Routine Activity Theory

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Routine activity theory, first formulated by Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979) and later developed by Felson, is one of the most widely cited and influential theoretical constructs in the field of criminology and in crime science more broadly. In contrast to theories of criminality, which are centered on the figure of the criminal and the psychological, biological, or social factors that motivated the criminal act, the focus of routine activity is the study of crime as an event, highlighting its relation to space and time and emphasizing its ecological nature and the implications thereof.

In their initial formulation, Cohen and Felson postulated that changes in the structure of the patterns of daily activity of people in cities following World War II could explain the rise in crime that had occurred, according to leading studies at the time. Their hypothesis was that postmodernity had facilitated the convergence in space and time of likely offenders with the goal of committing crimes against suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians. From this they derived two apparently simple ideas with significant implications: first, that the opportunity for crime may depend on a configuration of distinct (though not disaggregated) elements of the aggressor or criminal; second, a correlate of the first, that the absence of either of the first two elements (aggressor and target) or the presence of the third (capable guardians) would be sufficient in itself to prevent a potential criminal event.

Routine activity theory is, in short, an attempt to identify, at a macro-level, criminal activities and their patterns through explanation of changes in crime rate trends (Cohen & Felson, 1979). It is based on criminal events, on the distribution and grouping in space and time of the minimal elements that make them up, rather than on the search for offenders' motives, and it thus offers a frame of reference for concrete and individualized crime analysis and facilitates the application of real policies and practices aimed at altering the necessary elements that make the existence of a crime possible and thereby preventing it (Tilley, 2009).

In their seminal article, "Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach", Cohen and Felson (1979) pointed out an important sociological paradox: while indicators of well-being and socioeconomic conditions, which had until then been considered causes of violent crime – such as poverty, lack of education, and unemployment – had generally improved in the 1960s, reports of crime rates indicated that there was a significant increase in crime during these years. To explain this contradiction, they focused on changes in structural patterns of people's daily activity and how the new configuration provided greater criminal opportunities and, therefore, could influence the trends observed in rates of certain types of crime, in particular crimes against persons or property (Felson & Cohen, 1980).

The transformations in modern society to which the authors refer, revealed through various questionnaires and reports, lent a greater importance to activities away from the home. For example, women's participation in the labor force and access to higher education, as well as an increase in vacation length, trips outside the city, or permanent relocation, increased contact with possible offenders and left homes empty and unprotected. In addition, technological advances during this period led to the appearance and consumption of small electronic appliances such as televisions, video recorders, and stereo equipment, with higher values and lower weights that made them very attractive and easy to remove and transport. Finally, the appearance of automated teller machines, an increase in bank transactions, deposits, and withdrawals, together with changes in daily activity related to the circulation of property, generally increased the mobility and visibility of consumer goods. In short, the growing number of available objects, the increased number of unguarded homes, and the greater possibilities of direct contact between persons or their property and offenders brought about an increase in suitable targets and a decrease

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in capable guardians to prevent crimes, and therefore an environment of greater opportunity.

Cohen and Felson (1979) tested their explanation for changes in crime trends through empirical evaluation of their principal postulates. In order to confirm that the dispersion of activities away from the home and the family could increase the possibility of becoming a suitable target and diminish the presence of capable guardians; to confirm that the suitability of targets influenced predatory contacts and that solitary life, away from the family environment, could raise victimization rates; and, finally, to try to verify that the rise in crime was related to changes in the structure of daily activities in American life, they turned to various studies that provided sufficient empirical support to confirm their hypotheses. Thus, for example, they utilized Hindelang's victimization surveys (1976) to confirm that activities performed away from home presented greater risks than those performed at home. They also defined the household activity ratio, which provided an estimate of the proportion of American households most exposed to the risk of personal or property victimization.

