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Is a General Theory of Socially Disapproved Violence Possible (or Necessary)?

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A model of theoretical science is set forth to guide the formulation of general theories around abstract concepts and processes. Such theories permit explanatory application to many phenomena that are not ostensibly alike, and in so doing encompass socially disapproved violence, making special theories of violence unnecessary. Though none is completely adequate for the explanatory job, at least seven examples of general theories that help account for deviance make up the contemporary theoretical repertoire. From them, we can identify abstractions built around features of offenses, aspects of individuals, the nature of social relationships, and different social processes. Although further development of general theories may be hampered by potential indeterminacy of the subject matter and by the possibility of human agency, maneuvers to deal with such obstacles are available.

Several distinct philosophies guide the study of socially disapproved behavior (deviance), and the nature and import of theories within each of those "philosophies of the enterprise" differ. However, the most common approach to the study of deviance is that called "science" or sometimes, "theoretical science" (Tittle 1995). According to the model of theoretical science, scholarship has as its ultimate goal the development of theories to explain phenomena within some domain of interest. Within a science framework, theory answers the questions of "why" and "how" in a disciplined but abstract manner. Theories tie together various particular "explanations" of more specific phenomena in such a way that the explanations can be derived from more abstract principles, while at the same time those general principles imply potential new predictions and explanations of as yet unexlained phenomena.

Scientific explanations are peculiar to concrete situations, events, or patterns while scientific theories are by their very nature "general" or abstract, intended to provide interconnected explanatory principles that transcend the limitations of time and space. Though theories are general and abstract, they also differ in the degree to which they can be so characterized, and the terminology is not always consistent.

Sometimes scholars use the word "theory" to refer to any discursive effort to explicate any phenomenon, in any way, whether general or specific. However, theoretical science conceives of theory in an encompassing explanatory manner, so here we will use the term in that broader sense to refer to a set of interrelated ideas or statements that provide abstract causal accounts of the phenomena within some domain of inquiry. Theories in this sense often set forth a basic or central causal principle that is theorized to apply with greater or less force under various contingencies, with specification of the mechanisms by which such a principle operates.

1. Barriers to a Science of Deviance or Socially Disapproved Violence

Although many embrace the philosophy of theoretical science and the bulk of deviance work in one way or another is devoted to the development and/or testing of theory, there are inherent difficulties in trying to produce a general theory of disapproved behavior (see Tittle 1985). Two such potential obstacles are of particular import in trying to generate general theories about individual actions that encompass acts of violence. One concerns the assumption, necessary to theoretical science, that behaviors to be explained share some common causes. That assumption is especially

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relevant to socially disapproved behavior that happens to be criminal. Legal standards of behavior are inherently arbitrary, being products of a political process. As a result, there is no reason to expect the various types of behavior dealt with in any given legal code, much less among legal contexts, to show obvious, manifest, or essential similarity.

An array of criminal behaviors may include everything from failure to pay taxes to taking of human life without state authorization, and may include sexual violations and vice; such an array may also encompass acts prohibited through the influence of special interests as well as acts prohibited for the common good. Contrasts are especially sharp between criminal acts involving property or vice and those pertaining to violence. It is hard for most people to imagine that a theory explaining petty theft or prostitution might also account for homicide or assault, or that a theory providing such explanations could encompass trivial as well as extremely serious acts. And, this problem does not disappear if a theorist sets out to develop a theory of criminal violence. Indeed, given the plethora of behaviors prohibited in law, it appears that the only similarity in criminal behaviors is the fact of their illegality. Therefore, if general theories play on commonalities, the possibility of developing such criminological theories might seem to be exceptionally challenging.

Even if legal standards are by-passed with generic definitions of "normatively unacceptable behavior," as I am doing here (Tittle 1995; Tittle and Paternoster 2000), or "force and fraud undertaken for self-gratification" (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), the absence of easily observed kinship poses challenges. For example, although there is no consensus about the formal definition, most people would probably think of socially disapproved violence as involving willful behaviors that result in physical harm to victims, even though harm itself might not be intended. But even so, regardless of legality, socially disapproved violence encompasses a range of behaviors, depending on the society in question, extending all the way from domestic abuse to stranger homicide, including along the way suicide and unauthorized killings by agents of a state, and expressing various degrees of willfulness as well as harm. Is it reasonable to think that a single theory can explain the actions of

executives of polluting industries whose initiatives result in sickness to residents of a neighborhood as well as the acts of street gangs in protecting their turf? More pointedly, is it feasible to try to explain acts of socially disapproved violence of any kind using theoretical principles that also apply to non-violent behaviors?

