Advancing the Concept of Problem in Problem-oriented Policing

Priit Suve
ORCID: 0000-0003-4408-3568
Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, Estonia

Abstract. Recent developments in understanding the concept of problem in problem-oriented policing denote valuable perspectives but mainly from a substantialist perspective. In this article, the relational perspective in thinking of safety problems was introduced, and some key advancements presented. Exploiting causal and constitutive reasoning and the idea of the complexity of problems, the self-actional, inter-actional, and trans-actional perspectives were used for determining the differences between the substantialist and relationalist perspectives. The concept of problem was analysed from two perspectives. First, in light of initial and recent elaborations of the term. Second, through the actual use of the term. The substantialist ethos dominated through the data analysed and it has both advantages and disadvantages. However, relational thinking calls for a deeper understanding of safety problems. Resigning from the substantialist ethos and asking whether there are pre-given A-s and B-s, and turning towards the idea that there is no A-s without B-s, creates an environment for a more open-minded understanding of problems in policing.

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0014.6656
http://dx.doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0014.6656

Keywords: policing, concept of problem, relationalism, substantialism

Introduction

The field of safety echoes: nobody can guarantee success. The question is, instead, how to fail wisely? Failure and success can be weighed in light of some problem, but the concept of problem should be acknowledged in the first place. In this article, I expand a discussion renewed by Borrion, et al.¹ and initiated by Goldstein² about the concept of problem in problem-oriented policing (POP). However, using ideas of relational thinking, a slightly different setting for thinking of problems will be elaborated.

Safety-related problems penetrate the whole social world, grasping many scientific disciplines. The police and policing are hardly separable from these. Even more, through crimes and the feeling of safety, they are often wedded into people’s everyday lives. Problem, as a concept, has been one of the characteristics of the police for a long time³, still has an impact and high value in the field of criminology⁴, and present new input for the advancement of safety⁵. The viewpoint, how the concept of problems in relation to safety is or should be defined, conceptualised

³ Ibid., p. 242.
⁵ Borrion H, et al., op. cit.
and addressed in policing, is well elaborated\textsuperscript{6}, tested\textsuperscript{7}, and advanced\textsuperscript{8}. However, the decentredness and low problem tractability (wickedness) of many problems put pressure on the ways problems are understood. Working under the public eye directs agents responsible for safety to propose answers instead of outlining questions. Terrorism can be seen as one sign of our times presenting a blunt example of the latter: ‘Before the US-led invasion in March 2003, Iraq had never experienced a suicide terrorist attack in its history’.\textsuperscript{9} For policing and the concept of problem, it would be challenging that the ‘presumed connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism is largely misleading and, what is worse, it may be encouraging domestic and foreign policies likely to exacerbate this terrorist threat’.\textsuperscript{10} The example above distills general dilemma in thinking of problems — whether and/or when is it sufficient to think of problems as static things or rather as dynamic relations? Does terrorism belong to the terrorist or their victims? Despite the threat that the topic of this article — thinking about problems — ‘would probably not receive much support in policing circles today’\textsuperscript{11}, I take the risk and argue that relational thinking has much to offer for both — to the practitioners related to policing and researchers for more in-depth discussions and elaborations for the sake of safety. ‘[A]cknowledging the political dimension of the problem-oriented approach’\textsuperscript{12} I introduce discussions from (relational) sociology in showing how relationalism and substantialism, as different perspectives, open new sources in thinking of problems. For example, one can imagine whether there is a difference in implementing a community policing strategy (in different countries or the same place in different times or by different people) as a pre-given substance or co-created process?

Although I use examples of particular and well-known problems of safety from the point of view of police strategies (as they were expressed), the aim of the article is broader — to advance interdisciplinary research and discussions about problem from the point of view of and for the sake of safety at the micro and macro levels, and from the analytical (how things are) and normative (how things should be) perspectives. The range of connections between problem and safety is broad and needs to be clarified from the point of view of this article. In addition to the previously mentioned usage of the concept of problem, I emphasise two additional and also close but different safety-related dimensions. The first is related to police organisations, which should be designed in a way that allows administrative strategies (e.g. personnel and/or financial strategies) to be combined with functional strategies (e.g. problem-oriented policing, COMPSTAT, community policing) in different functions.

\textsuperscript{8} Borrion H, et al., \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{9} Pape RA. Dying to win: The strategic logic of suicide terrorism. Random House Incorporated, 2006, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{11} Borrion H, et al., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 16.
Advancing the Concept of Problem in Problem-oriented Policing

(e.g. criminal police, community officers, traffic police) and levels (e.g. senior staff, rank-and-file officers). The second dimension is related to the social world that poses increasing demands for advanced knowledge in understanding problems. Here, I mean trends having a close impact on safety. These ‘trends’ are actually crises that are a single crisis with different phases, which are not resolved but ‘managed and contained’. This series of crises started in 2008 with the financial crisis; manifesting itself in the migration crisis of 2010–2012; illuminated in the struggle of emerging economies and rising powers (e.g. China and Brazil) 2013–2016, and in 2016, we entered a fourth phase of the crisis, a political crisis, which has the potential to reignite all of the previous three crises and generate a truly transformative crisis. Previous and future crises or phases of the crisis have different epicenters and hardly predictable directions. I argue that in the context of ‘failure to develop adequate responses to complex problems’, it is still possible ‘translate’ problems into a more adequate form and through the relational view, at least try to fail wisely.

