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Low self-control takes flight: The association between indicators of low self-control and imprudent airline passenger behavior

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ABSTRACT

A large body of research finds that low self-control is associated with a variety of antisocial behaviors and undesirable outcomes. Yet, several behavioral domains remain unexplored. The purpose of the current study is to expand the boundaries of the literature concerning the behavioral outcomes of low self-control by examining its association with the likelihood that individuals will engage in imprudent behavior when flying on airplanes. To consider this, survey data was collected from a U.S. sample of 750 adults. Results indicate that, controlling for a host of demographic characteristics and one's frequency of flying, individuals who are lower in self-control are more likely to report they would engage in a range of imprudent behaviors when flying. This association was particularly evident when the analysis was focused on the self-centeredness dimension of low self-control. Implications of this study and directions for future research are discussed with regard to the potential for low self-control to account for a very wide variety of behaviors not directly associated with crime.

1. Introduction

Since its development, self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) has received a considerable amount of attention and empirical scrutiny. At its core, the theory contends that low self-control – the inability to consider the consequences of one's actions – should explain a wide variety of outcomes, criminal and otherwise. In support of this claim, an ever-growing body of literature links deficits in self-control to delinquent and criminal behavior (Pratt & Cullen, 2000), victimization (Pratt, Turanovic, Fox, & Wright, 2014), poor physical and mental health (Miller, Barnes, & Beaver, 2011; Moffitt et al., 2011), financial instability (Moffitt et al., 2011), problems within romantic relationships (Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011), imprudent behavior (Arneklev, Grasmick, Tittle, & Bursik, 1993; Reisig & Pratt, 2011), and being dissatisfied with life (Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2014). Thus, the negative consequences associated with low self-control seemingly permeate every major facet of life.

This line of research raises questions as to just how far the applicability of the theory extends. Speaking to this issue, Arneklev et al. (1993, p. 227) have noted, "...the *range* and accuracy of all promising theories that purport to account for any form of human behavior must be evaluated" (italics added). Yet, as Reisig and Pratt (2011) recently commented, the range of non-criminal behaviors that have been assessed as outcomes of low self-control remains limited. Given these observations, there is a need to assess the extent to which the theory can be used to explain behaviors that, while violating social norms, may or may not be subject to formal sanctioning. True enough, a limited body

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of research provides evidence supporting this supposition (e.g., Arneklev et al., 1993; DeBono, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2011; Reisig & Pratt, 2011), yet additional inquiry is warranted in order to more fully assess the reach of the theory.

In an effort to add to and expand research on outcomes associated with low self-control, the current study will investigate whether low self-control is associated with imprudent behavior on the part of airline passengers. Specifically, this study investigates whether three indicators of low self-control (lack of restraint, impulsivity, and self-centeredness), along with a global measure of low self-control, are associated with six different airline passenger behaviors. To examine this, survey data was collected on a sample of 750 adults from across the USA. Prior to describing the methodology in greater detail and presenting the results of the analyses, past theory and research on low self-control and its relevance for explaining a wide range of antisocial and imprudent behaviors is reviewed.

2. Background and literature review

2.1. Gottfredson and Hirschi's self-control theory

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory, presented in their book *A General Theory of Crime*, represents one of the most important contributions to the field of criminology in particular and, more broadly, the social sciences. Basing their theory on the premise that all human behaviors are guided by the desire for immediate gratification, Gottfredson and Hirschi argue the primary reason why people engage in criminal and other antisocial behaviors can be traced to a lack of self-control. Describing the elements of low self-control they state, "...people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, shortsighted, and nonverbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 90).

Since the publication of *A General Theory of Crime*, countless studies have found a positive association between low self-control and a variety of delinquent and criminal behaviors (for meta-analytic work see de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Pratt & Cullen, 2000), leading Pratt and Cullen (2000, p. 952) to conclude that low self-control is, "...one of the strongest known correlates of crime." Understandably, the bulk of research and empirical scrutiny directed at self-control theory has focused on its ability to predict delinquency and crime. However, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, p. 117) make clear that the theory should not only explain the occurrence of crime, but a variety of behaviors that are not necessarily criminal in nature: "It [the theory] is meant to explain all crime, at all times, and, for that matter, *many forms of behavior that are not sanctioned by the state"* (italics added). This argument seems justified considering the fact that many behaviors that fall outside of the obvious purview of the criminal justice system reflect impulsivity, self-centeredness, and "...the tendency of individuals to pursue short-term gratification without consideration of the long-term consequences of their acts" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 177). Accordingly, such things as overeating, impulse shopping, gambling, and infidelity should be positively associated with low self-control. Thus, far from being a theory intended to only explain a narrow set of behaviors subject to formal sanctioning by the state, self-control theory should explain a wide variety of behaviors and outcomes.

On this matter, an accumulating body of evidence points to the broad applicability of the theory. Research by criminologists, psychologists, sociologists, and others provides evidence that low self-control is positively associated with peer rejection (Chapple, 2005), victimization (Pratt et al., 2014), accidents (Junger & Tremblay, 1999), physical and mental health problems (Miller et al., 2011; Moffitt et al., 2011) educational and financial difficulties (Moffitt et al., 2011; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), lower quality relationships (Vohs et al., 2011), impulsive buying habits (Baumeister, 2002), and being dissatisfied with life (Hofmann et al., 2014). The ever expanding literature is too vast to describe here in detail (readers are referred to Hay and Meldrum (2015), but a clear conclusion emanating from this body of work is that low self-control is associated with a wide variety of behaviors.

2.2. Extending the reach of self-control theory

With such favorable and consistent evidence of the wide range of socially undesirable behaviors and consequences associated with low self-control, the question must be asked, just how broadly can the theory be applied? Instructively, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) provide guidance for those seeking an answer to this question. In particular, they direct attention to the notion that the scope of a theory should only be limited by defensible arguments for why a theory *should not* be the basis for explaining particular outcomes, stating that, "The boundaries of a theory require theoretical justification" (p. 116). Given the nature of low self-control as previously described, the theory should conceivably be able to explain *any* behavior that embodies impulsive, insensitive, and shortsighted decision-making. Gottfredson and Hirschi further place the burden on restricting the range of a theory on those who purport to claim otherwise, noting that, "...limits on the range of a theory should not be taken too seriously unless those stating the limits provide evidence that it will not work outside the narrow domain they specify" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 117).

Given the above discussion, low self-control should be able to account for a range of behaviors that take place in both general and highly specialized contexts. In this regard, two recent studies provide evidence that supports this contention. First, Reisig and Pratt (2011) found that college students who rated themselves as lower in self-control were more likely to report engaging in "drunk dialing," passing gas in public, and openly using profanity in public. Second, in an experimental study, DeBono et al. (2011) found that individuals who had been depleted of their self-control through a tedious computer typing task (relative to those who did not have to complete the task) were more likely to be rude, as indicated by the decreased likelihood of a participant saying "thank you" when the experimenter held a door open for them to pass through. These studies nicely illustrate the point that low

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