The second especially relevant hurdle to general theories of misconduct is the possibility that some human behaviors, including acts of socially disapproved violence, may not be sufficiently deterministic to permit the identification of "causes" that can be theorized and taken into account empirically (Katsenelinbiogen 1997). As numerous scholars have noted, deviant behaviors often seem to have an emergent quality to them (Felson and Steadman 1983; Luckenbill 1977). That is, they are not the result of straightforward causal forces. Instead, the prohibited actions grow out of complicated situational processes that unfold in unique ways as individuals act, interpret the actions of others, react, and so on, until the interaction eventuates in some outcome—sometimes deviant and sometimes not. Contrary to an extreme deterministic notion that individuals respond to causal forces in the same way that a leaf is subject to the forces of wind, humans are thought to exercise a certain amount of "agency" in deciding what to do and when (see Bandura 1989, 2001; Kahneman and Tversky 2000). So, even when all known predictors of the probability of deviance (Farrington 2000; Loeber, Slot, and Stouthamer-Loeber 2006) are present, individuals are believed to sometimes choose conformity just as they sometimes decide to violate social prohibitions even when all of the known risk factors seem to be against such actions. To the extent that scientific theories assume deterministic outcomes, then, general theories may always be inefficient and perhaps impossible.

2. Theoretical Maneuvers: The Tool of Abstraction
Despite the difficulties involved in developing general theories about individuals' deviant behavior, such theories are nevertheless feasible and desirable. In the remainder of this paper, maneuvers to overcome the problems of apparent non-comparability and indeterminacy are discussed. In addition, it is argued that general theories explaining misbehavior already exist, although none yet passes the test of adequacy, and that they apply as well to socially disap-

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proved violence as to any other misconduct, making special theories of violence unnecessary.

While various deviant acts or episodes may appear on the surface to be distinct, it is the job of theorists to look past the obvious in order to find abstract connections among the elements at play in misconduct and from those abstractions to build theories providing answers to questions of "how" and "why." In fact, the main theme and tool of theory is abstraction. As long as scholars dwell on the manifest aspects of behaviors, they are limited to descriptions, empathetic interpretations, or perhaps *ad hoc* explanations. The first step in building theory is for the theorist to free him/herself from a focus on observable "essentials" of various kinds of actions. Thus, if we think of rape, vandalism, and bank robbery in terms of their evident characteristics, we will likely conclude that they are very different behaviors, each requiring its own explanation. For example, from an evident or "everyday" point of view, one act may be regarded, either by the actor or by others, as a physical act of aggression (or, some might think, passion), another a prank for fun, and the third as an attempt by the perpetrator to gain riches. Alternatively, from a non-theoretical stance, the three acts might be seen to differ in the seriousness of their consequences, with rape being most heinous, bank robbery a little less so, and vandalism least. Yet, those distinctions do not lend themselves to general theorizing. Abstraction, however, permits these three acts to be seen as very much alike in ways amenable to theoretical accounting. The first job for a theorist, then, is to imagine transcendent elements.

"Abstraction" is the name I give to the theory-building tool with which the theorist either perceives or imputes theoretically relevant transcendent qualities. Such abstraction is the key to building general theory because it permits the theorist to rise above the obvious. Abstraction can be employed with various degrees and it can be applied to many elements of deviant action—the acts, the persons, the contexts, or the processes at work. Moreover, abstraction not only permits unification of disparate phenomena, but it also allows for differences within abstract elements that become the tools

for explanation. In other words, by abstracting, a theorist first ignores concrete differences among acts, and then identifies, on a higher plane, new differences among acts or episodes that can then serve as causal variations. Abstracting, however, is not simply "observing" things others may not see, though it may involve some of that. Rather, abstraction, in one sense, represents an "imposition" of a new reality on the phenomena to be explained.

It is this aspect of general theory-building that rankles some scholars who cannot imagine that variables that might be known only to the theorist or researcher, or if known by actors, might actually appear irrelevant, can possibly account for human actions. On this point there is a fundamental difference of orientation among students of deviance. Some try to work with a concrete reality that seems apparent to actors and observers. To them, understanding grows from grasping the social world as it is experienced by the participants in actions of misconduct (Allen 2007), which almost always implies that explanation cannot extend beyond a specific context or, if it does, only to one similar in manifest ways. Others, whom I call general theorists, embrace the idea that even if participants have no awareness of their operation, abstract processes may be at work and may account for outcomes. For general theorists, the key is not whether something makes sense to actors but whether the theoretical structure provides answers to why/how questions posed by a critical, scientifically trained audience that employs the ultimate criterion of predictive capability, certified by derivation and testing of empirical relationships.

2.1. Abstraction Concerning Offenses
One form of abstraction that is often employed by theorists has to do with features of various offending actions. Though seemingly distinct, almost unique, offenses may nevertheless be alike in serving theoretically relevant, abstract purposes for the perpetrator. As one example, assault, rape, vandalism, and robbery have all been conceived as alternative control-enhancing mechanisms by which an offender alters his/her position in response to a coercive environment and a provocative, humiliation-generating situation

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(see Tittle 1995, 2004, concerning Control Balance Theory).[1] Such a distinction permits a theorist to erect an elaborate theoretical structure providing answers to questions about the conditions under which one or another deviant outcome is likely.

Note that this abstraction concerning the "control enhancing function" of misbehavior may be something about which the offender him/herself has no conscious awareness, intent, or knowledge. Moreover, it is not obvious to observers, whether they be scientists or lay persons, and may become cognitively real only after a theorist has pointed out the distinction. In other words, this characteristic or quality that unites offenses illustrates the point made earlier that abstractions may be entirely "invented" or "imposed." Yet, such "invented" characteristics are crucial for explanations within larger theoretical frameworks. Whether the explanations provided by that larger framework are adequate by the various relevant scientific criteria remains to be seen, but it is clear that abstraction of offenses provides explanatory leverage that otherwise would not be possible.

