
PREFACE

More than forty years ago, in the preface to his “discussion and critique” of Robert K. Merton’s anomie theory of deviance, Marshall Clinard wrote, “Few sociological formulations have provoked greater interest and discussion than anomie” (1964, p. v). Today, following the eclipse and partial resurrection of anomie theory, the same “greater interest and discussion” description applies to Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi’s *General Theory of Crime*, published in 1990. No book in the field of criminology is quoted, commented on, and critiqued as much as *General Theory*, and none has been both widely praised and damned as much. Although Merton’s formulation argued that “deviant behavior such as crime, delinquency, mental disorder, alcoholism, and suicide arises, in large part, from inadequacies in the social structure” (Clinard, 1964, p. v), Gottfredson and Hirschi *reconstituted* the relevant dependent and independent variables, arguing that deviant behaviors such as crime—including white-collar and property crime, delinquency, violence, illicit drug use, smoking and alcohol abuse, sexual irresponsibility, reckless driving, poor school performance, and laziness—arise in large part from inadequacies in parenting.

This is an astonishing claim, and for several reasons. For one thing, in our era of specialization it makes a bold, broad, and sweeping claim, seemingly explaining a major swath of human misbehavior. No, a different explanation for a different crime, much of the field argues; each theory should explain a segment of the picture, says common wisdom. Gottfredson and Hirschi reject such qualifications, storming the fortress of criminological theory with a consistent, coherent, and unified theory. Moreover, these investigators offer an empirical, material, eminently generalizable explanation—surely the measure of a *positivist* theory—in the context of their *critique* of positivism. And in an age of ever more sophisticated statistical elaborations, Gottfredson and Hirschi’s argument is eminently accessible to the nonquantitative reader.

What led me, a constructionist and symbolic interactionist of deviance and drug use, to become sufficiently interested in Gottfredson and Hirschi’s general—and *positivist*—theory of crime as to be moved to edit a collection of original essays on the topic? It would seem that

the topic and the approach of these theorists are worlds removed from, even antagonistic to, my own. This assessment is inaccurate. For me two major features made a detailed exploration of *A General Theory of Crime* a compelling and rewarding experience.

The first feature of Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime that intrigued me was the authors' brilliant solution to a problem that had puzzled me for decades. Some thirty-odd years ago, Hirschi (1973) took me, among others, to task for my constructionist approach to deviance, crime, and delinquency. What interested me back then was the paradox of and seeming contradiction between how violating norms and laws—socially constructed phenomena—could be caused by essentialistic, materially real forces, such as social structure, neighborhood disorganization, individual background factors, childhood experiences, and genetic predisposition, that are *independent* of this construction process. If positivist criminology—and, by extension, explanations of deviance—bases its definition of crime on the law or the norms, both socially constructed, how can any theory it devises posit the causal influence of stable, universal factors that are constant in a range of social settings? This is clearly a contradiction. How can one explain a variable with a constant? How can one explain the violation of socially constructed phenomena with factors that are independent of these phenomena, defined not by the state but by the scientist? Such an exercise seemed to me (as it does to Gottfredson and Hirschi) to violate one of the most fundamental rules of causality. At the time the mission of positivism seemed to be in jeopardy; all explanatory schemes, those in the social sciences at least, seemed in peril. In 1975 I wrote a paper on the subject and delivered it, at the invitation of David Peterson, as a lecture at Georgia State University, but I lacked the confidence to shape it into publishable form; its manuscript has been lost through the cracks in my many moves since that time.

It wasn't until I read Gottfredson and Hirschi's *General Theory of Crime* fifteen years later that I came upon a resolution of this dilemma. Gottfredson and Hirschi brilliantly recognize this dilemma as a fatal flaw of positivism—at least, the brand of positivism they refer to as “substantive” positivism. Positivist criminology's flaw, they say, lies in its *legalism*, that is, in passively accepting the state's definition of what a crime is. Clearly legalism is a form of constructionism: It deems that the *law* defines a crime, not the scientist. Laws vary from one jurisdiction to another. Basing one's definition of what a crime is on what the state says it is fogs up the issue of what the basic, essential nature of crime is. In so doing, the criminologist passively complies with the action of a social body that is *separate from and independent of* the dynamics that produce a certain type of human behavior. Why should there be any connection between the actions of a legislature and what causes the behavior we wish to explain? The legalistic definition of crime is artificial because it has nothing to do with the actions it attempts to explain; what it *does* address is what legislators do. Hence any explanatory theory based on it must of necessity ring hollow.

Rather than define crime as a social construct, Gottfredson and Hirschi adopt a materialist or *essentialist* definition. Crime exists—as *crime*—regardless of what a legislature says it is, they argue. Their definition makes the claim that crime is the same everywhere, in all societies at all times, a universal—and, in a sense, an absolute in organized human life: It is force or fraud in pursuit of self-interest. The criminologist must adopt a definition that is true to, reflects, and is consistent with the phenomenon itself. For me, Gottfredson and Hirschi's

recognition of this contradiction in substantive positivism was worth the price of admission. In any case, it earned my respect and piqued my interest.