Although the relationship between some elements of the criminal event in space and time had already been recognized by earlier theories such as the older ecological theories of Shaw and McKay (Shaw et al., 1929), as well as Hirschi's social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) and others, Cohen and Felson not only identified the socio-environmental aspect of the crime event but also, by focusing on routine activities, offered a model with great expressive power to explain the "ecological" nature of crime and demonstrate how elements apparently unconnected to the illegal activity may shape and determine it (or its absence). Thus, for example, many technological advances for legitimate purposes, such as automobiles, electronic devices, highways, or telephones, may be used by offenders for their illegitimate activities. That is to say, the structure of routine legal activities also determines how crime is organized in society as well as where it will occur most frequently, with the important preventive consequences that flow therefrom.

Routine activity theory explains the criminal event through three essential elements that converge in space and time in the course of daily activities: (a) a potential offender with the capacity to commit a crime; (b) a suitable target or victim; and finally (c) the absence of guardians capable of protecting targets and victims.

The likely offender may be anyone with a motive to commit a crime and with the capacity to do so (Felson & Cohen, 1980), although it is most likely to be a young man, without stable employment, who has failed in school, and who has a record of traffic accidents and emergency room visits (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Although in their initial formulation Cohen and Felson (1979) used the term "motivated offender", in later works, particularly those of Felson (among others, Felson & Boba, 2010; Felson & Cohen, 1980) they avoided the term "motivated" in refering to the offender, as what they truly considered relevant was not disposition or motivation to commit a crime but rather the physical factors that made it possible for a person to be involved in crime. What this approach contributed was an articulation of the need to divert attention away from the offender in order to understand the crime (Felson, 1995), given that the focus had been exclusively on him or her. Nevertheless, although it was necessary to pay attention to other aspects of crime in order to understand and prevent it (Felson & Clarke, 1998), this never meant leaving aside the "point of view" of the offender (Felson, 2008), given that, as we shall see, the very definition of the target as "suitable" is made through the understanding of the purposes and capacities of the aggressor in relation to intrinsic characteristics of the potential targets of crime.

The suitable target is a person or property that may be threatened by an offender. Felson prefers the term "target" to "victim," as the former highlights the fact that the majority of crimes are aimed at obtaining goods, and therefore the "victim" may be absent from the place of the crime (Felson & Clarke, 1998). The probability that a target will be more or less suitable is influenced by four attributes, described from the point of the view of the offender by the acronym VIVA (value, inertia, visibility, and access), which defines its level of risk (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson & Clarke, 1998):

- value, real or symbolic, from the perspective of the offender;

- inertia, referring to size, weight, and shape, or the physical aspects of the person or good that act as obstacles or impediments to the offender seeing it as suitable;
- visibility, or exposure of targets to offenders, the attribute that marks the person or the good for the attack;
- access, referring to the design of the site and the placement of the object that increases the risk of attack or makes it easier to carry out.

Later developments modified the VIVA concept, already described somewhat superficially in the first paper by Cohen and Felson (1979), which could be applied to any type of target, whether material or personal. Consistent with their ecological perspective, the authors focused at first on the relationship of the target to space and time, without paying much attention to the motives that led the offender to select one target or another and independently of whether the target was material or not. Once the theory had been developed and complemented by others such as "rational choice," sufficiently distant from theories of criminality and supported by a wide body of empirical research, later formulations took up new concepts such as Clarke's "hot products" (1999), which focused specifically on the most attractive objects to thieves. By means of the acronym CRAVED, Clarke describes those products that are stolen with the greatest frequency as concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable, and disposable.

The third and final element described in the theory is the absence of a capable guardian, someone who can intervene to stop or impede a crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979). A guardian capable of preventing crime is one in whose presence the crime is not committed, and whose absence makes it more probable (Felson, 1995). This definition includes anyone who moves through an area or who functions as a guard of persons or property, although the concept of guardian should not be restricted to or be confused with police or security guards. They are obviously capable guardians, and in fact they are usually absent when a crime occurs (Felson & Boba, 2010), as demonstrated in the classic Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment, which tested the effectiveness of random patrols and found that an increase from normal patrol levels in a given area had no significant effect on criminal activity in the area (Kelling, Pate, Dieckman, & Brown, 1974). Others who must be considered capable guardians, and who may be even more important for the prevention of crime, are the occupant of a house, a brother, a friend, or a passer-by – in general, any person who in the performance of his or her daily activities can, through presence or activity, protect him- or herself, protect others, or protect his or her own or others' property.

