

Chapter 2

The General Theory of Crime

In 1990, Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi published the general theory of crime—a universal theory of crime that claims to be able to explain “all crime, at all times” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 117). The central constructs of this theory are self-control and criminal behavior; low self-control is the most important predictor for delinquent behavior. This theory is a control theory, and it claims to be able to explain a wide range of criminal acts and “analogous” behavior (for example, divorces or accidents) with low self-control. Both for the development of self-control and for an explanation of delinquent behavior, the family is the most important institution. Other institutions, such as schools or neighborhoods, play only a secondary role or no role at all.

The general theory of crime belongs to the most cited and theoretically as well as empirically tested criminological approaches. Most studies that have tested the assumptions of the general theory of crime placed their main focus on the relationship between self-control and delinquent behavior. In this chapter, however, the question of the formation of self-control is emphasized. By and large, the chapter does not raise the claim to describe the general theory of crime as such. In the following, merely those facets of the theory that are relevant for answering the questions of the study at hand are emphasized.

2.1 “Crime” and “Criminality”

The general theory of crime is often also called the self-control theory. This term, however, ignores the fact that Gottfredson and Hirschi built their universal theory of crime on *two* central concepts, namely, “crime” and “criminality”.

2.1.1 Regarding the Definition of “Crime”

Gottfredson and Hirschi defined “crime” as “... acts of force or fraud undertaken in pursuit of self-interest”. (1990: 15). This definition does not build on the legal

definition of crime as an offense. It enables them to determine the nature of criminal acts themselves as scientists independent of political decisions (ibid.: 3).

Gottfredson and Hirschi did not define crime in juridical terms. From their point of view, one and the same action, when carried out in different contexts, can be defined as criminal or not criminal (ibid.: 175). For them, the definition of crime is the essential initial point of their theory: “The central concept of a theory of crime must be crime itself” (ibid.).

For Gottfredson and Hirschi, almost all criminal acts are banal and trivial, need only short preparation, have little permanent consequences, and often do not produce the result that the offender had expected (ibid.: 16). It is important that they look at different criminal acts as interchangeable, because these show the same qualities, such as immediateness and effortlessness. Therefore, differences between serious and simple, between instrumental and expressive crime, or between violent and property crime—even delinquency between status offenses and other criminal acts—are meaningless and misleading (ibid.: 22). This definition of the nature of crime has not remained indisputable in the literature. The so-called white-collar crime is often stated as an example of a kind of offense that cannot be explained by the universal theory of crime (e.g., Friedrichs and Schwartz 2008). Nevertheless, Gottfredson and Hirschi have contradicted this regularly (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 180ff.; Hirschi and Gottfredson 2008: 226ff.), for example, with the argument that this activity only exhibits gradual differences to usual crimes.

2.1.2 Regarding the Definition of “Criminality”

The concept of “criminality” refers to the propensities of persons to commit criminal acts. These propensities can be determined with the help of the above-named characteristics of criminal acts. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, criminal acts promise an immediate profit or an easy satisfaction of needs, are exciting, have few long-term benefits, require low skills or planning, and often result in pain and troubles for the victims. The typical qualities of offenders correspond to these characteristics of criminal acts: “In sum, people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short-sighted, and nonverbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts. Since these traits can be identified prior to the age of responsibility for crime, since there is considerable tendency for these traits to come together in the same people, and since the traits tend to persist through life, it seems reasonable to consider them as comprising a stable construct useful in the explanation of crime” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 90–91).

In addition to this description of the elements of self-control, Hirschi and Gottfredson (2001: 82) defined the concept in general as a propensity to avoid acts whose long-term costs exceed the immediate or short-term benefits. However, they also defined self-control as the difference between people regarding their tendency

to avoid criminal actions regardless of their current circumstances (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 87).

For Gottfredson and Hirschi, self-control is identical to “criminality”; this is also shown by the fact that they include a longer segment from an older publication in their 1990 book, in which they replace the concept of criminality with self-control: “Criminality (self-control) ... refers to stable differences across individuals in the propensity to commit criminal (or equivalent) acts” (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1986: 58; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 137).

They felt that the concept of “low self-control” is more suitable than the concept of “criminality”. In their opinion, one does not need special characteristics to behave criminally. They stated that criminality clarifies that people who behave criminally have a particular characteristic that others do not have (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 88).

2.2 Causes for Self-Control: The Family

The general theory of crime is a control theory. Because of this perspective, self-control is naturally low. Children do not originally differ in their low self-control; it develops only in the course of life. The causes for differences in self-control lie primarily in the family socialization. Low self-control, then, is to be explained by deficits that result from missing care, punishment, or practice (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 95). “The major ‘cause’ of low self-control thus appears to be ineffective child-rearing” (ibid.: 97). Several conditions are considered necessary to socialize a child. First, for children to develop self-control, they need parents who observe their behavior. Second, the parents have to be able to recognize deviant behavior. Third, they have to punish if it appears (ibid.).

For Gottfredson and Hirschi, parental rearing behavior is the key factor for the development of self-control. Moreover, they discussed the direct effect of parental supervision not only on self-control but also on delinquent behavior. They expect that supervision can prevent criminal or analogous acts directly: “Search for supervision presumably prevents criminal or analogous acts and at the same time trains the child to avoid them on his own” (ibid.: 99). A direct effect is to be expected rather on young children whose behavior is supervised by the parents strongly than on juveniles who are slowly separating from parental control (Fig. 2.1).

In their “parental mediation thesis”, Cullen and colleagues took the assumption that family socialization is the primary and most important source of self-control. (Cullen et al. 2008: 64f.) Therefore, parental rearing behavior mediates the influence of other family factors (e.g., neglect, single parenthood, and number of children) and all the other factors of self-control that lead to criminal or analogous behavior. That means that such factors have no direct effect on self-control or criminal activity.

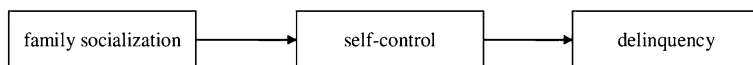


Fig. 2.1 Relationship between family socialization, self-control, and delinquency in the general theory of crime

“The broader implication of this discussion is that for any factor, whether family, community, or societal, to influence self-control and thus offending and analogous behaviours, it must have an impact on the effectiveness of the parenting ...” (ibid.: 65). Gottfredson and Hirschi supposed that a reciprocal attachment between parents and children is important, but it alone cannot produce self-control. For this, parental supervision and control are necessary.

2.3 State of Research: Parental Rearing Behavior and Self-Control

The goal of the general theory of crime was to explain delinquent behavior. For the validity of the theory, it is also important to examine whether its assumptions about the causes for self-control are true. Only few studies that have empirically tested the assumptions of the general theory of crime have explicitly examined whether the relationship between parental rearing behavior and self-control corresponds to the theoretical Gottfredson and Hirschi’s assumptions. In recent years, studies have focused on the causes for self-control, which is also shown in the overviews by Cullen et al. (2008) and Buker (2011). The question of the relationship between parental rearing behavior and self-control has received special attention; more than 20 empirical studies have been published since the publication of the general theory of crime. In approximately half of the studies, self-control was measured as an attitude, most often with the self-control scale of Grasmick et al. (1993). Equally often, behavioral indicators of self-control were used; this was also preferred by Hirschi and Gottfredson (1993). Regarding the quality of the studies, it is striking that many of them were based on longitudinal data; this makes it possible to examine causal effects.

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Neighborhood Disorganization and Social Control
Case Studies from Three Russian Cities

Siegmunt, O.

2016, XIII, 82 p. 17 illus., 16 illus. in color., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-21589-1