The article starts with a clarification of relationalism compared to substantialism with the clarification of self-action, inter-action, and trans-action. The latter is necessary for understanding safety problems from analytical and normative positions. Without grasping how things are (the problem!), the implementation of some tool (e.g. strategy) may cause unpredictable results.

In the second part, I use the knowledge from problem-oriented policing and examples of police practices to demonstrate the benefits of relational thinking. In using knowledge of problem-oriented policing, I will limit the discussions to Goldstein’s classical texts and recently published ideas of second-generation POP. Also, I use well-known examples of stop-and-search practices and the often cited examination of problem-oriented policing. However, I will not dive into discussions but will use these data with the purpose of illumination.

Theoretical issues

About relationalism

Although relational thinking has spread over many disciplines in the social sciences, I will focus only on the nuances that have profound meaning for the topic. Substantialism and relationalism, together with self-action, inter-action, and trans-

---

16 Borrion H, et al., op. cit.
18 Braga A, op. cit.
action are the concepts helping elaborate and advance knowledge in thinking about the concept of problem from a safety-related perspective.

The field of safety and police research related to the concept of problem, faces the same dilemma, as famously stated by Mustafa Emirbayer: ‘whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or processes, in static “things” or in dynamic, unfolding relations.”20 It seems trivial to state that social things are interrelated. In the field of safety, it is often expected that there is a causal connection between an action and a social event. Sentences like ‘Problem-oriented policing is currently promoted by practitioners and academics as a more effective response to urban crime problems than conventional policing methods’21 articulate a common way of thinking, expressing this notion of causality. However, as was clear from the example of terrorism mentioned above, this imaginary causality is not always direct or linear (I do not argue that this was a claim of Braga et al.22). In looking for a tool (e.g., police strategy) to solve something unsolvable (e.g., terrorism) unpleasant consequences may emerge.

In light of this article, it is appropriate to clarify the general meaning of relationalism with explanations from fields having direct links to safety issues: organisations and power. In a broader sense, relational thinking means thinking of the social world through social relations. In organisational theories, it was described as ‘[s] hifting the focus of inquiry from entities (e.g., leadership, the organisation) to organisational activity’.23 For our purposes, to understand and develop relational thinking in the field of safety, the relational perspective on power is feasible: ‘It presumes the primacy of relations over entities. The identities of the As, Bs, and other elements of power relations are viewed not as being “given” prior to these relations, but as being constituted within them.”24 How this seemingly simple division from entities to relations produces something that is constituted within relations, will be explained below in more detail. To be clear: the premise of safety issues as given is another trap in policing since it binds the way of thinking and axiomatic “knowledge”. I will start this discussion with clarifying the idea of causality and constitutiveness, which offer knowledge prerequisites for further discussions, and could also be a useful starting point for thinking of a particular safety issue in everyday life.

Causal and constitutive reasoning

Social facts, like problems of safety, are made of thoughts, concepts, beliefs, and other immaterial ‘things.’ However, there are many things in common in the material and immaterial world, and one of them is the method of explanation from the point of causation. Marriage and a plate can both be broken, but it should be distinguished: how it happened (the process) and what made it possible (the

22 Ibid.
constitutive elements of a plate and marriage)? For that reason, in starting to think about some problem, it is necessary to distinguish at least two kinds of explanations: causal and constitutive. This division is especially crucial since it brings in discussions about capacities, which poses an issue about the capacities of some particular tool (e.g., police strategy) and all of the participants (e.g., individuals, groups, organisations). However, also, it forces us to acknowledge a context, since “[t]he causal capacity tells what the system would do in specified situations (e.g. in certain enabling and triggering conditions).” 25 For example, in choosing a police strategy to address some safety issue, it is necessary to think about the possible capacities of the strategy. The starting point is acknowledging the type of the strategy — is it analytical (i.e., constructed for some purposes like community policing (see COMP-STAT 26) or empirical (i.e., the description of particular empirical data 27)? Explaining (1) why some strategy does not work is different from explaining (2) what the constitutive elements of this strategy are. The first question is about the process (normative) and tells how the social world works. The second is analytical and tells how the social world is composed, what the constitutive elements are. The same questions are also appropriate to ask regarding problems. It is crucial to distinguish the identification of (1) what a problem is (analytical-ontological position) from a question of (2) how it has happened (the process). I will elaborate these distinctions in more detail below, but ignoring the contextual information paves the way for failure. As Cummins explains: ‘Capacities are best understood as a kind of complex dispositional property.’ 28 This explanation was used in order to emphasise the complex nature of capacities — there is no definite list of capacities. Even more, in social life, there are countless ways to be related, but for failing wisely, it would be useful think about some possible combinations creating fertile ground for capacities that may arise.

