



An empirical test of self-control theory in Roma adolescents



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The current study tested the applicability of self-control theory in Roma adolescents, one of the largest ethnic minorities in Europe; it compared mean levels in deviance measures and correlates (parenting and low self-control) in Roma versus non-Roma Czech youth.

Methods: Questionnaire data were collected from Roma ($n = 239$, 47.5% female, $M_{age} = 14.02$) and non-Roma ($n = 130$, 47.7% female, $M_{age} = 14.71$) adolescents residing in the Czech Republic. Measures included maternal parenting processes, low self-control, and deviance (alcohol use, school misconduct, and theft).

Results: Findings from SEM analyses provided evidence that perceived maternal support predicted lower deviance both directly and indirectly via low self-control, while perceived maternal conflict predicted lower self-control and higher deviance. No differences were found between Roma and non-Roma adolescents in mean deviance scores or in the links between parenting, low self-control, and deviance.

Conclusion: Roma adolescents did not differ from ethnic Czech adolescents in rates of deviance or the developmental processes focused on age-appropriate indicators of deviance. Thus, this evidence further extends the reach of Gottfredson and Hirschi's seminal theoretical work to ethnic minorities outside of North America.

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The General Theory of Crime or Self-control Theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) has generated a substantial amount of empirical research on how an individual's level of self-control interacts with environmental opportunities to foretell deviant behaviors in both adolescents and adults (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993; Hay & Forrest, 2006; Vaske, Ward, Boisvert, & Wright, 2012).

Early socialization is a key in the development of self-control. Ineffective child rearing results in lower levels of self-control, which is linked to subsequent norm-violations. Empirical studies on these links have provided evidence of both direct and indirect effects of parenting on deviance, mediated through low self-control (Gibbs, Giever, & Higgins, 2003; Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007); some work has also found limited support for indirect effects only (e.g., Hay, 2001). Based on longitudinal data, Vazsonyi and Huang (2010) concluded that variability in self-control among children at 4.5 years in age explained almost half of the variance of developmental changes in deviance over time.

Although Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) emphasized the importance of early socialization, they acknowledge in their original work that self-control has an individual difference or biological component (Vazsonyi, Roberts, & Huang, 2015). Indeed, recent behavior genetic evidence has revealed that between 55% and 66% of variability in self-control is heritable (Beaver, Wright, DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2008; Wright & Beaver, 2005) and that the stability of self-control over time also has a

strong genetic basis (Beaver, Connolly, Schwartz, Al-Ghamdi, & Kobeisy, 2013; Coyne & Wright, 2014). This does not mean, however, that socialization processes, including effective parenting, are not meaningful in the development of self-control. Rather, biological factors predict deviance in an interaction with environmental factors (Moffitt, 2005; Vazsonyi & Huang, 2010; Vazsonyi et al., 2015), much like shown in experimental intervention work (Piquero, Farrington, Welsh, Tremblay, & Jennings, 2009; Piquero, Jennings, & Farrington, 2010).

Individuals who do not develop adequate self-control are more prone to risky or deviant behaviors, including smoking, excessive drinking, risky sex behavior, drug abuse, or gambling (Pratt & Cullen, 2000), or in other words, acts that provide immediate and easy gratification. Numerous studies in criminology but also the developmental sciences have established self-control as a key individual difference that affects levels of adjustment and developmental outcomes throughout the life course (Casey et al., 2001; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989; Moffitt et al., 2011; Vazsonyi & Huang, 2010). The analogous importance of impulse control or self-regulation in predicting adjustment outcomes has also been recognized in psychology (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), education (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005), or health and health-risk research (Griffin, Scheier, Acevedo, Grenard, & Botvin, 2011; Miller, Barnes, & Beaver, 2011).

The far reach of self-control theory

The relationship between low self-control and various deviant behaviors has been consistently found in a number of studies utilizing

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variety of methods from nationally representative longitudinal data analysis (Perrone, Sullivan, Pratt, & Margaryan, 2004; Vazsonyi & Huang, 2010) to meta-analysis (Pratt & Cullen, 2000) and in diverse adolescent samples. Previous research provided some evidence supporting the applicability of the theory across ethnic and cultural contexts. Low self-control was positively and consistently associated with delinquency in both European American and American Indian high school students (Morris, Wood, & Dunaway, 2007); additionally, virtually identical associations were found in a sample of Latino youth residing in the United States (Shekarkhar & Gibson, 2011), in Puerto Rican youth (Miller, Jennings, Alvarez-Rivera, & Lanza-Kaduce, 2009). In Macanese and Hong Kong adolescents, low self-control was associated with both violent and non-violent delinquency (Chan & Chui, 2015), and in Macanese adolescents with bullying perpetration (Chui & Chan, 2013). Additionally, the associations between low self-control and deviant behaviors among youth were invariant across a number of different cultures (Vazsonyi, Pickering, Junger, & Hessing, 2001), as was the link between low self-control and cyberbullying across 25 countries (Vazsonyi, Machackova, Sevcikova, Smahel, & Cerna, 2012). On the other hand, Cheung and Cheung (2008) found that low self-control was unrelated to delinquency in a sample of Hong Kong youth, above and beyond the effects by social factors.

