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Can self-control theory explain offending in late adulthood? Evidence from Germany☆

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1. Introduction

The general theory of crime formulated by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) is one of the most prominent and most researched theories of crime causation in international contemporary criminology. Briefly summarized, its authors argue that criminal and analogous, reckless and imprudent behaviors result from low self-control, a personality trait understood as "the tendency to avoid acts whose long-term costs exceed their momentary advantages" (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1994: 3). The core hypothesis of the theory posits that the less an individual considers or cares about the long-term consequences of actions that provide short-term benefits, the more prone he or she is to behave in a criminal or otherwise risky and antisocial manner. The low self-control effect is assumed to be universal, that is uniform across various demographic groups.

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) also touch upon a critical role of opportunities in the formation of acts of crime, but fail to specify the exact interplay between self-control and opportunities for crime, thus leaving the role of opportunities in crime causation unclear and ambiguous (Hay & Forrest, 2008; Simpson & Geis, 2008). There are good reasons to assume that the availability of criminal opportunities moderates the impact of low self-control, with ample opportunities amplifying the criminogenic self-control effect. Nevertheless: in 1990 Gottfredson and Hirschi remained surprisingly vague and somewhat inconclusive in this regard, leaving clarification open for future works (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2003) and scholars (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursick, & Arneklev, 1993; Hay & Forrest, 2008).

In the empirical literature, low self-control has been established as one of the best predictors of deviant and criminal activity (De Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Gottfredson, 2006; Pratt & Cullen, 2000). Numerous studies show that low self-control is related to increased offending. Supportive results have been obtained for various forms of criminal and analogous behavior (e.g. Burton, Evans, Cullen, Olivares, & Dunaway, 1999; Gerich, 2014; Grasmick et al., 1993; Moon & Alarid, 2015; Reisig & Pratt, 2011; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1999), for different demographic groups (e.g. Baron, 2003; Burt, Sweeten, & Simons, 2014; Burton, Cullen, Evans, Alarid, & Dunaway, 1998; Evans, Cullen, Burton, Dunaway, & Benson, 1997; LaGrange & Silverman, 1999; Longshore, Rand, & Stein, 1996), in different countries/cultural settings (e.g. Marshall & Enzmann, 2012; Rebellon Straus, & Medeiros, 2008; Rocque, Posick, Marshall, & Piquero, 2015; Vazsonyi, Pickering, Junger, & Hessing, 2001) and with attitudinal and behavioral measures of the concept (Brenda, 2005; Evans et al., 1997; Marcus, 2003; Tittle, Ward, & Grasmick, 2003; Wolfe, 2015). Furthermore, the independent effect of low self-control on offending seems to be fairly robust and holds even when controlling for social learning variables (Baron, 2003; Hay & Forrest, 2008; McGloin & Shermer, 2010; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Yarbrough, Jones, Sullivan, Sellers, & Cochran, 2012), morality (Antonaccio & Tittle, 2008; Hirtenlehner & Kunz, 2016; Schoepfer & Piquero, 2006; Svensson, Pauwels, & Weerman, 2010; Tittle, Antonaccio, Botchkovar, & Kranidioti, 2010), expected utility/rational choice/deterrence (Hirtenlehner, Pauwels, & Mesko, 2014; Seipel & Eifler, 2010; Tittle et al., 2010; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Paternoster, 2004), and legal cynicism and legitimacy (Reisig, Wolfe, & Holtfreter, 2011). However, as is true for most criminological studies on the causes of offending (regardless of their theoretical framework), much of this research has focused on adolescents and young adults (most frequently on students) – a fact that has been termed "adolescence-limited criminology" (Cullen, 2011). A few works have drawn on the general population. Studies investigating exclusively people in advanced or late adulthood, let alone the elderly, have remained scarce.

Noteworthy exceptions to the rule are the works of Scott Wolfe and colleagues (Wolfe, 2015; Wolfe, Reisig, & Holtfreter, 2015). These authors relied on a sample of nearly 2000 people aged 60 years and over living in Florida or Arizona. They found that low

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self-control significantly increases crime involvement in late adulthood. Opportunity variables also affect offending. Unfortunately, Wolfe and colleagues do not include an interaction between self-control and opportunities in their analyses, thus limiting the presented evidence to an independent effect of criminal opportunities. Moreover, they show that a measure of attitudinal self-control cannot account for the gender gap in late life offending and that low attitudinal self-control has a greater effect on males' compared to females' criminal behavior. The latter challenges self-control theory's invariance hypothesis.

In addition, there are a few studies (Burton et al., 1999; Tittle et al., 2003) which draw on samples of the general population, but also include analyses differentiated by age groups. These works report the findings of separate tests of self-control effects among older respondents. Both studies reveal that the self-control effect declines with age, and that low self-control does not significantly predict offending in the older age categories. However, the latter finding suffers from methodological deficiencies, which may mask the true effect of low self-control in advanced adulthood. Among them are small subsample sizes for the aged and therefore a low power to establish self-control effects in this group, a very skewed distribution of crime involvement in late life and thus limited variance in the dependent variable, as well as a failure to include the types of crime older individuals are most likely to commit (see also Wolfe et al., 2015: 5 f.).