Analytical and processual capacities have different positions in the context (environment). It is crucial to understand that causal capacities take the environment for granted 29. For that reason, the contextual information (environment) should be acknowledged and specified. There is nothing pre-given, but it depends on the position of the researcher. After the conceptualisation of a context, appropriate causal explanations will be available. However, relations between the constitutive elements make different capacities feasible. In thinking of problems in relation to possible solutions, it is also necessary to keep in mind the asymmetric nature of relations: ‘the system’s causal capacities do not constitute its parts and their organisation.’ 30 Also, compared to the process of the problem, the constitution of capacity does not take time — it happens instantly. For example, if there is a plan to use some police strategy, then it is necessary to train police officers. Both

29 Ylikoski P, op. cit.
30 Ibid., p. 6.
training and implementation of strategy take time, but after training, the capacity for implementation is available instantly. As such, it is like a magic that can be used in policing. The question is, how to prepare a context in which particular capacities (e.g., kindness, safety) will appear, and how to discover these properties and conditions that made existing capacities (e.g., riots, drug problem, street crimes) available. Understanding and acknowledging contextual factors is a necessary precondition for failing wisely. As we will see from the examples below, failing in preparations may be preparation to fail. The actual situation is sometimes more complicated than is often described in positivist models for situations with definable problems and solutions. However, some problems are hard to define and not solvable, but still need immediate action — wicked problems.

**About the nature of problems**

The central ethos of the problem-solving approach is to define a problem, i.e., a problem is the central element. Also, searching for the best practices is a well-known and rooted culture in the field of safety. These are the causes to bring in another dimension of problems — the nature of a problem. Seemingly the same problem may have a different nature, which has a crucial impact on the ways it should be treated. Comparative research related to gun violence in the US, Canada, and Australia offer an excellent example of the different nature of the problem and comes down to a search or creation of best practices. The research reveals that ‘some wicked social problems are not inherently wicked, but are instead influenced by the national political landscape.’ This means, among other things, that the nature of the problem is contextual, and there is nothing pre-given — an idea that will be given a proper meaning in the discussions below. So, according to this research, gun violence should be given different kinds of attention in the compared countries. This knowledge is especially important because, at first glance, gun violence is gun violence and should be treated similarly, i.e., looking for best practices is the right way to go. However, this kind of oversimplification may appear as a source of a new problem instead of a solution.

Although wickedness is a topic covered broadly in many disciplines, in this article, I cover only the main ideas related to the article’s purpose. In their seminal article, Rittel and Webber operate in the field of planning and claim that planners face problems which they entitle ‘wicked’. They offer ten characteristics of these kinds of problems. Although the authors often use safety-related issues as an example of a wicked problem, it does not mean that all safety-related issues are wicked. Instead of referring to these ideas, I draw an example which covers most of the characteristics of wickedness emphasised by Rittel and Webber. For example, in the case of problems with general public order:

— It is complicated to define the problem. How to cover something, which is related to so many disciplines starting from policing and criminology, but

---


32 Ibid., p. 50.

33 Rittel and Webber, *op. cit.*
also linked to social-psychology, housing, education, medicine, economy, redundancy, and many others;

— There is no one-single stopping rule. There is no single success-formulaappable to solve the problem of public order;

— Solutions are not true-or-false but good-or-bad. A solution that led to a good result previously (e.g., some police strategy combined with some particular youth policy), may not offer the same result next time;

— There is no ultimate test of a solution. Since many fields and agents are involved, the effect of the previous action is severe if any to measure;

— Every attempt counts significantly. Mistakes will be visible and unforgivable. In hiring and engaging more police officers on public order, the impact on safety, society, and organisation may be drastic, starting with lowering trust in the police or causing a misbalance between the police organisation’s other functions;

— There is a countless set of possible solutions. Here, there is an emphasis on the word set. In wicked issues, such as public order, the combination of various tools (including agents) is a key for success;

— Every problem is unique can be considered to be a symptom of another problem. In thinking of problems of public order, it is useful to label a problem as an answer and start to look for a question. Similarly to the example of terrorism presented above;

— The existence of a problem can be explained in different ways. Reasoning has a crucial factor in the solution. Pieces of evidence should be presented. The question — how do you know that the problem is present? — is essential and unavoidable. Discovered evidence refer to an ontological point (what is the problem), but not necessarily to the solution.

During this more than forty year period from the initial article of wicked problems, the idea of wickedness has spread and developed. Also, in the field of safety, the span of the topic is broad, from grasping the problem of alcohol use to police strategies such as problem-oriented policing. Since the purpose of this article is to advance knowledge of thinking about the concept of problem in developing the groundwork for better tackling of safety issues, we emphasise here the importance of framing a problem, which bridges the argumentation below. As was highlighted, all safety issues are not wicked, but the nature of these should also be clarified. From the point of view of decreasing complexity, problems can be understood as tame (both the problem and solution are clear), complex (the problem is clear, a solution is not), and wicked (neither the problem nor solution is clear). However, the described typology does not cover many aspects of social


life, which leads to the next crucial issue in the concept of problem, but also sheds light on many aspects of social life. Selg (forthcoming) emphasises situations where a solution is clear, but the problem is not. These kinds of problems — entitled ideological problems — can often be encountered in everyday political life, and in this article, we look at the example below from the field of safety.