The concept of the capable guardian, present or absent, has been subject to updates practically since its initial formulation. Its very definition has been debated and reformulated by Felson himself, as well as by other researchers. For example, Hollis-Peel et al., in a literature review of the guardian figure in routine activity theory, have defined guardianship as "the physical or symbolic presence of an individual (or group of individuals) that acts (either intentionally or unintentionally) to deter a potential criminal event" (Hollis-Peel, Reynald, van Bavel, Elffers, & Welsh, 2011, p. 54), a definition that includes elements that they view as insufficiently specified in the original article by Cohen and Felson (1979) as well as later works. One example is closed-circuit television (CCTV), which is operated by people whose presence at the crime site is not physical (Hollis-Peel et al., 2011). Felson himself, in an effort to tie his theory to Hirschi's social control theory (1969), refines the figure of the guardian, distinguishing the "intimate handler" from the "place manager" (Felson, 1995). The first may be a parent or friend who tries, through disapproval of the potential offender's behavior, to prevent actions that violate the rules. The place manager, the second aspect of the guardian, refers to those individuals who have a supervisory responsibility in particular places, for example, doormen, bus drivers, etc. Thus, in developing the concept of the guardian, Felson takes the four elements of Hirschi's theory (1969), attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, and condenses them into one, "handle." In probing the idea that someone could dissuade an offender by means of his presence in a place, or that a person could discourage a possible offender because of his relationship with him, Felson is consistent with the idea of social control and drives home the idea that control is a critical element in crime rate trends (Cohen & Felson, 1979).

On the basis of the three elements initially proposed by Cohen and Felson (1979) – offender, target, and guardian – and the later incorporation of the intimate handler, Eck developed what is known as the crime triangle, which distinguishes the elements necessary for a crime to occur from other elements, called controllers, that have the potential to prevent it (Eck, 1994). Offender, target, and place, located in the inner triangle, are supervised by controllers, located in the outer triangle, which can reduce the probability of a crime event by controlling each of these three elements. Thus, the handlers are those persons with whom the offender has an emotional relationship, whether through family, friendship, religion, respect, or others. Their objective is to keep the potential offender away from problems. On the other hand, managers are owners of the place or their agents – doormen, store employees, waiters, or others who endeavor to prevent problems in the place. Finally, guardians seek to protect the target; they are not only police and security guards, but, to a greater extent, owners who guard their own properties.

Exploring these concepts, Felson (1995) reasoned that the probability that the guardian, the handler, or the place manager may be successful should be considered in relation to his or her degree of responsibility. He establishes four different levels: personal, such as owners, family, and friends; assigned, such as employees who have been assigned specific responsibilities for looking after a place; diffuse, such as employees with generic responsibilities; and general, the responsibility of any person. He constructs a 4×3 grid with 12 cells, with levels of responsibility in the rows and crime elements and their respective controllers in the columns. Accordingly, we can analyze the probability of a controller's success upon a given element, descending according to the level of responsibility. Taking as an example an object watched over by a guardian, such as a handbag: if the person watching it is the owner, the risk of it being stolen is low; if it is a security guard, the risk will still be low but not as low as if it were the owner; if it is an employee with other duties, the risk will be greater; and finally, if it is a person with no relationship to the handbag's owner, the risk will increase.

For their part, Sampson, Eck, and Dunham (2010), in analyzing the reasons why controllers are ineffective or their actions are occasionally mistaken, develop the idea of what they call "super controllers," that is, people, organizations, and institutions that provide incentives for controllers to prevent or facilitate crime and that, without directly influencing its elements, may do so indirectly and incentivize prevention. In this extension of the crime triangle, they add a third set of elements grouped around three categories (formal, diffuse, and personal) and 10 types (organizational, contractual, financial, regulatory, courts, political, market, media, group, and family).