It is important to remember that abstraction not only unifies its objects but it also introduces crucial differences that then become explanatory tools. For instance, if offenses are tied together by their capacity to increase an individual's control, those same offenses may differ theoretically (1) in the degree to which they are likely to increase a person's overall control in the face of potential counter-control, (2) in the opportunities for their employment by a given person in a specific situation, and (3) in the potential counter-control they are likely to invoke. Moreover, as with other abstractions, such differences may have powerful implications despite an actor's being unaware of them and despite the fact that prior to the theory, others may not have noticed or imagined such differences or their importance. Thus, theory plays out around abstract similarities and differenc-

es, and one focus of such abstractions can be the potential offenses.

However, some abstract conceptualizations around offenses are more abstract than others and derived theories can be arrayed with respect to a hierarchy of generality. Taking note of that hierarchy is useful because it suggests the possibility of theoretical integration, an important step in increasing the adequacy of general theories (Messner, Krohn, and Liska 1989; Tittle 1995, 2004). Yet, considering levels of generality and degrees of abstractness shows that, though abstraction is an essential process in theory building, it is not sufficient. To underline that point, note that the above example of abstracting offenses in terms of their control-altering possibilities in order to create a theory of control balancing might be regarded as a specific instance of the general formulation enunciated in General Strain Theory (GST) (Agnew 1992, 2001, 2006), and, as such, might be subsumed within that larger account. Indeed, integrating limited theories into more general formulations is an important ongoing process in theoretical science in pursuit of the most general possible theory relevant to a given set of phenomena. However, to accomplish that purpose it is not enough to enunciate an apparently more abstract principle; it is also necessary to find a way to accommodate the details of the theories to be integrated.

Consider General Strain Theory (GST) as a potential absorber of Control Balance Theory (CBT). GST conceives of assault, rape, vandalism, bank robbery, and various kinds of socially disapproved violence with respect to how likely their commission by an individual is to (1) reduce "strain" (a form of internal inconsistency) and/or (2) to help relieve negative emotions associated with such strains. Offending is theorized to be caused by individual efforts to use such offending as a means to overcome strain or the emotions it generates. Obviously, perceptions of having inadequate control, a key variable of CBT, can be conceived as one espe-

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[1] Though far more complicated and rich than a brief account can portray, Control Balance Theory (CBT) argues that a person's control ratio—the amount of control an individual can exercise relative to that which is arrayed against him or her—influences the chances of being provoked, usually by some form of debasement, into considering the possibility of deviant behavior. Deviant behavior is conceived as a maneuver to extend one's control—to correct a control imbalance and to relieve feelings of humiliation. So, whenever a person is provoked into an acute realization of a control imbalance and comes to see deviance as a possible solution, he/she then decides what deviance it might be possible to commit without invoking counter-control greater than the potential gain from deviant behavior. The deviance likely to be selected is theorized as being predictable from the original control ratio.

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cially important form of strain, while the process of control balancing can be conceived as a technique to try to relieve a particular kind of strain or the emotions of humiliation associated with it. Thus, the argument of CBT can be subsumed within the GST process of alleviating negative emotions through various forms of coping. Yet, CBT contains crucial details that would be lost if one only observes such a possibility and lets it go at that.

For example, though GST features strain it does not prioritize types of strain, as CBT does in its identification of a "master strain" of control imbalance. GST does not explain why some situations are straining, as CBT attempts to do for what it treats as the most important form of strain individuals can experience. Further, although GST suggests that under some conditions strain gives rise to negative emotions, CBT explains why control imbalances produce a particular negative emotion and describes the conditions under which that occurs. GST identifies numerous conditions that may affect the direction coping might take, but it does not explain exactly what conditions influence the likely coping responses to particular strains or why they produce that effect, as CBT does with respect to control balancing. Thus, theoretical integration must go well beyond formulating a general, abstract process, even when such a process might be more general. In fact, as useful as abstraction is, it can be over-emphasized to the neglect of other necessary elements for successful building of general theory.

One of those additional, crucial requirements for integration is an appropriate infrastructure with a central causal process within which more detailed applications can be accommodated, which GST does not yet seem to have. Moreover, trying to modify GST so that it can accommodate the principles of CBT, as well as other theories such as Coercion/Social Support (CSS) (Colvin, Cullen, and Ven 2002),[2] though laudable and perhaps an important step, is not the ultimate goal. After all, while the causal arguments of CBT can be conceived as an instance of the causal process enunciated by GST, it is also possible to conceive of CBT as the more general account and allow it to absorb GST. In fact, given the deficiencies in GST noted above, it might be more efficient to integrate GST into CBT rather than the other way around. However, the goal is not to make either GST or CBT healthier by importing missing elements. Instead, theoretical science calls for a more encompassing general theory than either GST or CBT would become by consuming the other. The general theory we must strive for will express the processes set forth by control balancing, general strain, and other theories as well. But just as GST falters in its current inability to accommodate specific details of theories that might otherwise be candidates for assimilation, an even more general theory might well fail to a greater extent for the same reason. The criteria for successful theoretical integration, then, go beyond mere generality or abstraction, though both are essential.

