



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijlcrj

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
LAW
CRIME
AND
JUSTICE

Pubertal development, low self-control, and violence among South Korean girls

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Pubertal development
South Korea
Girls
Violence
Biosocial criminology

ABSTRACT

The literature on the low self-control theory hints that low self-control may interact with other risk factors to generate antisocial behaviors. A separate line of the literature on pubertal timing indicates that pubertal development may interact with criminogenic factors to produce adolescents' violent behaviors. Juxtaposing these two literature that have been rarely linked in empirical research, the present study examines a hypothesis in the field of criminology that self-control interacts with pubertal timing in the creation of violent acts among adolescent girls. Using a cross-sectional sample of South Korean girls, the results of the analysis support the working hypothesis that girls' violent acts are amplified by the combination of low self-control and early pubertal development. Based on the results, implications for research and policy are discussed.

1. Introduction

Since Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) first published the landmark book *A General Theory of Crime*, a great deal of empirical attention has been paid to the theory. Such interest may have resulted from their provocative claim that low self-control is *the general cause* of crime, delinquency, and all forms of analogous behaviors. Despite the debatable nature of their claim, a mountain of evidence now gives credence to their theory's key propositions. Research has consistently shown that low self-control is a robust correlate of crime, delinquency, and a wide variety of deviant behaviors, offering solid support to what is termed the generality thesis of the theory (Arneklev et al., 1993; Moffitt et al., 2013; Pratt and Cullen, 2000). Such support has been garnered from research by using disparate measures of self-control, varying study designs, and a wide variety of samples across age, gender, and locales (Pratt and Cullen, 2000; Vazsonyi et al., 2017).

Despite the great wealth of evidence, empirical tests of the theory have still room for further expansion. The majority of the work assessing the validity of the theory has been conducted in the Western world, with relatively less research performed in East Asia. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue, emphasizing the culture-free nature of the theory and thus the futility of cross-cultural research, that the general theory can be applied across different cultures equally well. They declared that “cultural variability is not important ... we should look for constancy rather than variability ...” (p. 175).

In addition, empirical assessment of the general theory has focused more on the antisocial behaviors of men and boys: lesser attention has been given to women's or girls' deviant behaviors. Existing research, if any, is mostly on female stereotypical deviance such as property crimes, substance abuse, and generic forms of delinquency (LaGrange and Silverman, 1999; Piquero et al., 2002;

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¹ This study was supported by research fund from Chosun University (2016).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcrj.2018.05.003>

Received 28 December 2017; Received in revised form 18 May 2018; Accepted 18 May 2018
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Unnever and Cornell, 2003). Violent behaviors perpetrated by girls, in comparison, have rarely been examined. Developing the generality thesis, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) devoted an entire chapter arguing that their theoretical propositions can be generalized across all people, all types of deviant behaviors, and all cultures. Therefore, testing the theory against samples, behaviors, and geographical regions that have been less investigated could serve as an additional litmus test of the low self-control theory. The present study aims to examine the validity of the theory against violent behaviors of a sample of adolescent girls in South Korea.

2. Generating current Study's hypotheses

One possibility that Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) neglected to entertain is that biological and genetic factors are implicated in producing antisocial behaviors. As with other criminologists who have trained under the sociological paradigm, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) also downplayed biological explanations of crime and delinquency. Touting for the role of self-control as the primary cause of all deviant behaviors, they maintained that the “magnitude of the genetic effect [on antisocial outcomes] ... is near zero” (p. 60).

