

TO: Students in CJ 605

FROM: R. B. Taylor

DATE: 10/6/08

RE: Introductory reflections on: Gottfredson, M., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

This memo does several things: it points you to what I think are some of the most key elements in the volume, talks about some of the research directions since its appearance, reviews some common misconceptions, addresses the possible WCC connection and other current challenges for the model.

Please also pay attention to the additional sources cited in the footnotes. You may want to follow up on those.

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

This volume is not without its critics.¹

The Most Key Points in the Book

- You want to clearly understand why this theory is needed. What is “wrong” with other criminological theories? What specific problems do they hope to solve.
- Be clear on the distinction between criminal behavior and criminalistic tendencies or criminality. Be prepared to argue in favor of or against this distinction.
- You want to understand their arguments against crime-specific theories.
- Their arguments about what is happening with behavioral genetics and biological positivism are pretty complicated. Nevertheless, you want to understand the broad outlines of their argument **logically** and the conclusion to which this leads. There are current theories describing important biological substrates (causes?) of criminal behavior, although we are generally skipping them in this course.² Nevertheless, you want to be clear on how G&H criticize these perspectives.

¹ See for example: Akers R. Self-control as a general theory of crime. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 1991; **7**: 201-211;

² Rowe DC. Biometrical genetic models of self-reported delinquent behavior: A Twin study. *Behavior Genetics* 1983; **13**: 473-489;

Rowe DC. Sibling interaction and self-reported delinquent behavior: A Study of 256 twin pairs. *Criminology* 1985; **23**: 223-240;

Rowe DC, Osgood DW. Sociological theories of delinquency and heredity: A Reconsideration. *American Sociological Review* 1984; **49**: 526-540;

Moffitt TE, Caspi A, Rutter M, Silva PA. *Sex Differences in Antisocial Behaviour : Conduct Disorder, Delinquency, and Violence in the Dunedin Longitudinal Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2001;

Moffitt TE, Caspi A. Findings about partner violence from the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study. Research in Brief. National Institute of Justice. 1999;

Moffitt TE. The new look of behavioral genetics in developmental psychopathology: Gene-environment interplay in antisocial behaviors. *Psychological Bulletin* 2005; **131**: 533-554;

- *You can skip the chapter on white collar crime.* Students in the past have gotten terribly hung up on whether GTOC applies to WCC. Let's avoid that pitfall. I mention this at the end under challenges.
- You want to spend considerable time reflecting on the extent to which you believe there are general criminalistic tendencies that vary across people. *You need to have an opinion about this matter.*
- You also need to reflect on where you stand with regard to the motivation matter.
- The authors tell us "A conception of crime presupposes a conception of human nature" (p. 5). *You want to understand why this is so, how the authors handle it here, and how you would respond to a quote like this in a theory exam.*

Some additional things the GTOC tries 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 no need for a concept like desistance. Or, alternatively, desistance is not that interesting a topic. This would seem to call into question a large body of research.* Think about this when you get to life course. **IMPORTANT**
- 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. *You want to have a clear sense of what their concerns are.*

GTOC Impacts and Research Directions Since

The volume itself, and further defenses of it,³ have been cited OVER 1,200 times. This book has had and continues to have a huge impact. In the 2000s it continues to be cited around 100 times **a year**.

One of the largest areas of interest in this work has been developing empirical indicators of the tendency toward criminality, more specifically, low self control (LSC). Sociologists have generated multi-item indicators of LSC.⁴ Researchers, as is their wont, have gotten into quibbling about how many dimensions within LSC there are, and how stable is it really over time, the relative importance of behavioral vs. attitudinal components, and other issues as well.

In addition to getting at LSC or capability for control a newer addition has been the *desire to exercise control*.⁵ It looks like both of these influence reported deviance. It is no surprise that Chuck Tittle,

Moffitt TE. Adolescence-Limited and Life-Course-Persistent Antisocial-Behavior – a Developmental Taxonomy. *Psychological Review* 1993; **100**: 674-701.

³ Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M. (1993). Testing the General-Theory of Crime - Commentary. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 30(1), 47-54.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

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.⁶

Beware This Misconception

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

One early empirical work lead authored by Grasmick, a well known sociologist, validated this interactionist model.⁷ The interaction term was significant, but so too was LSC for one outcome.