2.2. Abstraction Concerning Individuals

A second form of theoretical abstraction concerns characteristics of the individuals who might violate norms. The best known usage of such abstraction is Self-Control Theory (SCT) (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990).[3] SCT not only abstracts offenses through their potential for gratifying human needs, but enunciates a causal principle based on another kind of abstraction—the person's ability, or capacity, to anticipate long-range negative consequences and to restrain him/herself for maximum personal benefit (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). According to the theory, regardless of anything else, a person with low self-control who sees a chance to commit some gratifying act (including

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2 Coercion/Social Support Theory (CSS) contends that the balance of coercive influences relative to social support influences in a person's life determines various outcomes. For example, a person who enjoys consistent social support, because of the sense of trust it generates, is expected to develop low levels of anger, high self-control, and strong, morally based social bonds that in turn cause pro-social behavior and good mental health. Erratic social support produces a tendency toward exploratory deviance because the lack of dependability in support generates moderate anger, low self-control, and social bonds based on calculation. Additional predictions are made about the effects of erratic and consistent coercion, with arguments and causal sequences responsible for each outcome specified by the theory.

3 Self-Control Theory (SCT) argues that specific elements of child rearing affect the degree of self-control a person acquires. The level of self-control learned in childhood is said to remain relatively constant throughout the life cycle and to explain and predict the chances of misbehavior. Those with low self-control are theorized to be highly likely to offend because offending is potentially gratifying and those without strong self-control are unable to anticipate and act on future negative consequences that almost always accompany misbehavior.

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socially disapproved ones) without much risk of immediate costs is likely to commit that act. Such a person simply cannot help it.

The general characteristic of self-control, which is presumed to operate in all circumstances, for all individuals, and with respect to all forms of force or fraud undertaken for self-gratification, allows explanation and prediction far more effectively than other notions about individuals. But, even granting such generalizing ability, one might wonder why self-control is a more abstract notion than, say, honesty, selfishness, or greediness, all of which are common-sense ideas about why individuals misbehave, presumably rooted in everyday observations. Simply stated, the abstract notion of self-control is superior because it ties together six separate individual traits, including impulsivity and a preference for risk taking, while the presumed alternative features of individuals that might bear on deviance stand alone with little ability to unify disparate things to be explained. For instance, selfishness alone does not foreshadow one's inability to restrain deviant impulses in those instances where deviant acts might result in punishment. Focusing on these as separate traits, or on others already mentioned, encourages particularity while focusing on the more abstract concept encourages generality. Thus, honesty may help account for property offenses, but it will not help in explaining violence. And, greed may partially account for the bank robbery but hardly vandalism. Low self-control however, presumably accounts for all of them plus other delicts.

This is not to say that self-control is the only useful theoretical abstraction about individuals, that the theoretical apparatus within which self-control is embedded in SCT is sufficient, or even that Gottfredson and Hirschi's concept of self-control is superior to other related concepts or to the self-control ideas of other theorists (examples: Muraven and Baumeister 2000; Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister 1998). After all, numerous personality characteristics, some inclusive of various traits, have been identified by various scholars, though most have proven elusive and few have the sweeping import of self-control (see Caspi et al. 1994; Moffitt et al. 1995). Indeed, the possibilities for useful theoretical abstraction concerning individual characteristics are vast, particularly if abstraction of individuals is combined with other forms of abstraction. Moreover, just as control

balance ideas might be subsumable under general strain theory, the causal processes of self-control may be encompassed within more general theories, such as that of Social Learning (Akers 1985, 1998, 2000; Bandura 1977; Burgess and Akers 1966) or brought into any number of theories in the form of contingencies for the full operation of various causal mechanisms set forth in those formulations (Agnew et al. 2002; Colvin, Cullen, and Ven 2002; Tittle 2004).

2.3. Abstraction Concerning Social Relationships

A third kind of abstraction focuses on the nature of the social networks within which individuals are embedded. The well known theory (theories) of social bonding, or social integration (Briar and Piliavin 1965; Hirschi 1969; Nye 1958; Reckless 1967; Reiss 1951; Toby 1957; see also J. Braithwaite 1989; Felson 1986; Sampson and Laub 1993; Warr 2002) employs abstraction of offenses (see above), concerning the normative status of different behaviors within a social network. But, it pairs that abstraction with another one around which causal forces are marshaled, that of the individual's relationships with the social group within which a norm is relevant (Horowitz 1990). Some acts are prohibited and some encouraged in specific social groups; however, the extent to which an individual fulfills either of those normative mandates is theorized to depend largely on the nature and strength of his or her ties to the network/group. Those who are bonded, or integrated (an abstract notion), are restrained from normative violation and constrained toward normative conformity, regardless of the specific norms. So, the explanatory platform for this theory rests on abstractions of social relationships and abstractions of offenses, not the individual's personal characteristics or various manifest characteristics of situations or people.

Here too, it is useful to remember that even though the abstraction of social relationships is immensely useful, it requires an explanatory apparatus to be theoretically potent. Moreover, the theory of social integration may play an essential part in theoretical integration—when it is brought under some other explanatory umbrella, brings other accounts under its tent, or is integrated with other theories using various kinds of abstractions within an entirely separate formulation.

