1 Starting Point and Aim

An empirical\textsuperscript{1} study aimed at the broadest possible understanding of how the persons studied actually live, rather than at achieving quick results in specific areas by applying standardized investigations, is a difficult and tedious enterprise. This was demonstrated once again – as in other comparable studies – in the “Tübingen Comparative Study of Young Offenders.” The actual study, which began in 1965, was preceded by a prolonged period of specific planning and design and by a pilot study. After the (retrospective) investigations were completed, a lengthy phase of intensive evaluation began, the results of which are dealt with in the present report. Meanwhile, the further development of the subjects is being observed (prospectively) within the framework of a follow-up study.

The planning and design of the Tübingen Comparative Study of Young Offenders took place at a time when the research situation in the Federal Republic of Germany, contrary to that in the United States, was marked by a complete lack of comprehensive criminological studies; there were no comparative studies going beyond the simple collection of data from records and carried out directly with a large number of adult offenders. Therefore, a central aim of the present study was to develop basic criminological knowledge of how offenders actually live. Particularly in the field of criminology, this seemed all the more necessary as there are numerous theories claiming entirely different causes and concomitant circumstances of criminality: Theories related to personality predominated in the past, while today, theories which make social circumstances responsible for criminality (still) prevail. Criminality is regarded either as an effect of certain social structures or as a consequence of social reaction.

The present study complies with the traditional multifactorial approach insofar as such one-sided perspectives are rejected. It is marked by the self-evident, yet often neglected insight “that every offense is committed by an offender (or offenders), who is not, as it were, standing free in space as an entirely independent individual, isolated from any ties, but is always part of certain social fields, whose determining forces have an effect which is merely relativized by the individuality of each personality” (GÖPPINGER 1980, pp.76ff.; translated by Ina Kraan). This view is closely related to the concept of the offender in the context of his social relationships, which took increasingly definite shape in the course of the study.

\textsuperscript{1} The term “empirical” as used hereafter is not only associated with a purely hypothesis-testing research design and standardized or quantifying methods of social research (see Sect.4.1 below and Part III, Sect.1.1). It also includes epistemological modes focusing on other kinds of rules and generalizations from experience which are gained by developing ideal-typical concepts and methods. Therefore, in the German text, the term Erfahrungswissenschaft (and erfahrungswissenschaftlich) in the tradition of M. WEBER, was used instead of empirische Wissenschaft (and empirisch).
(see Part III). It is not a theoretical model starting out from fixed hypotheses concerning the relevance of individual factors and certain causal relationships; rather, it should be understood heuristically in the sense that the actual complex of conditions and the real importance of individual factors are left open to discovery in the individual case.

Consequently, a research design based on one-sided theories was out of the question. Exclusive commitment of the study to any hypotheses was deliberately avoided so that it would remain open to unanticipated or unexpected circumstances and relationships. Thus, initially, we considered some seemingly simple and naive-sounding questions, which, however, demanded extremely complex answers: What are the offenders to be studied like in comparison with the rest of the population? Do they differ at all from the “general” population in terms of their life histories, in somatic, psychiatric/psychological, and social aspects, or in their behavior patterns?

These extremely broad and open initial question had methodological implications for the design of a comparative study: Only against the background of what is usual in the “general” population can the significance and weight of individual characteristics, behavior patterns, and circumstances for (recidivist) criminality be assessed.

The group of offenders (O-subjects) was selected from 20- to 30-year-old male prisoners (regarding the method, see Sect. 2.2 below) serving sentences of at least 6 months. This selection criterion was based on the reasonable assumption that these offenders would generally have already had what might be called a “criminal career.” This was important, since offenders characterized by marked criminality, not by chance or peripheral manifestations of delinquency, were to be studied. For various reasons, 20–30 years seemed a suitable age range: It is particularly "prone" to criminality, and the selection of younger subjects would have meant that the large number of offenders who did not receive repeated convictions until adulthood would have been disregarded (see Part II, Sect. 1.3). The latter group of offenders in particular had not been taken into account at all in previous criminological studies, which concentrated mainly on juvenile (age 14–17) and adolescent (age 18–21) offenders.

The offender sample was therefore expected to cover a definite, yet practically and theoretically important, subgroup of offenders, i.e., offenders demonstrating serious or recidivist criminality (see Part II, Sect. 4.3.1) and not “criminality” as such. A minimum sentence of 6 months was stipulated because it could be assumed that this would exclude offenders convicted for petty offenses and also for the important practical reason that the duration of the sentence, i.e., the time during which the subject would be available, had to be sufficient to carry out in-depth investigations.

In contrast, the control group (G-subjects), was intended to represent a cross section of the corresponding age group of the general male population. A group that would be “normal” in every respect was to be selected, meaning that there would be not only hidden delinquency, but also a certain percentage of previously convicted subjects in the group (see Sects. 2.1.2 and 2.3 below and Part II, Sect. 4.7).