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Low self-control and the adoption of street code values among young adults

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Holding street code values has emerged as a significant predictor of antisocial behavior. In light of this evidence, researchers have devoted increased attention to the factors which contribute to the adoption of street code values.
Methods: The current study builds on this growing body of research by considering the extent to which multiple indicators of low self-control are associated with holding street code values among a sample of young adults.
Results: The results demonstrate moderate to large associations between various indicators of low self-control and holding street code values, even when accounting for demographic characteristics, a history of violence, and violent victimization.
Conclusions: A robust association exists between low self-control and holding street code values. The implications are discussed with regard to the multiple interpretations of the findings.

1. Introduction

Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime (1990) is a popular explanation for criminal offending and other, non-criminal forms of deviant behavior. According to the theory, crime and other "analogous" behaviors – such as substance use, promiscuous sex, and reckless driving – are simple and require no special learning; therefore, deviant behavior can be understood as easy actions that allow for instant gratification (see also Hirschi, 1969). According to this perspective, everyone is motivated to engage in these behaviors because they provide pleasure through the commission of a relatively quick and easy behavior. However, many people do not do so; according to this theory, people who do not engage in crime or analogous behaviors are controlled by an internal characteristic known as self-control, or the tendency to delay gratification, overcome impulses, and consider the consequences of one's actions.

The general theory of crime has received a great deal of attention in the criminological literature and in other behavioral science disciplines such as psychology, education, and public health (Hay & Meldrum, 2015; Vazsonyi, Mikuška, & Kelley, 2017). Numerous empirical studies have been conducted both in the United States and abroad; these studies generally show that low self-control is positively related to criminal behavior. In addition, multiple meta-analyses have been conducted, all providing substantial support for the theory (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Vazsonyi et al., 2017), and low self-control has also been identified as a robust predictor of victimization (Schreck, 1999); a recent meta-analysis of the literature on low self-control and victimization shows that this relationship has also received empirical support (Pratt, Turanovic, Fox, & Wright, 2014).

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that, in addition to contributing to crime and analogous behavior, a lack of self-control can contribute to other negative life circumstances, which themselves are correlated with crime, though have no true causal effect on crime. In other words, they argue that the relationships between crime and the risk factors identified by other criminological theories are spurious. However, research does not fully support this argument; for example, Pratt and Cullen's meta-analysis (2000) showed that self-control did not render the associations between crime and characteristics such as deviant peers or deviant attitudes non-significant (see also Hay, Meldrum, & Piquero, 2013).

While a great deal of literature has examined the effect of self-control on crime and other similar types of misbehavior, less attention has been given to Gottfredson and Hirschi's argument that low self-control also leads to other characteristics that are relevant to competing criminological theories. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to examine whether self-control is associated with one of these rival explanations of crime: deviant subcultural values. In particular, we examine subcultural values in line with the code of the street as described by Anderson (1999). Like the general theory of crime, most research on

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the code of the street has focused on the code as a predictor of crime and victimization. Fewer studies have attempted to test or expand on Anderson's descriptions of the etiology of street code values.

By testing whether low self-control is related to the adoption of street code values, this study makes important contributions to the literature on both self-control and the code of the street. First, by examining the extent to which low self-control relates to non-crime outcomes, we contribute to a better understanding of additional consequences of self-control on individuals' lives and well-being. Second, this study adds to the code of the street literature by building upon Anderson's description of how individuals come to believe in and adopt the tenets provided by the code. While there has been some attention given to the association between low self-control and street code values (Henson, Swartz, & Reyns, 2016; Piquero et al., 2012), the theoretical rationale for why low self-control should increase the likelihood of adopting street code values remains lacking. In this regard, we provide a theoretical framework for understanding why such an association could exist, and expand methodologically on prior work in this area. Prior to describing our study, however, we first review Anderson's (1999) arguments regarding deviant subcultural values and then provide the theoretical rationale for why individuals who are low in self-control would be more likely to adopt street code values.

2. Literature review

2.1. The code of the street

Elijah Anderson's *The Code of the Street* (1999) describes a set of subcultural values favorable toward violence held by certain members of disadvantaged communities. These values govern behavior among poor residents of dangerous areas, providing alternative methods of gaining and keeping the respect of others. Notably, the code of the street provides strict rules and expectations regarding the use of violent or hostile behavior. In particular, the code emphasizes a need to behave violently – or at least demonstrate a *willingness* to engage in violence – in response to signs of disrespect from others. Failure to do so can be devastating to one's status in the community and is considered to negatively impact one's safety.

Anderson (1999) acknowledges, however, that not all residents of a community with a strong street culture adopt the code. He describes two separate cultural orientations within such areas: a “street” orientation in which people reject traditional beliefs and instead value the ideas advocated by the code, and a “decent” orientation in which people hold traditional, mainstream values (see also Warner, 2003). While “decent” people do not truly believe in the code of the street, they often accept that an understanding of the code and a willingness to act accordingly on occasion is necessary to navigate the dangers of the community.