Two aspects of the described typology should be specified. First, the question of the clarity of a problem seems to be simple, but also disastrous and often an object of manipulation, as brilliantly presented by Charles Tilly using the example of terrorism\(^{37}\). Similarly to Tilly’s\(^{38}\) argumentation that there is no owner of a definition of terror, terrorism, or terrorist, one should acknowledge that nobody owns the definition of a particular problem. The latter is especially crucial in the field of safety, which has countless regulations trying to capture all of the misbehavior. Second, related to a problem, a solution may be even more complicated, since all of the agents may imagine the outcome as well as the process of solving or mitigating a particular problem differently. Although there may be several sets of contextual factors, it is difficult to argue against the fact that in public service, there are often situations where some social event (e.g., increasing street crime; a terrorist act) cause public debate forcing officials to solve a problem. Problems of public order are well-known (e.g., misdemeanors, riots, violent crimes), in which hiring more police officers or applying military policing strategies appear to be quick and easy solutions. However, as was described above, more police and aggressive police tactics can be a source of new problems (such as distrust in the police). Also, there are plenty of examples in criminology, where it is possible to recognise the displacement of problems instead of resolving them. Riots or street crimes are obviously a signal, but the problem maybe something else. The signal-noise dilemma is clearly and famously presented by Nate Silver: ‘The noise is what distracts us from the truth.’\(^{39}\) I am not offering a theory of truth, but a possibility to orient oneself in the noise.

Now, after clarifying the ideas of relationalism, causal and constitutive reasoning, and the nature of problems, it is easier to understand the key aspects of our argumentation, and move closer to understandings of the concept of problem as an interconnected phenomenon.

**Substantialism and relationalism: self-action, inter-action, and trans-action**

Since the primary purpose of this article is to craft a groundwork for thinking of problems in a way which allows the substantialist view to be made distinct from the relational, I use the terminology of self-actionalism, inter-actionalism, and trans-actionalism.\(^{40}\) According to François Dépelteau,\(^{41}\) there are two modes of perception

---


\(^{41}\) Dépelteau F, *op. cit.*
of the social world. First, the co-deterministic theories explain evolution as ‘the effect of inter-actions between social structures and agency’.\textsuperscript{42} From that point, there are pre-existing structures and agencies. For example, in safety, it is possible to recognise good and bad actions; adults and juveniles; owners and the poor, and so on. In this regard, social structures must be external to action since they exist before action. Another view was first introduced in ‘Manifesto for a Relational Sociology’\textsuperscript{43}, and means by words of Dépelteau, that ‘the main challenge posed by relational theories is to explain social phenomena without any total or partial causal relation from social structures to action.’\textsuperscript{44} The transaction is not like a line within a mathematical formula composed by single components (e.g., criminal + action + policeman) or just the addition of some actions of pre-given entities. These different lines and participants ‘in their developing interrelationship, constitute a singleness, such as we recognise when we speak of an argument, a debate, a discussion or a fight.’\textsuperscript{45} If social things are not pre-given entities, but relations (nodes and ties) then who are criminals, what is a crime, and how should we think about problems?

From the perspective of the concept of problem, the question is: should we study (1) self-action (where things are viewed as acting under their own powers); (2) inter-action (where thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection);\textsuperscript{46} or (3) trans-action (the action A is the action A only because it is interconnected with the action B, and vice versa)?\textsuperscript{47} An answer to this question is not simple, since ‘[o]ur spontaneous view of the world is substantialist, not relational: in our language, we express the world as being composed of substances, rather than emerging, unfolding and processual relations.’\textsuperscript{48} Norbert Elias provides a brilliant example of this idea: ‘We say, ‘The wind is blowing’, as if the wind were actually a thing at rest which, at a given point in time, begins to move and blow. We speak as if the wind were separate from its blowing, as if a wind could exist which did not blow.’\textsuperscript{49} Following the idea, in safety, there should be substances like assets or criminals that have properties like a price or dangerousness, which are connected in activities like stealing or blackmailing.

From another perspective, Selg\textsuperscript{50} clarifies the relational view of everyday life using the term ‘distance’. To put it into the context of safety, we can imagine a distance between the policeman and criminal, while the ‘distance’ is a relation between the two, not a property or action. The distance does not belong to policeman or criminal. However, for a distance in our example, it is necessary to have both policeman and criminal. The instantness in relational thinking should also

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 52.
\textsuperscript{43} Emirbayer M, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{44} Dépelteau F, op. cit., p. 59.
\textsuperscript{46} Dewey J, Bentley A.F, op. cit., p. 132.
\textsuperscript{47} Dépelteau F, op. cit., p. 60.
\textsuperscript{50} Selg P, op. cit., 2018, p. 540.
be emphasised since the idea helps in further discussions: a ‘distance’ appears instantly in thinking about policeman and criminal. It does not appear later. The problem is, there are countless another instant ‘things’ similar to distance (for example respect or fear), which we only recognise if needed, in particular circumstances. All of these invisible things are in place regardless of their recognition.

