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Scaling-up self-control: A macro-level investigation of self-control at the county level

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Extensive prior research has documented the relationship between self-control and deviance, albeit almost exclusively at the individual level. In fact, only two recent examinations of self-control and adverse outcomes (including deviance) exist at the macro-level.

Methods: In order to extend prior research, this study relies on data from all counties in the state of Texas with a population of over 10,000 residents to provide a county-level analysis of the ability of macro-level self-control to predict three outcomes: violent crime, property crime, and unemployment rates.

Results: Exploratory factor analyses supported the existence of two macro-level dimensions of self-control, e.g., initiatory and inhibitory self-control. Subsequent correlational and predictive regression analyses provided evidence of the linkages between these macro-level indicators of self-control and a number of adverse outcomes.

Conclusions: The findings highlight the importance of continued inquiry into macro-level indicators of self-control and the role of macro-level manifestations of self-control in policy and prevention initiatives to promote crime prevention and prevent adult adjustment problems such as unemployment.

1. Introduction

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime has been one of criminology's most widely tested theories. Drawing a line in the sand regarding the extent to which the field needs complicated and complex theories of crime, the theorists outlined a much simpler account of the genesis of crime, one centered on the role of self-control in predicting criminal and analogous behaviors over the life-course. As a general theory, the theorists further argued that self-control could account for "all crime, at all times" (p. 117) and suggested that this relationship would be invariant across demographic characteristics and cultural contexts. And while the theory has been subject to much criticism on issues related to tautology, measurement, type-of-crime explanation and so forth, the weight of the evidence suggests that self-control is correlated with a wide range of criminal and analogous behaviors throughout the life-course and across various contexts (Arneklev, Grasmick, Tittle, & Bursik, 1993; Cochran, Wood, Sellers, Wilkerson, & Chamlin, 1998; Evans, Cullen, Burton, Dunaway, & Benson, 1997; Gibbs, Giever, & Higgins, 2003; Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993; Keane, Maxim, & Teevan, 1993; Miller, Jennings, Alvarez-Rivera, & Lanza-Kaduce, 2009; Piquero & Tibbetts,

1996; Tittle, Ward, & Grasmick, 2003). In addition, although the theory does not entirely render irrelevant many other factors related to crime, the consistency of its effects in many dozens of studies predicting crime (Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Vazsonyi, Mikuska, & Kelley, 2017) and victimization (Pratt, Turanovic, Fox, & Wright, 2014) across many different data sets is quite robust.

It is important to note that Gottfredson and Hirschi's focus was at the individual-level, i.e., what are the individual differences that exist between persons that produce the differences observed with respect to criminal and deviant behaviors. Accordingly, virtually all of the empirical studies carried out by researchers testing aspects of their theory have focused on persons. Not surprisingly, measuring the key concept of self-control has also been, at times, rather contentious, especially with respect to the distinction between measuring self-control attitudinally or behaviorally (Arneklev, Elis, & Medlicott, 2006; Benda, 2005; Evans et al., 1997; Higgins, Wolfe, & Marcum, 2008; Keane et al., 1993; LaGrange & Silverman, 1999; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Tittle et al., 2003) as well as considering which are the best items to measure self-control and how such items and resultant scales operate across demographic factors, such as age and sex (see Piquero, 2008; Piquero & Rosay, 1998; Piquero, MacIntosh, & Hickman 2000; Vazsonyi et al., 2017). Likewise,

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the source of the self-control measure has important implications for understanding the relationship between self-control and delinquency at the individual level (Meldrum, Young, Burt, & Piquero, 2013). In this vein, the unit of analysis issue represents the major point of departure for the current study and highlights the importance of two specific studies analyzing self-control at the macro-level that require a detailed review.

In the first study, Eisner (2014) took on the herculean task of assessing the large homicide decline—and not the more well-known and recent one of the 1990s/2000s, but instead a more historical one dating back many centuries (i.e., the year 1200 to the present). His theoretical point of departure from Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) original conceptualization and focus on individuals as the unit of analysis was linking the homicide decline to “a sequence of civilizing offensives, historically specific bundles of techniques that target both the inner self (i.e., self-control) and the mechanisms of self-control” (p. 3). In his research, Eisner documented compelling evidence that macro-level changes in self-control, measured in a number of different ways to include book production, literacy rates, alcohol consumption, and a measure of cultural change¹, were related to changes in homicide rates over time and across countries.

In the second and most recent study, Findley and Brown (2017) undertook a fifty-US-statewide macro-level analysis of two dimensions of self-control, initiatory and inhibitory, and examined their relationship with various outcomes including for example, the homicide rate, the suicide rate, academic cheating, and infidelity. Because their macro-level self-control measurement strategy is one that we adopt (and extend) in the current study, it is important to describe their measurement and operationalization of initiatory and inhibitory self-control in further detail.

