

TO: Students in CJ 605  
FROM: R. B. Taylor  
DATE: 10/10/06  
RE: Reflections on The General Theory of Crime

This memo outlines where the interest in the general theory of crime (GTOC) has gone in the last few years, and how the theory needs to be modified, and the important points in the book that seem to have been overlooked by the field.

The volume itself, and further defenses of it,<sup>1</sup> have been cited close to 1,000 times. One of the largest areas of interest in this work has been identifying indicators of the tendency toward criminality, more specifically, low self control.

Sociologists have generated indicators of LSC.<sup>2</sup> These are multi-item indexes that have been widely used. In addition to getting at LSC or capability for control a newer addition has been the desire to exercise control.<sup>3</sup> It looks like both of these influence reported deviance. It is no surprise that Chuck Tittle, whose important control balance theory is also widely influential, and which addresses desire for control, has called for this modification. He argues that desire for control is as important as low self control. Researchers also have considered if LSC is something more than being religious. It looks like it is.<sup>4</sup>

One of the widely mis-understood points about the GTOC is that it is not about one main effect. It is not just

LSC → criminal behavior or behaviors involving force or fraud.

Rather it is: those with low self control when confronted with opportunities for force or fraud will take advantage:

**LSC X Opportunity** → criminal behavior or behaviors involving force or fraud

The early empirical work validated this interactionist model.<sup>5</sup> The interaction term was significant, but so too was LSC for one outcome. Later work has tended to forget the opportunity side of the model, and just focus on the connection between LSC and crime or deviant behavior.

Work has been done extending the model to white collar crime and white collar criminals, as G&H argued was appropriate. Dr. Nicole Piquero's research talk a week or so back was an example of where that line of research is going.

Dr. Piquero also addressed the question of overlap between LSC and fundamental personality dimensions. The "big five" personality dimensions or the Five Factor Model include: extraversion,

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<sup>1</sup> Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M. (1993). Testing the General-Theory of Crime - Commentary. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 30(1), 47-54.

<sup>2</sup> Grasmick, H. G., Tittle, C. R., Bursik, R. J., & Arneklev, B. J. (1993). Testing the Core Empirical Implications of Gottfredson and Hirschi General-Theory of Crime. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 30(1), 5-29.

<sup>3</sup> Tittle, C. R., Ward, D. A., & Grasmick, H. G. (2004). Capacity for self-control and individuals' interest in exercising self-control. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 20(2), 143-172.

<sup>4</sup> Welch, M. R., Tittle, C. R., & Grasmick, H. G. (2006). Christian religiosity, self-control and social conformity. *Social Forces*, 84(3), 1605-1623.

<sup>5</sup> Grasmick, H. G., Tittle, C. R., Bursik, R. J., & Arneklev, B. J. (1993). Testing the Core Empirical Implications of Gottfredson and Hirschi General-Theory of Crime. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 30(1), 5-29.

neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness (or flexibility vs. conformity). LSC sounds in many ways as if it has components of both low conscientiousness and low conformity. The FFM is supported by three decades of work in personality theory. Elements of the FFM link to risky and illegal behaviors.<sup>6</sup> I know of no study that has had LSC go head to head with the FFM to explain acts of force or fraud or law breaking more generally. In other words, do we yet know whether LSC is something in addition to, or over and above the fundamental components of personality?

There have been summaries and critiques of the model, and calls for modifications. Tittle et al. (2003) think that where the model needs modifications

would be consideration of the contingencies under which self-control is likely to play a larger or smaller part. The theory seems to assume that, given opportunity, low self-control always has more or less the same effect. However, research has already shown that the effects of self-control are somewhat contingent (p. 362).

In short, it looks like what started out as an elegantly simple theory is being pushed under the incessant nudging of messy data findings toward a more cumbersome, less parsimonious, less straightforward theory.

IMHO, figuring out the opportunity side of this model is one of the most important future tasks for those working on the model. Although I have not extensively researched this part (or any part!) of this theory, the indicators used by Grasmick et al. (1993) seem problematic. Perhaps one reason this part of the model has been backgrounded has been because it is so much more difficult to come up with adequate operationalization of the opportunity construct than the LSC construct.

Some additional things the GTOC try to do that have gotten overlooked are important contributions as well. More specifically, I think the following are important:

- The discussion of the age-crime curve, and how or whether to accommodate this at all. Is this brute biological fact, or just shifting opportunity structures, or something else. If these folks are right, there is not need for a concept like desistance. Or that desistance is not that interesting a topic.
- Relatedly, they seem to dismiss as trivial gender differences in offending as due to opportunity differences. This is something that many might find wrong headed.
- The effort to bring the positivist and classical traditions together, and the criticisms they make of each school generally.

GTOC connects us to numerous core issues in crime and deviance: socialization, life course, are punishments relevant, does the deterrence model make any sense, and more. It is a watershed, it is important. It takes on a lot, maybe it gets a lot wrong. But it gets us thinking and it tries to pull together the field in an important way.

Later you will be reading more Hirschi. His view of human nature there is different than his view of human nature here. Don't worry about that. But you might want to think about how bonding theory is different from the general theory.

Later you will be reading one work on life course criminology. You will want to think carefully about how that view differs from the general theory.

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<sup>6</sup> Dahlen, E. R., & White, R. P. (2006). The Big Five factors, sensation seeking, and driving anger in the prediction of unsafe driving. *Personality and Individual Differences, 41*, 903-915.