Introduction to:


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.

You already have read Laub and Sampson (2003) on life course criminology. You will want to think carefully about how that view differs from the general theory. You also will want to think carefully about how this view differs from situational action theory.

This volume is not without its critics (R. Akers, 1991). More on that later.

The Most Key Points in the Book

1. 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?

2. Be clear on the distinction between criminal behavior and criminalistic tendencies or criminality. Be prepared to argue in favor of or against this distinction.

3. You want to understand their arguments against crime-specific theories.

4. 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.*

5. You also need to reflect on where you stand with regard to the motivation matter.

6. 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:

7. 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. You especially want to be clear about how they differ with life course criminology and what is generally known as the career criminal perspective. For more details on this read Gottfredson & Hirschi’s latest (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2016). IMPORTANT

8. 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.

9. 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.

What you can skip
Their arguments about what is happening with behavioral genetics and biological positivism are pretty complicated. Although we are skipping this chapter for now, in future – before the advanced exam -- you want to be clear on how G&H criticize these perspectives.

For more on current theories describing important biological/biosocial substrates (causes?) of criminal behavior read up on what current researchers, especially Rowe and Beaver are doing (Rowe, 1983, 1985; Rowe & Osgood, 1984; Schwartz & Beaver, 2015).

For a nice summary of this area, see Akers & Sellers (2012: 58-60).

The only think that we are going to do in this course on biosocial is to look at a detailed critique of the neuro approaches that rely on functional MRIs.

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.

GTOC Impacts and Research Directions Since
The volume itself regularly gets cited about 20 times a year (see below). If we also add in citations to defenses of this work, by Gottfredson and others, the impact is much larger (T. Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1993; Travis Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2000)

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 (Arneklev, Grasmick, & Bursik, 1999; Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993; C. R. Tittle, Ward, & Grasmick, 2003, 2004; Welch, Tittle, & Grasmick, 2006). 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 (C. R. Tittle et al., 2004). It looks like both of these influence reported deviance. It is no surprise that Chuck Tittle (Charles R. Tittle, 2004), 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 (Welch et al., 2006).

**Our own Jeff Ward** has been doing a lot of work on the structure of LSC inventories.

**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 $$\Rightarrow$$ 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 $$\Rightarrow$$ criminal behavior or behaviors involving force or fraud**
One early empirical work lead authored by Grasmick, a well known sociologist, validated this interactionist model (Grasmick et al., 1993). 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 (2000). 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.

The one notable exception we have reviewed so far is Wikstrom (2012)

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

**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 (Langton, Piquero, & Hollinger, 2006).

**LSC and Fundamental Dimensions of Personality**

In a presentation here at Temple about ten years ago, Dr. Nicky Piquero addressed the question of overlap between LSC and fundamental personality dimensions. Other researchers also have addressed this question (Marcus, 2004). It turns out to be pretty important conceptually. The basic question

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1 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
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. 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 (Marcus, 2004). 

I am not up to speed in this area so please consult Dr. Ward for more background.

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.

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!

2 For one example: (Dahlen & White, 2006). For a more general review of over 30 years of work, see the references in Marcus (2004)
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.

References