Values in line with the code of the street have been linked to a number of outcomes, including violent behavior (e.g., Brezina, Agnew, Cullen, & Wright, 2004; Stewart & Simons, 2006, 2010), non-violent criminal behavior (Allen & Lo, 2012; McGloin, Schreck, Stewart, & Ousey, 2011; McGrath, Marcum, & Copes, 2012), inmate violence (Mears, Stewart, Siennick, & Simons, 2013), victimization (e.g., McNeeley & Wilcox, 2015a, 2015b; Stewart, Schreck, & Simons, 2006), fear of crime (McNeeley & Yuan, 2016), conflict within intimate relationships (Barr, Simons, & Stewart, 2013), and risk for arrest and conviction (Mears, Stewart, Warren, & Simons, 2017). Furthermore, these relationships have been observed in multiple populations, such as among urban Black youth (Stewart & Simons, 2006, 2010), college students (Henson et al., 2016; Intravia, Wolff, Gibbs, & Piquero, 2016), adults across multiple types of neighborhoods (McNeeley & Wilcox, 2015a, 2015b; Piquero et al., 2012), and youth in Europe (McNeeley & Hoeben, 2017). This demonstrates that codes for violence like those found in the code of the street are widely held and that the theory is applicable to populations other than the disadvantaged, inner-city minority youth initially described by Anderson (see also Brunson & Miller, 2009; Copes, Hochstetler, & Forsyth, 2013; Keith & Griffiths, 2014).

Given this evidence supporting the link between street code values and antisocial behavior, researchers have started to devote attention to predictors of street code values, and several characteristics described in Anderson's (1999) observations of the code have been quantitatively linked to the adoption of street code values. First, according to Anderson's description of the code of the street, scholars generally expect street code values to be more common among African-Americans. However, with one exception (Taylor, Esbensen, Brick, & Freng, 2010), research has generally not shown a significant effect of race when including other individual characteristics in the model (Brezina et al., 2004; Intravia et al., 2016; Keith & Griffiths, 2014; Piquero et al., 2012). Second, some studies show that males are more likely to believe in the code (Intravia et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2010), while other studies suggest that males and females are equally likely to adopt the code (Keith & Griffiths, 2014; Stewart & Simons, 2006). Third, Anderson described the code of the street as an alternative to traditional methods of success, and studies have found a positive relationship between strain or perceived lack of opportunities and adoption of the code (Brezina et al., 2004; Stewart & Simons, 2006). Fourth, Anderson explains that the code becomes necessary to navigate dangerous spaces due to poor relations with police; accordingly, adoption of the code of the street is related to perceived police discrimination (Intravia, Wolff, Stewart, & Simons, 2014) and a lack of respect for the police (Piquero et al., 2012). Fifth, adoption of the street code is related to prior victimization (Brezina et al., 2004), likely because the code is perceived as a way to decrease one's vulnerability to violence (see McNeeley & Wilcox, 2015b).

In addition, Anderson (1999) described the family as an important source of street code values, as individuals with a “street” orientation actively teach their children to believe in the code of the street as well. In line with this theory, Stewart and Simons (2006) found that youth in “street” families were more likely to adopt the code. Similarly, Brezina et al. (2004) found that power-assertive parental discipline increased the adoption of the code, while parental supervision was negatively related to adoption of the code. Finally, because Anderson's (1999) theory is based on observations of disadvantaged inner-city areas with high crime rates, scholars hypothesize that individuals residing in urban, disadvantaged, or crime-ridden areas will be more likely to adopt the code of the street. In this regard, Stewart and Simons (2006) found that neighborhood disadvantage and violence were related to the adoption of the code. However, other studies have not found a relationship between neighborhood context and adopting street code values (Brezina et al., 2004; Keith & Griffiths, 2014).

Collectively, this body of research points to a number of factors that provide partial explanation for the adoption of street code values. We contend, however, that an additional factor which has not received adequate attention in the literature is low self-control. In the following section, we present an argument for why individuals who are low in self-control would be more likely to adopt the street code, drawing on statements by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) and Anderson (1999) to support our stance.

2.2. Low self-control and adopting street code values

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) characterize individuals with low self-control as unlikely to succeed in prosocial ways because they are impulsive, poor planners who are unable to delay gratification. Because those without self-control are less likely to achieve traditional, middle-class methods of obtaining respect and status such as educational achievement and employment (e.g., Evans, Cullen, Burton, Dunaway, & Benson, 1997; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1999), they should find traditional values less attractive and reject them in favor of deviant, subcultural values. Once youth have turned away from

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