Yet, this example does not offer suitable knowledge about how it would help us to understand benefits from substantialist view to relational view of safety problems. So, it is possible to analyse individual action as a self-action by an observer, ‘but, in reality, it is reasonable to assume that so-called self-actions are always part of transactions where the actions of A and B are interdependent.’51 There is nothing wrong with conceptualising problems of safety from the point of view of stable relations, but trying to discover and study interdependencies of social action is more inclusive and offers deeper knowledge. In general, it is possible to analyse a criminal and an asset; a community and disorder; a police strategy and the feeling of safety, but these are always interrelated through ‘things’, as described above. A criminal is a criminal only in relation to a particular asset; disorder is disorder only in relation to a particular community; the police’s behavior has meaning with a particular feeling of safety, and so forth. Of course, there are conditions in which there is a higher capacity for something, but there still, nothing is pre-given.

Problem in policing: concept and examples

There are many ways to elucidate the theoretical ideas presented above. However, it is true that, in the field of policing, the discussions of the concept of problem as relational is just the beginning. Therefore, I start from the outset. In this section I first look at the concept of problem as it was presented by Goldstein52 and elaborated by Borrion, et al.53, and then move towards the use of the concept in the classical experiment carried out by Braga, et al.,54 and in contemporary well-known stop-and-search cases.55 In such a way, it is possible to grasp both theoretical discussions as well as the concept in use. However, I do not criticise current standpoints, but try to develop the idea and support Goldstein’s ethos56 (‘At one time this emphasis was appropriate’) with minor accent: ideas developed in earlier times are often not useless, but need to be developed along with contemporary knowledge.

The sections below are dedicated to illuminating the current positions of problem in the examples taken into analysis, and to asking further questions in line with the theoretical perspectives to discover possible additional or hidden shades. In more detail, I focus on causal and constitutive reasoning; the nature of problem; and substantialist-relational perspectives. The following questions will be asked:

— About the causality and constitutiveness: is the emphasis on the process (how is something happening) or on the constitutive elements (what makes

51 Dépelteau F, op. cit., p. 55.
53 Borrion H, et al., op. cit.
54 Braga A.A, et al., op. cit.
56 Goldstein H, op. cit., 1979, p. 239.
it possible)? The notion of capacities is vital since they ground a context for an open-minded approach to a problem. Also, the knowledge of the principle of instantness may lead to a deeper understandings of causes of a problem by looking for a set that instantly made possible what happened. Thereupon it is easier to discover (1) crucial participants, and (2) necessary causations. Recognising a moment of enactment (recognition) of a problem, the activating process (including causes, reasons, agents) itself may become clearer.

— About the nature of problems: are these problems presented as simple (both the problem and the solution are clear), tame (the problem clear, a solution is not), wicked (neither the problem nor solution is clear), or ideological (a solution is clear, the problem is not)? Dealing with the recognition of the nature of a problem also clarifies the field of participants, capacities, and possible solutions, which all offer valuable input for organisational design as well as strategic choices in everyday policing.

— About substantialism and relationalism: is the concept of problem or a particular problem under discussion handled from a substantialist or relationalist perspective? The ontological-analytical position limits both the understanding of a problem and possible solutions. Since the prevention of further misbehavior can be recognised as one general ethos of the problem-oriented approach, thinking in terms of relations or substances has a crucial impact. In the analyses below, self-action and inter-action are treated as substantial, and trans-action as relational. In this study, it is not necessary to discern all three forms of action, and I make the difference based on the claim that ‘[s]ocial actors and actions are what they are, at some specific time and space, only through empirical chains of trans-actions.’

**Concept of problem in problem-oriented policing**

The purpose of Goldstein’s seminal paper is to summarise the nature of the ‘means over ends’ syndrome in policing and to explore ways of focussing greater attention on the results of policing — on the effect that police efforts have on the problem that the police are expected to handle. By ‘problems’, he means ‘the incredibly broad range of troublesome situations that prompt citizens to turn to the police, such as street robberies, residential burglaries, battered wives, vandalism, speeding cars, runaway children, accidents, acts of terrorism, even fear’, and emphasises the perspective of the job of police to deal ‘with a wide range of behavioral and social problems that arise in a community — that the end product of policing consists of dealing with these problems.’ In his further, developing paper, the purpose was ‘to join with others in exploring the future development of problem-oriented policing.’ He emphasises the early idea of problem-oriented policing, which from the perspective of the police’s management, assumed ‘the

---

primary responsibility for identifying problems, analysing them\textsuperscript{61}, and also ‘[t]he fundamental premise underlying the concept of problem-oriented policing is that police practices, in responding to common problems that arise in the community.’\textsuperscript{62} Both ideas cited are remarkable not only from the point of POP but also from the point of current research. The third paper was analysed for the purpose of elaborating Goldstein’s above-cited ideas to ‘revisit the problem-oriented policing (POP) literature and argue that the current conception of crime problem, akin to an obstacle, has overshadowed the goals that are threatened by crime.’\textsuperscript{63} Although all they found was the need to revise the concept of problem, the new ideas still hold A-s and B-s as pre-given structures and agents, but there is little discussion about the process of problem-creation. Table 1 generalises the overall concepts of problems discussed in the cited papers from the perspective of this article.