All things considered, research on the effects of low self-control on criminal activity in late adulthood is scarce and remains remarkably inconclusive. The findings regarding the explanatory power of self-control among the aged are contradictory, and the role of the interaction between self-control and opportunity is neglected in this body of research.

In this work, we revisit the debate on self-control effects on offending in advanced adulthood, but for the first time with data from a European country.[1] Acknowledging the importance of replicating findings across cultures, we draw on a survey of 2000 older people conducted in Germany. From our perspective, cross-cultural replication is indispensable for making claims about the generalizability of findings obtained in the U.S., especially when it comes to testing general theories of crime (McNeeley & Warner, 2015). We further advance the empirical foundation of self-control theory by explicitly addressing the interplay between low self-control and criminal opportunities in late life. Inspired by the clarifications undertaken by Hay and Forrest (2008), we investigate whether the effect of low self-control on late life offending is dependent on the level of criminal opportunities, with increased exposure to criminal opportunities amplifying the effects of low self-control. Last but not least the study examines whether low self-control accounts for the relationship between gender and offending in advanced adulthood, and whether the effects of low self-control on criminal activity are similar for male and female senior citizens.

2. Self-control theory: key propositions and empirical findings

2.1. The nature of crime and criminality

Self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) has as its point of departure the insight that acts of crime normally are exciting and easy to commit, require little effort, skills or planning, and provide immediate, but often only transient gratification of desires and needs. In many cases these immediate short-term benefits are accompanied by serious long-term costs. The delayed negative consequences often have the potential to exceed the momentary pleasures gained from the act. In the end all crimes are manifestations of self-interested behavior focusing on instant benefits while neglecting the risk of long-term costs (e.g. legal sanctions).

These common properties of the various forms of criminal conduct (and related behavior) suggest that they may also have a common cause, which is identified by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) as a lack of self-control. Self-control refers to the tendency or ability to consider the long-term costs of behavior. This latent trait is established early in life and remains largely stable over time. Individuals of low self-control are described as impulsive, risk-taking, short-sighted, self-centered, with a preference for physical activities and simple problem solutions. Their ability to anticipate, calculate and care about the temporally remote consequences of their behavior is limited. In brief: individuals of low self-control pursue immediate pleasures in disregard of the delayed consequences of their actions, which makes them vulnerable to the lures of momentary gratification often provided by acts of crime.

2.2. The role of opportunities

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) maintain that low self-control is the root – or even single – cause of criminal and analogous behavior. However, they remain inconsistent in this regard. The "tendency to be tempted by behaviors that promise short-term pleasure at the expense of long-term costs" (Marshall & Enzmann, 2012: 287) is sometimes supplemented with opportunities for crime as a second criminogenic factor. Opportunities are defined rather vaguely as "sets of circumstances favorable to crime" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2003: 8). Whether a specific act of crime will be committed, depends not only on the actor's level of self-control, but also on the availability of a corresponding opportunity. Only when an opportunity presents itself, individuals with low self-control are more likely to succumb to the allure of criminal conduct. For the absence of self-control to translate into a specific event of crime, an opportunity is necessary. From this it follows that, when criminal opportunities are more numerous, low self-control will flow more easily or frequently into acts of crime. This is tantamount to positing that the effect of low self-control is contingent of the extent of criminal opportunities, with self-control effects being greater when opportunities are abundant (Hay & Forrest, 2008; Hay & Meldrum, 2016).

This type of interaction may also apply to senior citizens. Several studies focusing on younger respondents found that the supply of criminal opportunities shapes the strength of the self-control/crime relationship (e.g. Cochran, Wood, Sellers, Wilkerson, & Chamlin, 1998; Desmond, Bruce, & Stacer, 2012; Grasmick et al., 1993; Hay & Forrest, 2008; Kuhn & Laird, 2013; LaGrange & Silverman, 1999; Longshore, 1998; Longshore & Turner, 1998; Marshall & Enzmann, 2012). According to these results, self-control exercises a greater effect when opportunities for crime are frequently available. The findings of Pratt and Cullen's (2000) meta-analysis point in the same direction: self-control effects are shown to be dependent on the presence of criminal opportunities, with self-control being more influential among individuals with many opportunities for criminal conduct.

However, Gottfredson and Hirschi themselves are reluctant to embrace this view. They have argued that opportunities for crime are ubiquitous and limitless, and that people with low self-control will encounter and find their opportunities (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2003). So, although opportunities matter for the commission of a concrete act of crime, they cannot account for the size of the aggregate self-control effect, which amounts to the absence of an interaction between them.[2]

Hirschi and Gottfredson (2008) explicitly object to ascribing criminal opportunities a causal significance similar to that of low self-control. In their eyes the role of opportunities in determining the distribution of crimes across individuals is negligible, self-control theory can be "assessed without undue concern for differences in opportunities" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2003: 9). For them, individual-level tests of self-control theory focusing on an interaction between level of self-control and supply of criminal opportunities represent a misinterpretation of their general theory of crime. Opportunities may at best explain which concrete crimes a person who lacks self-control commits, but not how frequently he or she offends.