The focus of routine activities has its roots in Amos Hawley's human ecology theory of community structure (1950). Although spatial variations in crime rates had already been studied by authors such as Guerry or Quètelet, the research had rarely considered the temporal interdependence of crime with place and human activities. In their early works, Cohen and Felson focused their attention on patterns of human activity based on the teachings of Hawley, for whom community is not merely a territorial unit, but is instead a symbiotic organization of human activities that take place in space and time (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Thus, rhythm, tempo, and timing constitute the three elements in which the organization of time is broken down, and which must be studied in order to understand society.

Although its foundation is in human ecology, routine activity theory presents many points of contact with, and has been influenced by, other criminological theories and approaches that arose in the 1970s in response to the failure of many intervention programs that conceived of the criminal as a being who should be treated from a medical or psychological perspective for his or her individual dispositions or pathologies. On the contrary, approaches such as rational choice operate from a pragmatic perspective of intervention in situational factors and criminal opportunities. The origin of this perspective may be found in the works of Cornish and Clarke (1986), which overlap with Felson's approach in their starting point (rational decision) and in placing the emphasis in crime prevention and explanation not only on the criminal, but also on the environment in which he or she acts. Rational choice proposes that offenders' behavior seeks

to obtain a benefit, and that they make their decisions on the basis of a judgment made after estimating their opportunities to commit a crime successfully, the risk of being caught, and the benefits they hope to obtain. This cost–benefit analysis is in reality a process made up of two decisions, one of involvement and one of event: the first refers to a disposition to commit crimes, that is, the individual evaluates the different options before him in order to achieve his or her objectives, whether legal or illegal, and ultimately chooses to begin offending and either continue or not; the second refers to the specific crime, which is influenced by situational factors. However, a rational decision does not mean that the criminal has made a cold, dispassionate calculus of every option and consequence and that the criminal is infallible in his or her perceptions and evaluations; like all human decisions, they are limited by the many variables that influence them and of which the offender may or may not be aware.

From the beginning, the approach of Cohen and Felson has been consistent with the idea of a rational criminal who takes advantage of opportunities. In this sense, the topic of opportunity plays a relevant role in the focus on routine activities as well as for the perspective of rational choice. One of the first precedents of the opportunity paradigm, though limited to the victim's role, was Hindelang's lifestyle theory (1976), whose central idea is that certain lifestyles favor victimization because they offer more opportunities for it. For its part, the work of Mayhew et al. in London, *Crime as opportunity* (Mayhew, Clarke, Sturman, & Hough, 1976), is considered one of the great milestones of opportunity theories. Although it is contemporary with the work of Cohen and Felson (1979), the British theory should be considered independent of the development of routine activity theory, given that there were no references at the time to research from the other side of the Atlantic, as Tilley (2009) has pointed out. Routine activity theory suggests that crime rates may rise or fall without any change in the number of criminals. In fact, the rise in availability of suitable targets or the diminished effectiveness of guardians, or changes in society's routine activities, may increase the probability that these elements converge in space and time and therefore increase opportunities for crime. One of the other most powerful ideas in routine activity theory is precisely that opportunities are not uniformly distributed in society, nor are they infinite. Instead, there is a limited number of available targets that the criminal may find attractive (Tillyer & Eck, 2009).

Finally, crime pattern theory highlights the spatial ties connecting crime, targets, and patterns of movement of offenders whose routine activities occur in places and times in which there is a greater probability of carrying out illicit acts. Offenders commit their crimes near the areas where they spend the most time (home, work, school, shopping, and entertainment) and around the routes that connect them. Awareness of the space around them is determined by activities undertaken in the past and conditions the placement of their future activities. If we want to understand the spatiotemporal distribution patterns of crime, we must, therefore understand the patterns of daily life and movements of criminals.