Table 1. Mode of defining a problem by Goldstein 1997, 2003 and Borrion et al., 2019.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition of problem</th>
<th>Improving policing: A problem-oriented approach\textsuperscript{64}</th>
<th>On further developing problem-oriented policing: The most critical need, the major impediments, and a proposal\textsuperscript{65}</th>
<th>The Problem with Crime Problem-Solving: Towards a Second Generation Pop?\textsuperscript{66}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition or description of problem</td>
<td>‘By problems, I mean the incredibly broad range of troublesome situations that prompt citizens to turn to the police, such as street robberies, residential burglaries, battered wives, vandalism, speeding cars, runaway children, accidents, acts of terrorism, even fear.’\textsuperscript{67}</td>
<td>‘each discrete piece of police business that the public expects the police to handle (referred to as a ‘problem’)\textsuperscript{68} ‘It was contemplated that the problems would be sizeable — a collection of many similar incidents — usually occurring throughout the jurisdiction served or within a reasonably defined area. Examples would be the problem of the drinking-driver, the robbery of convenience stores, or theft from retail establishments.’\textsuperscript{69}</td>
<td>‘the problems tackled by practitioners should not be defined in terms of crime or crime reduction alone. Indeed, the adequacy of interventions greatly depends upon the ways analysts frame the problems to solve in the first place.’\textsuperscript{70} ‘the problem is one of how to intervene to reduce crime to acceptable levels, whilst also satisfying the wider set of goals of all stakeholders’\textsuperscript{71} ‘In practice, this requires revising the concept of problem and aligning problem-solving models with the multicriteria frameworks found in other disciplines, including design, engineering and risk management.’\textsuperscript{72}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 15.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 19.
\textsuperscript{63} Borrion H, et al., op. cit., p. 1.
Advancing the Concept of Problem in Problem-oriented Policing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emphasis on process (how something happening) or on constitutive elements (what makes it possible)?</th>
<th>Emphasis on elements. Especially from the point of crime, which appears as a core of a problem.</th>
<th>Emphasis on elements and particular area.</th>
<th>Emphasis on elements with the notion of multiplicity of disciplines having input on policing. Deals mostly with what-questions, and not how-questions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on elements. Especially from the point of crime, which appears as a core of a problem.</td>
<td>The nature of problems is not analytically discerned.</td>
<td>The nature of problems is not analytically discerned.</td>
<td>Some indications of the nature of problems (e.g., wickedness) are present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention on the nature of a problem as tame, complex, or wicked.</td>
<td>The nature of problems is not analytically discerned.</td>
<td>The nature of problems is not analytically discerned.</td>
<td>Some indications of the nature of problems (e.g., wickedness) are present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantialism or relationalism?</td>
<td>Substantialism is the prevalent ethos.</td>
<td>Substantialism is the prevalent ethos.</td>
<td>Substantialism is the prevalent ethos.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** The author, based on Goldstein H, 1979 and 2003; Borrion H, et al., 2019.

Whatever the precise problem is, the causal and constitutive reasoning is a useful tool guiding to capacities. It is especially useful to remember that causal capacities take the environment for granted, although it is questionable whether there is any pre-given environment. Merely acknowledging the fact that every criminal is responsible for his/her actions, but not solely responsible for his/her self, is a striking reminder of the latter.

Advancement and the notion towards interdisciplinarity is a valuable component added to thinking of problems by Borrion, et al. However, thinking more analytically about the nature of problems in terms of complexity (including ideological terms) creates an environment that reduces the possibility of failure. The latter is an idea from Bob Jessop, who emphasised the idea in governance where there is no guarantee of success. It is only possible to choose ‘preferred forms of failure’, and safety is one of the fields holding no warrants. Moreover, the way that one thinks of problems implies possibilities for solutions and various means to the latter. It is not easy to separate a signal from the noise, and all of the tools available could be captured.

However, the most important addition to the thinking of problems stems from the substantialist ethos of current usage of the concept. Although the argumentation is broadened from the crime-related problems to many different fields, the roots are

---

66 Borrion H, et al., *op. cit.*
74 Jessop B, Governance and meta-governance: on reflexivity, requisite variety and requisite irony. Governance as social and political communication, 2003, p. 118.
still dialectical in terms of problems and tools. Contrary to substantialism, the relational thinking directs towards a shift of thinking focussed more on ethos instead of means. Social actors are not isolated but interdependent, and these dependencies should be discovered and studied in order to move closer to a problem. Environmental criminologists may argue that there can be a particular environment that creates a criminal or calls for a crime (self-actional perspective). However, the idea itself is relational: there are no A-s (criminals) without B (an environment) in this formula. Another widespread understanding is that there is a rule and a person who violates the latter, and both are constant (inter-actional perspective). However, it would be useful to think that there are no pre-given criminals, rules, or actions. The example of decriminalisation or criminalisation may be one of these examples most familiar to the audience. The understanding of some particular action (whether the action is a crime or not) can change simultaneously with a shift in the calendar (in case of criminalisation or decriminalisation) or taking a step (in case of crossing a state’s border). Also, the decriminalisation may be an effect of police or citizens behaviour — for some reasons, actors stopped acting in particular way. It does not necessarily have to be handled as a formal juridical act. Probably all contemporary societies can present some ‘dead’ legal rule. The example of the police’s power to use violence might be telling. The same action — using violence — can be legal if it is carried out by the police within the limits of the law, but it also can be illegal if it is carried out by the persons who cannot be fit into this particular law.