While the evidence of cross-cultural and cross-national generalizability of the link between self-control and delinquency is abundant, the role of parenting in predicting self-control and deviance is less clear. Cheung and Cheung (2008) found links between coercive parenting and both low self-control and delinquency. Similarly, Miller et al. (2009) found maternal attachment to be positively related to self-control, and both self-control and maternal attachment to independently predict deviant behaviors. In contrast, Shekarkhar and Gibson (2011) did not find links between parenting and self-control. With regards to comparative studies, some found the links between parenting, low self-control, and deviance were invariant across cultural contexts (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007; Vazsonyi & Crosswhite, 2004; Vazsonyi, Wittekind, Belliston, & Loh, 2004), while others did not (Morris et al., 2007). Although the majority of authors found either direct links of parenting on deviance or indirect links via low self-control (e.g. Miller et al., 2009; Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007; Vazsonyi et al., 2004), much work remains to be done in establishing whether these links vary across cultural environments or not, specifically outside of the United States.

The current study builds on this previous work by testing the links between parenting, low self-control, and deviance in samples of Roma and non-Roma youth from the Czech Republic. To date, this study is among the few to test the applicability of self-control theory in minority versus majority populations outside of the United States. The developmental context of Roma youth in Central and Eastern Europe is particularly interesting for testing the theory as Roma adolescents develop in unique developmental contexts as compared to majority youth. One would expect that this might alter developmental processes, and thus, potentially limit the applicability of self-control theory to Roma youth. The following section further describes and contextualizes the current situation of Roma minority in Central and Eastern Europe, including challenges that Roma youth face.

The developmental context of Roma adolescents in the Central and Eastern Europe

The Roma people are a distinctive ethnic group that has had a long historical presence in Europe. They originally migrated from Central Northern India and entered Europe around the 14–15th century (Simko & Ginter, 2009). Since then, the use of the term “gypsy” to refer to any and all “nomadic and socially unstable” (Simko & Ginter, 2009, p. 16) groups of people has been used. The exact number of Roma living in Europe is unclear due to a lack of reliable, official data. This is a result of migration as well as a reluctance of Roma to report their ethnic origin (Simko & Ginter, 2009). However, it is estimated

that more than 5 million Roma live in the countries that once made up the Eastern bloc (e.g., Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia; Ginter, Krajcovicova-Kudlackova, Kacala, Kovacic, & Valachovicova, 2001). They are also the largest ethnic minority in Central and Eastern Europe.

Roma have always had difficulties to fit into the majority culture, partly because European countries were not very welcoming towards these “dark-skinned people with completely different beliefs, odd traditions and incomprehensible language” (*Historie a puvod Romu*, n.d., para. 1). They have often been persecuted, and they have experienced chronic stigmatization (Kabakchieva et al., 2006). Thus, during the Second World War, about a half a million Roma were exterminated in Nazi concentration camps (Kabakchieva et al., 2006). During the second half of the 20th century, the Roma situation seemed to have been improving; however, Roma continue to experience discrimination in “schools, health service access, employment, housing access, and the judicial system” (de Cortazar, Leon, Garcia, & Nunez, 2009, p. 606). They suffer from a much higher level of poverty compared to the majority population, high levels of unemployment (Kabakchieva et al., 2006), and lower educational attainment (Kolarcik, Geckova, Orosova, van Dijk, & Reijneveld, 2010).

After the expansion of European Union (EU) at the beginning of 21st century, the “Roma problem,” previously seen as rather a local issue, has quickly become an EU-wide concern, as the newly admitted members were mostly Central and Eastern European countries with significant Roma minority populations (Pogány, 2006). Several European countries, including the Czech Republic, have been criticized for their inadequate treatment of the Roma minority (e.g. segregation of Roma youth into “special schools”) by the European Union itself, the United Nations, as well as many non-governmental organizations (Parekh & Rose, 2011). Sigona and Trehan (2011) argue that in addition to racism and xenophobia across Europe (Eurobarometer survey, 2012), the Roma people have faced new challenges because of their inability to renegotiate a new social contract following the economic and social changes in Central and Eastern Europe, driven by the establishment of the European Union.

Despite these concerns and challenges, research on Roma minority remains scarce. Most of the existing scholarship is predominantly descriptive with focus on adults (e.g. Ginter et al., 2001; Janevic, Jankovic, & Bradley, 2012). Only a few studies focused on Roma adolescents or comparisons of Roma and non-Roma youth (de Cortazar et al., 2009; Gerevich, Bacskai, Czobor, & Szabo, 2010; Kolarcik et al., 2010).

Evidence from previous studies indicates that the developmental context of Roma children and youth in the Czech Republic is characterized by: (a) exclusionary practices in the educational process (The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Czech Republic, 2012; Vomastková, Souralová, & Nekorjak, 2011) and low levels of educational attainment in general (e.g. Ginter et al., 2001); (b) lower socioeconomic status and a higher likelihood of living in poverty than majority populations (Sirovátka & Mareš, 2006); (c) worse health outcomes and higher levels of health-compromising behaviors (Nesvadbová, Rutsch, Kroupa, & Sojka, 2000); and (d) fairly substantial negative views about Roma by members of majority populations (Eurobarometer survey, 2012) and pervasive stereotypes about Roma youth as prevalent perpetrators of deviant behaviors (Gatenio Gabel, 2009).

The majority of ethnic Czechs share an opinion that Roma themselves are responsible for their current situation, and they see problems they face as caused by their ethnicity (being Roma, which they perceive as strikingly different from majority population regarding cultural values, customs, attitudes towards law, community and work; Dunbar & Simonova, 2003). The majority population reacts by excluding Roma from full participation in the majority culture and is willing to accept as members only those Roma who conform completely to majority values and expectations (Slavíčková & Zvagulis, 2014). The stigma associated with being members of this ethnicity is reflected in the fact that Roma are reluctant to identify with their

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