Over the years, the theory has seen many applications and developments. Given its strong pragmatic leaning, it is focused principally on preventing crime by reducing opportunities. In this vein, and based on the perspective of rational choice and the idea of the controller introduced by routine activity theory, the theory of situational crime prevention has emerged, focused on altering the structures of opportunity of a specific crime by means of different techniques with the goal of increasing effort, increasing risks, reducing benefits, and removing excuses.

In addition, to explain the distribution of crime in space, in relation to routine activity theory, other researchers have analyzed places in which crimes occur, looking for differences among countries or cities or showing concentrations in given areas; for example, Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger (1989) carried out a study in the city of Minneapolis in which they found that 50% of calls to police came from 3% of urban areas, while robberies were concentrated in 3.6% of the city. In the same vein, this theory has been used to predict victimization as well as the characteristics and behaviors of victims.

Finally, the theory has been widely used to study, among other things, sexual crimes (e.g., Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2001), robbery (e.g., Tseloni, Wittebrood, Farrell, & Pease, 2004), and more recently cybercrime; see, for example, the work of Miró (2011), who has described

the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of cyberspace and considers whether it provides a different environment of criminal opportunity.

The principal arguments used in criticism of routine activity theory question its efficacy, its moral and political legitimacy, and its tendency to blame the victim. These attacks, which flow primarily from a group of authors linked to traditional criminology, respond for their part to criticisms that, in turn, theories of crime in general and routine activity theory in particular direct toward the postulates of theories of criminality and the preventive models they propose (Clarke & Felson, 1993; Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson, 2008).

In relation to its efficacy, the principal reproach made of the theory is that measures introduced have no real effect in reducing crime, as what really results is a displacement – of the time, place, target, method, or form of the crime. Nevertheless, the rationality and opportunity components of the theory have been subject to more criticism by some authors. Critics have also argued that the theory's basis in the idea of the rational decision makes it only applicable to minor crimes with a smaller emotional component, and never to violent crimes (Akers, 1998). In connection with opportunity, it has been pointed out that routine activity theory and other crime theories do not fully explain whether places can alter their capacity to cause crime or merely serve as a pole of attraction for crimes that would have occurred regardless.

Finally, routine activity theory has received its most severe criticism in the area of moral legitimacy. Its detractors have maintained that the focus on routine activities has shown a complete lack of interest in or has directly avoided the offender, thus forgetting the etiology of the problem. In this sense the theory, although it begins from the premise of the existence of a "motivated offender," has not defined its meaning and has therefore been unable to answer the questions "Who are motivated offenders?" "What characteristics do they have?" and "Why are some individuals more motivated than others to commit crimes?" (Akers, 1997). Also considering the problem of motivation, other authors believe that from an analytic point of view motivation cannot be separated from opportunity, as both elements are merely descriptions of the criminal event. Last, this focus has been criticized from a moral perspective by critics who have pointed out that the theory is easily adapted to social and economic policies that exclude entire groups of people, and that it is aligned with "zero tolerance" police policies associated with the repression of minor crimes (Garland, 1999).

Routine activity theory emerged as a deliberately simple explanation for changes in violent crime trends, prompted by variations in patterns of daily activity, which may contribute to greater enjoyment of modern life, but may also encourage the commission of crimes. It differs from criminological theories centered on the offender's motivations in that it places emphasis on crime as an event that occurs in a concrete place at a specific time, and in so doing offers, through an attempt at conceptualization separate from the three elements of crime and their corresponding controllers, a powerful tool for crime analysis and prevention.

Through the years routine activity theory has had a significant impact on criminology and has received important empirical support. Along with rational choice and crime pattern approaches, it maintains a close relationship with crime analysis and prevention, and has been applied to strategies such as situational prevention or problem-oriented policing and problem analysis with a significant degree of effectiveness. Although there have been important criticisms of its ethical and methodological underpinnings, the majority of critics articulate its limitations and risks but are unable to deny its capacity to express and explain the need to look at crime, in order to prevent it, by paying attention to the way in which daily life unfolds in different places.

SEE ALSO: Differential Association Theory; General Strain Theory; Labeling Theory; Theories of Juvenile Delinquency.

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