**Concept of problem in action**

There is no need for a meta-analysis of case studies in problem-oriented policing to express some hidden values of a variety of the concept of problem. Here, I use data from the experiment of the efficacy of problem-oriented policing conducted by Anthony Braga and colleagues\(^7^{5}\), which still ‘remains a model evaluation study today.’\(^7^{6}\) In addition to this study focussed on a problem-oriented approach, I take a look at two reports involved in contemporary policing practices. Tiratelli M, et al.\(^7^{7}\) explored the relationship between stop-and-search and crime levels for a ten-year period, and Drury et al.\(^7^{8}\) ‘construct[ed] histories of some of the most significant riots in August 2011.’

These data, mediated by experts, are appropriate to acquire knowledge about how the concept of problem was handled. However, I do recognise the fact that these data do not represent all of the understandings and angles in use. This is not the case. And although the chosen examples concerned Anglo-American police culture, they are also accessible, as well as well-known for a broader audience. Besides, luckily, all of the limitations mentioned above will not influence the subject matter of this article. As is presented in Table 2 below, the overall concept of the problems are treated from a substantialist viewpoint. Regardless of the fact of many examples of an interactional viewpoint, the problems are still treated in a substantial way presenting A-s and B-s.

---

\(^{75}\) Braga A.A, et al., *op. cit.*


\(^{77}\) Tiratelli M, et al., *op. cit.*

\(^{78}\) Drury J, et al., *op. cit.,* p. 69.
Table 2. Ethos of a problem in three studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition or description of problem</th>
<th>Problem-oriented policing in violent crime places: A randomised controlled experiment&lt;sup&gt;79&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Does more stop and search mean less crime? Analysis of Metropolitan Police Service panel data, 2004–14&lt;sup&gt;80&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Re-reading the 2011 English riots. ESRC ‘Beyond Contagion’ interim report&lt;sup&gt;81&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Problem-oriented policing challenges officers to identify and to analyze the causes of problems behind a string of criminal incidents or substantive community concern’; ‘very little is known about the value of problem-oriented interventions in controlling violence’&lt;sup&gt;42&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>‘This study aimed to add to the limited evidence on the impact of stop and search on crime. [...] As the type of analysis that was carried out could only show correlation and not causation, any evidence of a lagged negative association would point to a possible deterrent effect.’&lt;sup&gt;44&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>‘To explain waves of riots, in place of the concept of ‘contagion’ — the notion that people simply copied others in a mindless and automatic way — we propose a new model of riot spread as identity-based collective empowerment.’&lt;sup&gt;85&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘This research attempts to generate more knowledge on the usefulness of problem-oriented interventions to control violent places.’&lt;sup&gt;83&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘[...] riots influenced each other: the occurrence of a riot in one location subsequently made rioting more likely in certain other locations. [...] that this influence process is actually one of the main predictors of rioting, and that the more intense the rioting the greater the influence.’&lt;sup&gt;86&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on process (how is something happening) or in constitutive elements (what makes it possible)?</td>
<td>Little or no attention to constitutiveness.</td>
<td>Emphasis on process.</td>
<td>Some limited attention to constitutiveness, processes are mostly in focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little or no attention to the nature of problems from the current perspective.</td>
<td>Little or no attention to the nature of problems from the current perspective.</td>
<td>There are some indicative signs to the complexity of problems.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to the nature of a problem as tame, complex, or wicked.</td>
<td>Substantialism is the prevalent ethos.</td>
<td>Although emphasising the relational idea, it remains on frames of interactionalism (with A-s and B-s), and for that reason is labelled as substantial.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantialism or relationalism?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Although emphasising the relational idea, it remains on frames of interactionalism (with A-s and B-s), and for that reason is labelled as substantial.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<sup>79</sup> Braga A.A, et al., op. cit.
<sup>81</sup> Drury J, et al., op. cit.
<sup>82</sup> Braga A.A, et al., op. cit., p. 542.
<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 543.
<sup>84</sup> Quinton P, et.al., op. cit., p. 3.
<sup>85</sup> Drury J, et al., op. cit., p. 4.
<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 15.
In addition to previous confirmations, I also acknowledge the limits coming from the methods of analysis. However, in summing up the three questions under discussion, in the research analysed, causality dominated over constitutiveness, the complexity of problems was used in a mediated way, and substantialism was the ruling ethos. At that point, it is appropriate to emphasise that all of the stressed factors — constitutive reasoning, nature of problems, relationalism — are often touched on in the literature related to problems in policing. Yet, the touch is often so general, cursory and undeveloped that the benefits of these concepts remain hidden.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of the article is to advance the knowledge of thinking about the concept of problem in developing the groundwork for better tackling of safety issues. After the brief sketching out of ideas offering additional perspectives to the traditional practice, I looked at the concept of problem from two perspectives: how it was elaborated in theoretical positions and used in three well-known studies. Regarding causal and constitutive reasoning, in all the papers, the central ethos was on processes and little or no attention was paid to constitutiveness. The process-orientedness is not a problem in itself, but may still ground nebulousness leading towards decisions having limited one-sided pieces of evidence and argumentation about a problem as well as possibilities for tackling it. Grounding constitutive elements lead to more emotion-free knowledge, including particular contextual information. There is no pre-given context, which is an axiomatic precondition in the normative approach, and can appear as one of the reasons for failure. Both elements, as well as causality, are related to the nature of problems in terms of complexity. Although without labelling the nature of a problem, the analysis of problem-oriented policing and stop-and-search practices presented some undesirable consequences that may accompany a vague understanding or definition of complexity. Starting to solve the unsolvable problem, increases the probability of failure. Even more, as the example of stop-and-search presented, it can appear as a separate problem.