For these authors, inhibitory self-control “involves an individual being able to over-ride an impulse to engage in an immediately rewarding, yet in the long-term counter-productive behavior (e.g., suppressing the urge to consume an entire coconut cake) [while] initiatory self-control involves an individual being able to pursue a goal for which an intrinsic impulse is weak or altogether absent (e.g., getting out of a warm bed on a cold morning to walk the dog)” (Findley & Brown, 2017, p. 2). To measure inhibitory self-control, they relied on items related to drunk driving, obesity, late credit, and risky sex, while to measure initiatory self-control they used items related to teeth cleaning, tax filing, voting, and vaccination. After establishing that the items chosen manifested into two latent variables, confirmatory factor analyses revealed good model fit for both of these two defined aspects of self-control.

Their subsequent and substantive regression analyses provided fairly strong evidence in favor of a macro-level self-control measurement approach. Specifically, inhibitory self-control was inversely related to academic cheating, infidelity, and the homicide rate, while initiatory self-control was negatively related to the divorce rate, the foreclosure rate, and the suicide rate but positively related to the colonoscopy rate.

Aside from these works, there may be other potential reasons as to why macro self-control should be a relevant source of inquiry for criminologists. One of these reasons represents a significant theoretical issue regarding whether macro-level associations between self-control and maladaptive outcomes simply reflect an aggregate effect of numerous low self-controlled individuals conducting themselves in low self-controlled ways. This argument may be especially likely when these measures are collected at the individual level and summated to the macro-level. This was the approach taken by Jones (2017) who

¹ Specifically, Eisner used a recent and novel source of data on cultural trends, the Google Books NGRAM corpus, a database of 8 million digitized books published between 1500 and 2008 (p. 54), in order to categorize the topics into three domains: (1) hedonistic preferences (e.g., sex, drugs, narcissism), (2) self-control (e.g., shame, politeness, good manners), and (3) culture of control (e.g., zero-tolerance, anger management) (pp. 54–55).

uncovered a relationship between aggregate self-control and serious juvenile offending at the macro-level using aggregations of parent reports of self-control. However, it may be the case that aggregate measures of self-control also have gestalt characteristics—exhibiting emergent properties of “collective discipline” (Tittle, 2011; p. 104). As Tittle explains, macro-level self-control may show an ability of a group to behave with foresight for the common good. In this regard, macro-level self-control, such as alcohol consumption and hedonistic texts, may represent a distinct influence on human behavior beyond that of a composite of individual level self-control².

2. The current study

With this theoretical orientation in mind and acknowledging the important contributions of these two recent macro-level self-control studies, our study extends Eisner's (2014) theoretical and preliminary empirical work as well as the unique analysis by Findley and Brown (2017) in two distinct ways. First, reducing the unit of analyses from previous studies, we consider indicators of macro-level self-control at the county-level in one large state, Texas, and focus on counties with a population over 10,000 persons. Second, we expand upon the items used to tap into both inhibitory and initiatory self-control. In so doing, our work provides a unique analysis of the utility of Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime to be able to predict a host of adverse outcomes at the macro-level, and the opportunity to investigate whether there are similar or differential effects for inhibitory and initiatory macro-level indicators of self-control on these outcomes.

3. Methods

3.1. Data

To test the applicability of macro-level indicators of self-control on various adverse outcomes, a purposive sample of all Texas counties was chosen. This state was chosen for its large population, large number of counties ($n = 254$), and diverse social and physical geography. The state of Texas contains five major metropolitan counties (Bexar [San Antonio], Dallas, Harris [Houston], Tarrant [Fort Worth], and Travis [Austin]) surrounded by large suburban counties and, tangentially, smaller rural counties. We further restrict our sample to counties with a population over 10,000 residents to reduce the potential impact of smaller counties (who are generally outliers on a number of items) on our analyses. As such, our final analytic sample size is 143 counties.

3.2. Measures

Several county-level indicators were selected as measures of aggregate self-control using the state-level analyses reported by Findley and Brown (2017). Those authors selected “mundane” aggregate indicators that have been shown to be highly correlated with self-control at the individual level. In doing so, they distinguish between measures of inhibitory self-control (ability to refrain from impulsive, short sighted behavior; e.g., smoking and obesity) and initiatory self-control (ability to take preemptive actions to protect oneself from harm or fulfill responsibilities; e.g., vaccination and voting). We use this distinction as a guide for the present analyses, all the while considering additional measures.

3.2.1. Inhibitory and initiatory self-control

To measure inhibitory self-control, we use the proportion of obese

² Although we do not adjudicate between these (or other) explanations herein, it is important to highlight here these theoretical issues that form the context of our work and importantly future research in this area. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out these explanations.

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