Regrettably, some of 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. See, for example, a meta-analysis review by Pratt and Cullen.⁸ Look at their Table 1. They report that eight times more studies have looked at main effects of LSC than have looked at the [LSC X opportunity] interaction. Note also there, however, that the effects look stronger for the interaction than for the main effects according to some measures.

Interactions vs. Main Effects

As a general theory point, you might want to think about how is a “main effects” theory of criminal behavior different from a “person X situation” interactionist model.

In this field generally the main effects models predominate.

What different challenges do these present for researchers, both in terms of operationalization, and in terms of validation?

⁶ Welch, M. R., Tittle, C. R., & Grasmick, H. G. (2006). Christian religiosity, self-control and social conformity. *Social Forces*, 84(3), 1605-1623.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Pratt, T. C., & Cullen, F. T. (2000). The empirical status of Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime: A meta-analysis. *Criminology*, 38(3), 931-964.

The Challenge for Measuring Opportunity

As you read GTOC, think about: how do we reliably measure opportunity? Can we get past paper and pencil indicators? How does it depend on the context? There are a lot of measurement and operationalization concerns here needing attention.

A Quick Aside on WCC

Work has been done extending the model to white collar crime and white collar criminals, as G&H argued was appropriate.⁹

LSC and Fundamental Dimensions of Personality

In a presentation two years ago here at Temple, Dr. Nicky Piquero addressed the question of overlap between LSC and fundamental personality dimensions. Other researchers also have addressed this question.¹⁰ It turns out to be pretty important conceptually. The basic question becomes: does LSC add anything we don't already know about the contributions of specific elements of personality.

The “big five” fundamental personality dimensions or the Five Factor Model (FFM) include:

- extraversion,
- 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.¹¹ I know of no study that has had LSC go head to head with the FFM to explain

⁹ Langton, L., Piquero, N. L., & Hollinger, R. C. (2006). An empirical test of the relationship between employee theft and low self-control. *Deviant Behavior*, 27(5), 537-565.

¹⁰ Marcus B. Self-control in the General Theory of Crime. *Theoretical Criminology* 2004; 8: 33-55. This article is hard to follow in places, but ends up making an extremely important point:

The studies summarized by Pratt and Cullen addressed mainly the issue of criterion-related validity of the GTC. With an adequate measure of self-control, however, we may also be able to empirically bolster the sometimes speculative arguments in discussions surrounding more conceptual issues. For instance, if self-control is more than old wine in new bottles, a measure of this construct should display discriminant validity if related to measures of more traditional personality traits, and incremental validity if related to independent variables. Without such a measure, the conceptual standing of the GTC within the multitude of theoretical traditions in criminology is just as hardly tested as is its value for predicting crime.

So in conclusion, there may be little gain in understanding and evaluating the GTC unless the measurement problem has been solved. Given the deficiencies in prior research with respect to this task, it seems questionable whether there is anything we know for sure about the theory after more than 10 years of intensive research—what a waste of time! (p. 49)

And this is even before we get to thinking about how to capture variations in opportunity!

¹¹ For one example: 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.

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?¹²

Some Want to Complicate the Model Further

There have been summaries (Pratt & Cullen 2000) and critiques of the model (Marcus 2004), 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 model.

Contributions, Challenges, and What Has Been Overlooked

So what are the main contributions of the current volume? First, it has asked us to seriously reconsider when crime-specific theories are needed. Is a more general framework feasible and sufficiently predictive? By framing the issue in this way, they call into question, or at least require that we reconsider, some widely used outcomes in delinquency and criminological research like, for example: criminal careers, desistance, and specialization.

Second, it has reminded the field generally that the psychology of individual differences are relevant to criminal behavior. By separating criminality and criminal behavior the authors point out ways that early childhood and adolescent experiences, and perhaps genetic differences as well, can make criminal behavior more likely, if we are willing to assume that personality is shaped by those experiential and biological factors. The model provides ways to think about processes.

Third, it has reminded us that crimes take place in settings where the opportunities exist, however we might define them. Their interaction model is at heart a (P X E) model, as was introduced in an earlier memo.

At the same time, the opportunity side presents an enormous challenge. 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 opportunity indicators used by Grasmick et al. (1993) seem problematic. Perhaps one reason this opportunity 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. And, further, because this concept is in dire need of further specification.

For a more general review of over 30 years of work, see the references in Marcus (2004).

¹² Marcus (2004).