Substantialism was probably the most evident feature characterising the perception of the concept of problem. However, the relational ethos could be the novel approach in thinking of safety problems and policing. As the dramatic conclusion (‘stop-and-search is clearly a problem not a solution’). Drury, et al. manifested that riots should be seen as a relation, not some pre-given event that should be solved by A-s and B-s.

‘Failure is a routine feature of everyday life,’ and for that reason should be taken seriously. To fail wisely, the overall focus and wisdom on thinking about problems as complex issues could be increased in the field of policing. In this article, only some ideas were presented. The ideas of relationalism need more advanced research and clarification in terms of trans-actionalism which is not a common

---

88 Ibid., p. 19.
vocabulary term and way of thinking in criminology and policing, although it does have great potential in the realm of safety.

To summarise, the example of theft could be appropriate: a thief is responsible for the action, but the theft does not belong to a thief or a victim (or an asset) and should be seen as a relation in between. Acknowledging this, we are back at the very beginning and should deal with the concept of problem from many different perspectives within the enormous social roulette.

References

Advancing the Concept of Problem in Problem-oriented Policing

About the Author

Priit Suve, Assoc. Prof. of public management of School of Governance, Law and Society, Tallinn University and professor of police theory Institute of Internal Security of Estonian Academy of Security Sciences in Estonia. Email: priit.suve@sisekaitse.ee

Streszczenie. Ostatnie zmiany w rozumieniu pojęcia problemu w policji, która jest instytucją zorientowaną na rozwiązanie problemów wskazują na wartościowe aspekty, głównie zaś z perspektywy merytorycznej. W niniejszym artykułe przedstawiono perspektywę relacyjną, w myśleniu o problemach związanych z bezpieczeństwem oraz przedstawiono kilka kluczowych rozwiązań. Opierając się na rozumowaniu przyczynowym i konstytutywym oraz pojęciu złożoności problemów, do określenia różnic między perspektywą substancjalistyczną i relacjonalistyczną wykorzystano perspektywę samodzielności, interakcji i transakcji. Koncepcja problemu została przeanalizowana z dwóch perspektyw. Po pierwsze, w świetle początkowych i ostatnich opracowań tego terminu. Po drugie, przez faktyczne używanie pojęcia. W analizowanych danych dominował etos substancjalistyczny, domyślnie mający zalety i wady. Jednak myślenie relacyjne wymaga głębszego zrozumienia problemów związanych z bezpieczeństwem. Rezygnação z etosu substancjalistycznego i pytanie, czy istnieją z gódy określone A i B, oraz zwrócenie się w stronę idei, że nie ma A bez B, stwarza warunki do bardziej otwartego zrozumienia zagadnienia problemu w policji.


Резюме. Последние изменения в разработке вопросов, касающихся проблемы в полиции, являющейся органом, ориентированным на решение проблем, указывают на полезные моменты, в основном, с точки зрения самого содержания понятия. В статье представлен реляционный взгляд на рассмотрение проблемы безопасности, а также представлены некоторые ключевые достижения в этой области. Используя причинно-следственное и конститутивное мышление, а также концепцию сложности проблем, для определения различий между существенной и релятивистской точки зрения была использована перспектива независимости, взаимодействия и сделки. Концепция проблемы анализируется с двух точек зрения. Во-первых, в контексте первоначальных и независимых разработок понятия. Во-вторых, посредством практического применения понятия. В проанализированных данных в основном обладал принцип существенности, и он имеет как преимущества, так и недостатки. Однако, реляционное мышление требует более глубокого понимания вопросов в сфере безопасности. Отказ от содержательного этоса и вопрос, есть ли предопределенные A и B, и обращение к идеи, что без B не существует A, создает среду для более открытого понимания проблемы в полиции.