



Is the criminogenic effect of exposure to peer delinquency dependent on the ability to exercise self-control? Results from three countries



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Association with delinquent peers is one of the most salient predictors of criminal behavior. Little is known, however, about whether the criminogenic peer effect is conditioned by individual characteristics such as the ability to exercise self-control.

Methods: Informed by Situational Action Theory's principle of the conditional relevance of controls, the present article uses crime survey data from three European countries to examine whether the criminogenic effect of exposure to delinquent peers is dependent on adolescents' capability for self-control.

Results: Results suggest that the delinquent peer effect on self-reported offending is amplified when self-control is low.

Conclusion: The fact that high self-control protects from detrimental peer influences is perfectly in line with Situational Action Theory's conceptualization of the perception-choice process.

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Introduction

A large body of research has established self-control (Gottfredson, 2006; Piquero, 2009; Pratt & Cullen, 2000) and association with delinquent peers (Akers & Jensen, 2006; Pratt et al., 2010; Warr, 2002) as powerful predictors of deviant or criminal behavior. Inspired by Self-Control Theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) and Social Learning Theory (Akers, 1998) it has been shown that both individuals suffering from low self-control and adolescents who are exposed to delinquent peers are more likely to commit acts of crime. Although there is ample evidence of independent main effects of these concepts – this even when self-control and peer association are mutually adjusted for each other in multivariate regression models – little is known about their concrete interplay. In other words: additive effects of low self-control and involvement with delinquent peers are well documented in the literature, but research on the interactive effect of these constructs on juvenile offending is scant. The few studies that take up the interaction issue yield inconsistent results. Some studies support the notion that the effect of delinquent peers on offending is stronger among individuals who lack self-control (Hirtenlehner & Hardie, 2015; Mobarake, Juhari, Yaacob, & Esmaeili, 2014; Morselli & Tremblay, 2004; Ousey & Wilcox, 2007; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 2001). Other works, though, cannot

corroborate this relationship (McGloin & Shermer, 2009; Meldrum, Young, & Weerman, 2009; Yarbrough, Jones, Sullivan, Sellers, & Cochran, 2012).

This article builds on previous investigations of the peer–self-control interaction, but goes beyond them by i) employing Situational Action Theory (SAT) (Wikström, 2004; 2006; 2010; 2014) as a framework to study the interplay of exposure to delinquent peers and ability to exercise self-control,¹ and ii) relying on three independent surveys of adolescents from three different European countries (Austria, Belgium and Slovenia). The pivotal research question is whether juveniles with a low capability for self-control are more susceptible to the criminogenic effect of association with delinquent peers. From SAT's conceptualization of the person–environment interaction it follows that the extent to which exposure to criminogenic settings (characterized, among others, by the presence of crime-prone peers) influences a young person's crime involvement depends on his or her propensity to offend (shaped, in part, by the ability to exercise self-control). The theory's core assumption that exposure variables affect offending particularly (or only) when crime propensity is high suggests that the crime-enhancing effect of association with delinquent friends is greater when the capability for self-control is low.²

Whether the criminogenic effect of delinquent peers is conditioned by the capacity for self-control will be examined using Austrian, Belgian and Slovenian data. The aim of the study is not to compare the three countries, but to test the robustness of a theoretical proposition in different cultural contexts with heterogeneous survey methodologies. We think that results replicated across countries and methodologies

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provide stronger and more reliable evidence for a theoretical argument than those gained from an ordinary one-sample study.

Theoretical Framework

Per-Olof Wikström's (2004; 2006; 2009; 2010; 2014) Situational Action Theory (SAT) serves as theoretical framework to understand the interplay of association with delinquent peers and ability to exercise self-control.

SAT is a general theory of deviant behavior that is based on the understanding that committing crime is breaking moral rules stated in penal law. It maintains that characteristics of individuals (their propensity to offend) and characteristics of settings (the extent to which they provide criminogenic exposure) interact in the causation of criminal conduct. At its core is the assumption that "people's actions are an outcome of a perception-choice process initiated and guided by the person-environment interaction" (Wikström, Oberwittler, Treiber, & Hardie, 2012, p. 10). The criminal propensity of a person – that is, an individual's general tendency to see crime as a viable action alternative and to choose this behavioral response – is determined by his or her personal morality and his or her ability to exercise self-control. Morality denotes the moral beliefs and associated moral emotions (guilt and shame) of the individual. Capacity for self-control refers to the ability to align one's behavior to one's moral values when faced with situational incentives to breach rules of conduct (Wikström & Treiber, 2007). A setting is defined as "the part of the environment (the configuration of objects, persons, and events) that, at any given moment in time, is accessible to a person through his or her senses" (Wikström et al., 2012, p. 15) or, more simply, as the part of the environment to which the individual is immediately exposed. It provides the current context of action. Settings that encourage acts of crime are regarded as criminogenic. The criminogeneity of a setting is determined by its moral context (the moral rules that apply to it) and its deterrent quality (the enforcement of the setting's moral norms).