Nevertheless, biosocial criminology, which is an ascending paradigm in the field of criminology, avers that human behaviors, including crime and delinquency, are the joint production of biological and sociological factors acting together (Walsh, 2009). Recently, a cadre of criminologists has further embarked on examining the interplay of sociological and biological risk factors. The resulting body of empirical evidence attested to the joint involvement of both risk factors in generating antisocial outcomes (for a meta-analysis, see Ferguson, 2010). Such efforts have also been directed toward examining the veracity of Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) propositions in their general theory. Although definitive conclusions are still on the horizon, emerging evidence indicates that the trait of self-control, which is stored in the frontostriatal system of the brain, is highly influenced by genetic factors (Sheese et al., 2007; Wright and Beaver, 2005). Likewise, despite Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) argument that parenting is the sole contributor of the level of self-control in their children, genetic factors underlie both parenting and their children's personality traits, including self-control (Spinath & O'Connor, 2003). Given the weight of the emerging evidence, therefore, the general theory may benefit by adding some of the biological elements into its theoretical exposition.

The present study considers one such biological risk factor—pubertal timing. Puberty, demarcating the transition from childhood to adolescence, accompanies a cascade of hormonal and physical changes (Paikoff et al., 1991). Research has consistently affirmed that pubertal timing, especially early puberty, is linked to an increased likelihood of delinquent acts of both boys and girls (Barnes and Beaver, 2010; Beaver and Wright, 2005; Caspi et al., 1993; Felson and Haynie, 2002). The mechanism through which early pubertal timing is associated with such adverse developmental outcomes has still not been fully explicated. A generally accepted explanation is that pubertal timing interacts with other sociological risk factors to amplify the likelihood of antisocial outcomes. For instance, the co-presence of early puberty and delinquent peers or general strain tends to elevate the probability of delinquency (Beaver and Wright, 2005; Caspi et al., 1993; Felson and Haynie, 2002). This line of reasoning is in harmony with the biosocial criminology's perspective that both biological and sociological factors are implicated in generating antisocial outcomes.

To summarize, scholars hint at the possibility that low self-control interacts with other criminological risk factors to generate antisocial outcomes. Simultaneously, research along the biosocial paradigm indicates that pubertal timing interacts with other sociological risk factors to generate delinquency. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), self-control is eminently a sociological variable wholly determined by how parents nurture their children (for opposing views, see Beaver et al., 2007; Connolly and Beaver, 2014; Wright and Beaver, 2005). If the two separate lines of the literature are converged, then, an interesting and worthy criminological hypothesis can be generated: low self-control interacts with pubertal timing to produce antisocial outcomes. Against this theoretical backdrop, the current study examines the extent to which involvement in violent acts among South Korean girls is affected by the interaction of low self-control and early pubertal timing. East Asian adolescents, including South Koreans, are generally considered to have higher self-control than their western counterparts (Yun et al., 2016). There exists a striking paucity of research on the link between puberty and delinquency among South Korean adolescent girls. Findings from the current study thus can serve as a valuable test for the generality thesis of Gottfredson and Hirschi.

3. Low self-control theory

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) notion of low self-control is derived from the characteristics of common crimes. Crimes offer easy, short-term gratification such as small amounts of money, excitement, and relief from situational strain. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, these characteristics of common crimes provide important clues to the nature of ordinary criminals: criminals are “impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to verbal), risk-taking, short-sighted, and nonverbal” (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, p. 90). Based on this observation, these theorists construe a latent propensity subsuming these characteristics of criminals, and call this propensity low self-control. The key tenet of their theory, often called the generality thesis, is that deviant acts of all types under all circumstances are committed by people with low self-control.

The most distinctive feature of the general theory is its simplicity and boldness. It asserts that the level of self-control determines people's ability to form social bonds and succeed in social institutions, which require delayed gratification, cognitive and verbal efforts, and planning. People with low self-control are likely to experience failures in personal relationships and social institutions, including school, occupation, friendship, and marriage. Note that competing criminological theories have postulated that failure in such social institutions and attachment is the underlying cause of crime and delinquency. According to the general theory, the causal inference of these competing theories is erroneous since the true cause underlying all of the associations is simply low self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). To illustrate, social learning theorists postulate that delinquent peer exposure is the cause of one's

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