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2.4. Abstraction Concerning Social Processes

A fourth form of useful theoretical abstraction is oriented around social processes. For instance, theorizing that all offenses are products of situational stimuli activating learned cues for action is a powerful abstraction (Social Learning Theory [SLT]: see Akers 1985, 1998; 2000; Bandura 1977; Sutherland 1939; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985). This is particularly so when it is also imagined that cues for action become stored in the human psyche as a result of a prior pattern of relative reward or punishment associated with various lines of action and that humans are fundamentally oriented toward maximizing reward and minimizing costs (Hechter and Kanazawa 1997; McCarthy 2002). With such theoretical armament, a scholar is equipped to explain and predict all offending, in all circumstances, by all people without recourse to any inherent characteristics of the individuals, the offenses, or the situation. This, of course, is in contrast to the common sense idea that offenders are different in essential ways, that acts have inherent appeal or repulsion for individuals who might commit them, and that situations largely determine outcomes by the degree to which they promise certain and severe penalties for norm violation.

With such a broad abstraction of process, not only can almost any individual behavior be explained, but almost all other theories can be subsumed (Akers 1990). However, it is good to remember, again, that abstraction alone does not suffice and that as useful as very general abstraction may be, it can actually be too much. In the case of social learning, the key to understanding, explaining, and predicting misbehavior is knowledge of prior reinforcement patterns. The theory, however, does not itself explain differential exposure to varied reinforcement schedules nor does it make any other key distinctions among people, offenses, or relationships. For instance, as long as reinforcement is similar, SLT makes no distinction among things learned. Thus, in their capacity to compel behavior, moral notions are equal to occupational goals or any other things with equivalent reinforcement histories. Yet, other theories (see in particular Etzioni 1988; Scott 1971; Wikström 2006; Wikström and Treiber 2007) and much research (see Antonaccio and Tittle 2008 for citations) suggests that moral issues may have more force than non-moral issues even when both are products of similar

learning histories. To the extent, then, that the content of learning matters, the very process of abstraction may defeat ultimate goals of theory by permitting one to ignore certain relevant details.

2.5. Summary

A variety of methods of abstraction have been employed in theoretical work to transcend *surface* differences among the variety of offending acts. Though offenses differ in obvious ways, those differences become irrelevant on the abstract level. It is latent distinctions among acts that take on meaning through the abstracting process and that come to have explanatory import. By imagining and identifying those non-obvious, hidden commonalities as well as "new" abstract differences, theorizing to provide explanations embedded in general principles becomes possible. Of course, as emphasized previously, such abstraction is only the beginning. If theories are to be both possible and realized those abstractions have to be encompassed within a causal framework structured to accommodate a variety of generative and restraining forces as well as various contingencies.

In this connection it is important to note that there is no necessary distinction between non-violent and violent deviant acts. If the key to explanation lies in abstract qualities, then the fact that one act causes physical harm to a victim while another only deprives the victim of property or dignity is of no import whatsoever as long as the different kinds of acts share the abstract quality around which the theory is built. Therefore, from the perspective of theoretical science, a general theory of socially disapproved violence is really no different than a general theory of offending (or ultimately even of human behavior *per se*). Since theories of offending can be easily envisioned and in fact already exist, and socially disapproved violence can be conceived within abstract categories and principles, there is no need for special theories of normatively unacceptable violence. The cardinal assumption of a theoretical science of misconduct, which I think has been fulfilled, is that all forms of such offending can be joined through abstraction, with outcomes being explained and predicted from general causal processes concerning those abstractions.

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Nevertheless, theoretically important abstract qualities do vary and sometimes those variations are linked to the "fundamental" characteristics of particular deviant acts. For example, most general theories of socially disapproved behavior identify "opportunity" to commit specific acts as an important feature of their explanatory schemes. While various theories seem to imply different things by the concept (see Tittle and Botchkovar 2005: 714–15), opportunity may nevertheless sometimes differentiate violent from non-violent acts of deviance. For instance, in Self-Control Theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 2003) opportunity appears to imply a situation where a given gratifying act of force or fraud can be committed with a minimal risk of immediate cost (Grasmick et al. 1993). By that definition, fraudulent acts (property crime) ordinarily may be more opportune than forceful acts. Because most people regard disapproved violent acts as more serious (harmful or consequential) than disapproved non-violent acts, they stand in greater readiness to do something about them. Therefore, it is more likely that a person, even one with low self-control, will confront more situations promising stronger risks of immediate consequences for prohibited violent actions than for unacceptable actions of a fraudulent nature. Furthermore, because the long-range consequences of violence are more potent than for fraud, it is harder for a person with weak self-control to remain oblivious to them. Thus, Self-Control Theory may be more effective in explaining violations of norms about property than in explaining disapproved violence (see Pratt and Cullen 2000) because the abstract formulation ties into "fundamental" features of the concrete world.

