually really doing it in Cincinnati, or doing it in Vegas or in London. Yeah. Really nice piece of work, problem oriented policing, successful case studies.

Ron Clarke:

I'm now trying to write a book of the same type of successful case studies of situational prevention of suicide.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's got to be something that's hugely important. I was actually teaching today doing some training for some police officers, and I was talking about not just the British coal gas story, but also the changes to the Bloor Street viaduct in Toronto.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Whereby using fencing, they went from 10 suicides a year to one suicide in 10 years.

Ron Clarke:

That's right. That's the sort of thing. I'm working with David Lester. Do you know him?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No. I'm just not a very social guy. I don't know anybody.

Ron Clarke:

Anyway, he's been at Stockton University now, all his life. He was a, he's a Brit. I think he's got something like 3000 publications, something like that. Something colossal.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good grief. Does he sleep? Is he like a vampire and just keeps going through the night? Okay, now I'm feeling like an underachiever. Thanks for that, yeah, great.

Ron Clarke:

He writes a lot of very short papers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Blimey, I mean, if that was me, it'd be like a sentence long to be able to churn out that many.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah. He really has got something like 3000 publications.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's spectacular. All right then.

Ron Clarke:

And he's at Stockton University, which is in Atlantic City. He's a very interesting guy. As I said, he's English. I seem to gravitate towards English people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, we kind of hang around together after a while. We have a shared sense of appreciating warm beer. Well, look, Ron, this has been lovely.

Ron Clarke:

Yeah, it's good.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thanks for spending some time with me. I very much appreciate it.

Ron Clarke:

Not at all.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Your work has been hugely influential and has driven so much crime prevention. Even though underappreciated by mainstream criminology, there are a lot of people who are not victims of crime that would be otherwise.

Ron Clarke:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Who don't know how much they really appreciate it.

Ron Clarke:

Well, some of the people that, some criminologists actually practice situational crime prevention in their everyday lives, very much so. You find that they're doing all the situational crime prevention measures they should, if they want to protect themselves from crime.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. But they just don't like to acknowledge it professionally.

Ron Clarke:

Right. Or they don't even realize what they're doing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, and that's the important thing about it is it provides, I think, especially for people who are learning about crime prevention, it provides a structure and a framework. That once you learn about it, it does feel like it's common sense. But that's a problem with common sense, not as common as people think it is. And you really need to think about it a bit more.

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Ron Clarke:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's all good stuff. Well, you've made a marvelous contribution to the field, and so we're very grateful.

Ron Clarke:

Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This has been fun, Ron. Cheers. Is it time for dinner now? Because I heard the microwave go.

Sheelagh Clarke [Ron's wife]:

Well, I didn't know whether you were ready for any dinner, but I have got a small amount of chicken stew. Typical English leftovers meal.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sheelagh don't make me English food. All right. This I've learned after 20 years in America. It's my treat. We're going to the diner. Come on. Fine. Sheelagh, we're not doing the English food. Get out of your slippers. Come on, we're going to the diner.

Ron Clarke:

The diner's pretty good.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go.

That was episode 62 of reducing crime. Recorded in the wilds of New Jersey in January, 2023. Subscribe at Spotify, SoundCloud, Apple, or wherever you listen. New episodes are announced on Twitter at underscore reducing crime. I personally lurk at Jerry_Ratcliffe. Transcripts and excel spreadsheets with multiple choice questions for every episode are available to instructors. Just ping me.

Be safe and best of luck.