The second feature that intrigued me about Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime was their stress on situational factors, or "opportunity." They argue that the substantive positivist's failure to address the process that translates a *general tendency* into a *specific act* is a critical flaw of positivist criminology. When I was in graduate school, Albert K. Cohen published an article in the *American Sociological Review* titled "The Sociology of the Deviant Act" (1965). In it Cohen raised a number of points that remain with me when I think about the relationship between deviant behavior and social interaction. Addressing Merton's anomie theory, Cohen asks, given anomie, "what will a person do about it?" A major portion of industrial society experiences the generic force Merton refers to as "strain." But how does strain translate into the deviant behaviors that are sketched out in Merton's "Social Structure and Anomie" (1938)? What is the connection between a factor and an act? Cohen locates this intermediary step in the "micro-sociology of the deviant act."

Gottfredson and Hirschi raise much the same point as Cohen did, but they supply a radically different answer. They distinguish "criminality," that is, the tendency or *predisposition* to engage in criminal behavior, from "crime," that is, the enactment of the criminal *event* in a particular situation at a particular time. For them, opportunity, not social interaction, bridges this gap. Gottfredson and Hirschi recognize that predispositions do not automatically translate into behavior. A particular tendency expresses itself only if the appropriate conditions—that is, opportunities—present themselves. This recognition and the discussion that followed it attracted me to *A General Theory of Crime*. I wish the authors had accorded the role of opportunity as much detail and space as they gave self-control, the other half of their crime equation, but they open the door to such a discussion, should other researchers wish to accept their invitation. I found, interestingly, their discussion of opportunity to be consonant with an aspect of Albert Cohen's interactionism, even though the substance of the two theories is worlds apart.

I came to this project, therefore, with the utmost respect for Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi as criminologists and sociologists and for their self-control explanation of deviance and crime, as spelled out in *A General Theory of Crime*. As controversial as the general theory is, it has not received a book-length assessment by a range of scholars who weigh in, variously, on its merits. This book attempts to undertake precisely that mission.

THE BOOK

Out of Control offers the first detailed, book-length assessment by a range of scholars of the pros and cons of Gottfredson and Hirschi's *General Theory of Crime* for the field of criminology and deviance studies.

Part I is devoted to the considerations raised by the general theory of crime. In Chapter 1, the introduction, I summarize the general theory of crime and the central issues it raises. In Chapter 2 Alex Piquero discusses the fundamental issue of how Gottfredson and Hirschi measure the relevant variables, especially self-control. In Chapter 3 David Greenberg focuses on the matter of whether and to what extent the relationship between self-control and

crime is an artifact of age, sex, and race and whether this basic correlation is sustained after these key variables are held constant or controlled. In Chapter 4 Sally Simpson and Gilbert Geis expand on the concept of opportunity in Gottfredson and Hirschi's self-control theory. Francis Cullen, James Unnever, John Paul Wright, and Kevin Beaver discuss in Chapter 5 the link that Gottfredson and Hirschi draw between poor, inadequate child rearing and low self-control—the linchpin of their general theory.

Part II covers how various criminological theories fare under the onslaught of Gottfredson and Hirschi's critiques. In Chapter 6 Ronald Akers treats the question of whether social learning theory might actually subsume self-control theory, that is, whether the general theory might be a *subset* of Akers's learning theory of deviance. In Chapter 7 Richard Rosenfeld and Steven Messner share their views on the relationship between the general theory of crime and the anomie approach. In Chapter 8 Ross Matsueda argues that Gottfredson and Hirschi have overly constricted the general theory of crime; their framework must be expanded to be compatible with social disorganization theory. And last for this part, in Chapter 9 LeeAnn Iovanni and Susan Miller challenge the general theory with omissions and distortions with respect to the role of gender in crime causation and victimization.

Part III is devoted to a discussion of the impact of the general theory on types of crime. Chapter 10, by David Friedrichs and Martin Schwartz, focuses on white-collar crime; in Chapter 11, by Richard Felson and Wayne Osgood, violent crime makes its appearance; Marc Swatt and Robert Meier's Chapter 12 covers property crime; and my contribution, Chapter 13, treats drug use.

Part IV offers the reader some concluding thoughts: Chapter 14, by Gilbert Geis, gives us a "hypercritical assessment"; and in Chapter 15, responding to the critics of *A General Theory of Crime*, Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson have the last word on the subject of the validity of self-control theory.

I take this opportunity to thank the contributors to this volume for their outstanding essays on the general theory of crime, an approach that has become perhaps the most compelling perspective in the field of criminological theory. I feel especially grateful to Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson for their willingness to cooperate with this project, one that exposes their precious intellectual offspring to the rough, rude, inconsistent hands of unbelievers, skeptics, and supporters alike. But this book, as others and I explain, provides testimony to both their brilliance and the importance of their theory's central place in criminology—more than fair exchange for the critical assessment collected here.

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