As another example, Social Learning Theory (Akers 1985, 1998) seeks the commonality of deviant behavior in the degree to which it has been previously "reinforced" (learned), either directly or vicariously, or by self-reinforcement through anticipation of outcomes (see Bandura 1977). Thus, as noted previously, theoretically it does not matter how different an assault may appear relative to writing a hot check. If an individual has experienced (directly or vicariously) the same amount of reward relative to punishment for the two acts, those behaviors are theoretically equivalent in their likelihood of being committed, given their physical possibility and equal chances of situational reward or

punishment. However, in reality, the nature of reinforcement for disapproved violence may be much different than for fraudulent check writing. Given cultural norms emphasizing greater seriousness of violent than property offending, especially those property offenses that do not involve direct invasion of privacy, learning concerning disapproved violence may be more firmly linked to a person's self-identity and it may have a stronger relationship with moral conscience (Wikström 2006; Wikström and Treiber 2007). If so, then violence and fraudulent check writing, even when equally reinforced, may differ in the likelihood of their expression, thereby reflecting some "fundamental" differences.

Overall, then, inherent, obvious, surface distinctions among deviant acts pose no real barrier to theorizing. The very nature of general theories requires that they be based on abstractions by which acts that appear different take on latent commonalities around which theoretical explanations are built. But, this does not imply that all differences among deviant acts are irrelevant. Good theories invent or recognize differences relative to their own explanatory principles and build in accounts that hinge on those differences. This process of spelling out theoretically relevant differences, sometimes referred to as "scope statements," "contingencies," "conditional specifications, or "moderators," is, in fact, essential to effective theory building (R. B. Braithwaite 1960; Cullen 1984; Walker and Cohen 1985). However, "fundamental" differences among acts of offending may bear on abstract, theoretically relevant differences so they are not always entirely outside the theoretical box. Yet, given the principles of abstraction and "moderation," general theories can easily relegate most manifest characteristics of offending acts to a back burner. Hence, no special theories are needed to explain socially disapproved violent acts, illegal acts against property norms, acts by females, acts by youth, white collar offenses, or any other acts differentiated by external characteristics.

3. Dealing with Potential Indeterminacy

A more serious problem for general theory may be inherent indeterminacy of social phenomena. It is clear that no theory in the current arsenal of deviance studies provides accurate prediction of outcomes. In fact, social scientists

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are usually happy if their theories generate predictions that prove to be better than chance guesses. Even the most successful predictive theories fall far short of being completely accurate. For example, tests of hypotheses from self-control theory, which is widely touted as one of our more successful theories (see Goode 2008), generally produce predictive coefficients below .30 (Pratt and Cullen 2000), and tests of hypotheses from social learning theory, often regarded as the leading theory of deviance (Sampson 1999), rarely yield predictions greater than .50 (see Akers 1998, 2000; Akers and Jensen 2003 for citations to the research) and even some of those predictions might be due to tautological measurement (see Rebellon 2006). This predictive "failure" is sometimes taken as evidence of inherent indeterminacy and some assume that such indeterminacy is at least partly due to the exercise of human discretion. If human behavior is largely non-deterministic, particularly if it is subject to free choice by individuals, then successful general theories of human behavior, especially deviance (including socially disapproved violence) may be unlikely, or perhaps impossible.

3.1. Attributing Human Agency

The literature now includes a number of arguments concerning human agency and several studies purport to show, by one means or another, its actual operation (see Bottoms 2006). Indeed, even I have raised the specter of human agency in connection with self-control theory, arguing that people can often choose how much self-control they exercise, and offering some indirect evidence to that effect (Tittle, Ward and Grasmick 2004). In addition, as noted before, the apparent lack of success of extant theories presumably following the science model is sometimes taken as an indirect indication of human agency at work. Unfortunately, given the current level of theoretical development, and some methodological barriers, the literature justifies neither a conclusion of general indeterminacy nor that human discretion negates efforts to build general theory.

In fact, the case for indeterminacy may be largely residual, resting on the uncertainty endemic to incomplete theories (see Tittle 1995) and flawed research. No contemporary theory incorporates all or even most causal forces that have been suggested by research or identified by various specific theoretical arguments, and none specifies a full comple-

ment of contingencies. Furthermore, not even our most successful theories spell out complete causal streams with enough tributaries to accommodate even a fraction of the potential complexity of social misconduct. Correspondingly, empirical research guided by such theories has failed to produce full prediction.

Moreover, research suggesting unpredictability of human behavior (examples include Felson and Steadman 1983; Luckenbill 1977) or indeterminacy (see Bandura 1989, 2001; Kahneman and Tversky 2000) does not indicate randomness. Indeed, theorists have set forth a number of strong statements about the forces operative in emergent outcomes (Tedeschi and Felson 1994) and there is good reason to believe that even human agency is exercised within constraining parameters (see especially Kahneman and Tversky 2000). The more that is known about individuals and the relevant constraints affecting their behavior, the better can decisions, even those following mutual reaction patterns, be anticipated. Thus, the science of human decision making, though far from providing full explanation, suggests distinct patterning. Whether a driver will take the right or the left fork may be largely predetermined, if for no other reason than habit (Bandura 1977). Of course, simple, isolated choices are easier to explain than complex series of decisions made in a social context, but the promise of explanation—even of complex choices—is real. At the very least, evidence suggests that good theory, informed by research, can narrow the zone of non-predictability.