The proximate mechanisms that link propensity and exposure to acts of crime are the perception of action alternatives and the process of choice. Perception refers to which action alternatives are taken into consideration (always in relation to a certain motivation). Choice describes the selection of the best alternative based on subjective assessments of the pros and cons of the considered alternatives. Whether crime is perceived as an action alternative in response to a particular motivation depends on the so-called moral filter, which is comprised of the person's individual morality and the moral norms of the setting. Controls (self-control and deterrence) affect the process of choice between the considered alternatives, but they only come into play when the moral filter has failed to exclude crime from the perceived action alternatives and crime is seen as a viable behavioral option.

In SAT, interactive relationships take center stage. Interactive effect dynamics exist when the effect of one explanatory variable is contingent on the value of another explanatory variable. SAT states that the effect of exposure to crime-conducive (moral) surroundings on offending is dependent on the individual's criminal propensity, and that a high crime propensity results in criminal behavior particularly when the individual is exposed to crime-encouraging (moral) surroundings. Criminogenic exposure matters especially when faced by crime-prone individuals. A typical example would be that the presence of delinquent peers makes a difference particularly when self-control is low.

According to SAT's principle of the conditional relevance of controls (Wikström, 2010; Wikström et al., 2012), self-control and deterrence only come into play when the moral filter does not exclude crime from the catalogue of perceived action alternatives (and when the individual deliberates).³ Controls only matter when the moral filter malfunctions or when there is a conflict between one's personal moral rules and the perceived moral norms of the setting, whereby the latter (conflict) facilitates the former (failure to stop crime from entering the range of the perceived response options).

A discrepancy between personal morality and moral norms of the setting can take two forms. Which type of control is expected to become salient depends on the exact nature of the conflict. SAT posits that when a person's moral rules encourage offending, but the moral rules prevailing in the setting discourage offending, whether or not an actor commits a crime depends on the deterrent quality of the setting. It also contends that when a person's moral rules discourage offending, but the moral rules dominant in the setting encourage offending, whether or not the actor commits a crime depends on his or her ability to exercise self-control. From that it follows that deterrence can be assumed to affect behavior especially when individual morality is low; and self-control can be assumed to influence behavior particularly when the moral context supports rule-breaking.

In this paper, our focus will be on the second proposition of the principle of the conditional relevance of controls, namely that self-control modifies the effect of a weak moral context on personal offending.⁴ The assumption that criminal behavior is most likely when people with poor self-control encounter surroundings supportive of crime implies that the effect of self-control on criminal activity is contingent on the nature of the moral context, with a greater impact of self-control among adolescents who are more exposed to peers showing positive attitudes to crime. This is equivalent to positing that crime-prone peers unfold their greatest impact on personal delinquency when actors suffer from a weak ability to exercise self-control.⁵

For a better understanding of this proposition, two issues need clarification: the theory's notion of self-control and the practice of equating exposure to delinquent peers with a criminogenic setting or a weak moral context.

Compared to the General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) SAT draws on a slightly different understanding of self-control. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, self-control is a multi-faceted, trait-like construct that centers on the ability to defer easy, immediate gratification of desires when such gratification results in long-term negative consequences. Apart from an inability to take the long-term consequences of behavior into consideration when making behavioral choices, the constitutive elements of low self-control include impulsivity, risk-taking, bad temper, self-centeredness and a preference for physical activity and simple problem solutions (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursick, & Arneklev, 1993). In a more recent version of the theory, the concept is expanded from the "tendency to avoid acts whose long-term costs exceed their momentary advantages" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1994, p. 3) to the "tendency to consider the full range of potential costs of a particular act" (Hirschi, 2004, p. 543).

Through the lens of SAT, self-control looks somewhat different (Wikström & Treiber, 2007). The theory distinguishes between the ability to exercise self-control as an enduring trait and the execution of self-control as a situational process. The ability to exercise self-control is something that people have (a capacity) and the execution of self-control is something that people do (an activity). An individual's general executive functions (his or her capacity for self-regulation) shape his or her ability to exercise self-control which, beside situational influences such as the degree of intoxication or arousal, governs the use of self-control in concrete circumstances. In SAT, the ability to exercise self-control refers to the "capacity to exercise moral management of the temptations and provocations the individual encounters in a setting" (Wikström, 2005, p. 217). It has to do with an individual's ability to inhibit perceived action alternatives that collide with one's personal moral attitudes when faced with situational incentives to break rules of conduct, or, in brief, the ability to resist current temptations and provocations. The latter are always situational in nature: they may stem from other people with whom the actor shares the setting or from a lack of deterrence. It is explicitly acknowledged that people vary in their ability to exercise self-control (i.e. their crime propensity), as settings are assumed to vary in the extent to which they encourage criminal behavior (their criminogeneity). Key for a crime to emerge is a specific form of convergence between the two: "Acts of crime tend

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