If theoretical developments concerning disapproved conduct continue at their recent pace, specific theory fragments (often now treated as if they were full theories) are likely to become more encompassing and more adequate. Moreover, it is not out of the question to expect the emergence of a general, overarching, dominant, integrated theory based on a central causal process that accommodates or integrates the forces currently associated with numerous theoretical accounts that try to stand alone. Such a theory may generate far better predictions than now follow from an inchoate theoretical repertoire. As those developments unfold, the zone of apparent indeterminacy may well narrow. This, of course, is an expectation filled with optimism and confidence in the enterprise of theoretical science. Not every-

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body shares such a hopeful outlook. My reason for doing so rests on the progress that has been made within the past twenty to twenty-five years. At the beginning of that era, I argued that theoretical science had been underrated, mispracticed, and prematurely judged by students of deviance, and that only time would tell if it could realize its promise (Tittle 1985). Subsequently, we have seen much theoretical ferment, with several innovative formulations having been produced. Some of those efforts have set forth unusual ideas (examples: control balance, Tittle 1995, 2004; coercion/ social support, Colvin, Cullen, and Ven 2002; morality–Wikström 2006; Wikström and Treiber 2007; self-control, Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) and some have elaborated and improved existing notions in an integrative process of borrowing, refining, and transforming extant formulations (for examples see: general strain theory, Agnew 1992; 2006; shaming theory, J. Braithwaite 1989; social control/ learning, Heimer and Matsueda 1994; self-esteem/defense theory, Kaplan 1995; institutional anomie theory, Messner and Rosenfeld 2001 [1994]; and social bonds, Sampson and Laub 1993). The net result is a marked improvement in ability to explain deviance and deviance-related phenomena, with consequent enhancement of predictive capabilities. If this trend continues—and there is much reason to think it will—less and less room will be left for speculation about indeterminacy as the process of theoretical science unfolds.

Further progress, however, does not depend entirely on theoretical improvement. Research problems always lurk in the shadows of science, only partly dependent on the adequacy of theories. Theories are intellectual edifices, constructed of abstractions whose inherent meanings exist in the minds of the theorists. However, if such intellectual structures are to be more than simply solutions to cognitive puzzles, they must be applicable to, and account for, the social world, which can only be certified by empirical test. But, testing assumes accurate derivation of hypotheses bearing on the real world, drawn from abstract notions. The confidence of the scientific community in a given abstract formulation depends on the extent to which predictions derived from it hold up when subjected to carefully organized observations.

Two major disconnects, however, characterize the process of translating theoretical arguments into hypotheses (or series of hypotheses and/or causal models) about the real world and trying to transform concepts into variables. The first stems from unclear theories. Theoretical ambiguity, sometimes inadvertent (see Tittle 2004 for an illustration of this), may lead to hypotheses that do not, in fact, represent relationships implied by the theory, to contradictory hypotheses, or to instances in which diametrically opposite findings are interpreted by some scholars as providing support for a theory and by others as constituting a challenge to that theory. A collective body of evidence supposedly bearing on a theory, therefore, may actually be largely irrelevant, tangential, or misleading.

The second kink, however, occurs when correctly drawn hypotheses are inappropriately tested, often because of weak or misdirected measurement. Measurement is the bridge between two different worlds, the intellectual and the empirical, and so is always somewhat uncertain. It is never entirely clear whether theoretical failure (or success, for that matter) is due to features of the theory itself, such as being impervious to agency, or to the way the concepts are operationalized. Given the difficulties of making a true and faithful translation of an intellectual product into an empirical tool, even very good theories may show diminished empirical performance (or in some cases such as making peer influence the test of social learning, showing more support than may be warranted). Of course, some theories may simply be wrong, but, it is also true that many relatively clear concepts are spoiled by researchers so that "tests" are often invalid. Empirical deficiencies, therefore, make it impossible at the present time to judge the achievements of a deviance studies guided by theoretical science or to conclude that indeterminacy prevails.

These theoretical/empirical deficiencies also impinge on "direct" evidence about human agency, which may appear to show the operation of uninfluenced/undetermined action only because theories are yet incomplete or because research tools are deficient. In view of such possibilities, it is simply too soon to draw a strong conclusion about agency or indeterminacy. Ultimately, both forms of uncertainty may be proven, but in the meantime, there is ample reason to proceed as if it does not matter. We do not know what can be accomplished until the process of science has more

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fully unfolded. Unfortunately, theoretical science moves extremely slowly and so far in its focus on socially disapproved behavior the process has only just begun to flourish.

3.2. Indeterminacy, Probability, and Social Science

Even if deviant behavior, including socially disapproved violence, turns out to be somewhat indeterminate, such indeterminacy does not necessarily constitute a barrier to general theory. While it would be neater and more convenient if the social world were absolutely known to be determined so that one could imagine complete explanation with accompanying total prediction, science does not require it. There is no logical reason why theories cannot specify causal processes that operate up to a point or specify probabilistic relationships/effects. The fact that most of our research methods are probabilistically based while our theories are deterministic is often taken to be an unfortunate inconsistency. However, it is easy to imagine that our theories and the hypotheses they spawn are, in fact, probabilistically, not deterministically, rooted. Thus, probabilistic research tools may actually match a probabilistic subject domain.

Building general theories to account for a probabilistic rather than a deterministic world requires only slight modification of current practice. First, theorists can do what empirical scholars using regression analysis currently do: explain as much as can be explained and then allocate the remaining unexplained portion to a residual category. Empirical scholars call the residual category an "error term" which is brought into predictive equations to fill out a matrix to avoid statistical problems of mis-specification. Likewise, theorists could specify what part of a phenomenon is to be explained by particular theoretical premises and what part is to be treated as a residual effect. In reality, all social scientists now employ this maneuver in their treatment of biological/genetic influences. Only the most conservative social scientists continue to discount the import of such forces (see, for example, discussions in Ellis and Walsh 1997; Guo, Roetter, and Cai 2008), although there may be much disagreement about the extent of their influence. Nevertheless, even those who recognize that social factors may interact with genetic/biological elements still largely exclude consideration of such influences from theoretical formulations. Similarly, most social researchers simply attribute

those genetic/biological components that might be operative to "error," which is usually assumed to be relatively small. Social scientists are simply unequipped to deal with the mysterious world of genetic/biological influences whose secrets are slowly being unlocked by physical scientists. In the meantime, the work of social science proceeds with a fair degree of success and with little worry that such influences may eventually have to be accommodated explicitly.

Second, instead of bifurcating phenomena to be explained into explicable and inexplicable zones, all explanations could postulate probabilistic effects all along the causal continuum. The task for theorists then would be to spell out the degrees of chance that are incorporated into given outcomes, to identify the forces that influence them, and to explain why and how those probabilistic processes operate. In other words, while most contemporary social theorists (like their predecessors) conduct their work *as if* social behavior, especially deviance, were determined (even when they may not actually believe it), they do not have to do so. Theorists could, instead, embrace indeterminacy and theorize about it directly.

3.3. Summary

While the possibility of indeterminism, particularly involving human agency, is a real concern for theoretical science, it does not necessarily constitute an insurmountable barrier. For one thing, we do not yet know how indeterminate human behavior is or the extent to which such indeterminacy actually hinders progress. Indeed, the results of research on uncertain outcomes and on human decision making suggest that very little human behavior is random, including the exercise of agency. To specify the degree to which human action can ultimately be explained and predicted, theorists must act now "as if" all were determined, letting the final decisions about indeternminacy rest on the products of a more fully exercised scientific process. Theoretical successes of the past two or so decades give cause for optimism in that regard. However, even if theorists do prematurely conclude that indeterminism and human agency must be accepted, they can adopt working strategies to deal with them. One such strategy involves sorting aspects of social phenomena into explicable and inexplicable zones, with the inexplicable parts being allocated to a residual "er-

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ror" category much as regression analyses separate components that are accounted for from those left unexplained. A second, little-tried approach is to confront probabilistic effects head on, providing explanations directly suited for uncertain outcomes.

4. Conclusions about General Theories of Offending

Based on the reasoning presented above, general theories of deviance that encompass socially disapproved violence are not only feasible but mandatory if we are to do our jobs as scholars trying to account for the phenomena in our domain. Fortunately, some success has already been achieved in developing such theories, as should be clear from some of the illustrations used in previous sections of this paper. Indeed, the contemporary theoretical tool box contains at least seven general theories of crime/deviance that encompass socially disapproved violence: social learning, general strain, self, social support/coercion, social integration/social control, self-control, and control balance. Each of these formulations contains abstractions designed to answer questions of "why" and "how" about behavioral patterns that are not limited to specific contexts or features. Moreover, all of them state at least one contingency under which the causal forces of the theory are said to operate with greater or less force.

The problem, therefore, is not a dearth of theories; it is that extant theories are not adequate to the job. Adequate theories within the philosophy of theoretical science must fulfill five requirements. First, they have to *explain* the things within their domains. That is, they must answer the questions of "why" and "how" in a way that satisfies the intellectual curiosity of an audience trained to ask deeper

and deeper questions and to be skeptical of answers. Such an audience will naturally expect the abstract formulations to provide explanations of at least a good proportion of the phenomena within their domains within a common causal network. Second, theories must be *testable* and *have been sufficiently tested* to verify them as consistent with the empirical world. That is, their abstract formulations must yield numerous statements of relationships applicable in the concrete world that conceivably can be falsified but in fact turn out to be supported by empirical tests. Third, theories should provide *comprehensive* accounts that accommodate all of the relevant causal forces that come into play. Fourth, adequate theories must be *precise*; that is, they should identify the conditions that influence exactly when and to what degree the causal processes will unfold, the nature of the causal effects (such as the form or shape of a causal relationship), and the time interval between the proposed causes and the expected effects. Fifth, good theories must specify full causal sequences and provide logical rationales for the connections among the parts, a feature called *depth*.

None of the contemporary theories listed above measures up to these standards. Some come closer than others but all fall short in one or another respect, and specific ones sometimes fail in multiple respects. One helpful approach for overcoming such deficiencies may be some form of further theoretical integration. Although some of the contemporary theories are themselves integrations of disparate theoretical parts, there still remains much potential complementarity among the seven contenders. Moreover, given that each of the theories cited enjoys some degree of logical and empirical support, at the very least the criterion of comprehensiveness suggests a need for still more integration.

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