



Low self-control and the Dark Triad: Disentangling the predictive power of personality traits on young adult substance use, offending and victimization



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To evaluate Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) spuriousness thesis by focusing on the virtue of alternative psychologically based constructs in explaining substance use, offending and victimization beyond low self-control.

Methods: Data from several hundred young adults were analyzed using structural equation modeling to evaluate the argument that personality traits are immaterial to explaining malignant behaviors beyond low self-control. To achieve this, the Dark Triad of personality was introduced in models alongside low self-control to explain the varied outcomes.

Results: Structural equation modeling demonstrated that those with low self-control are more likely to engage in substance abuse whereas those exhibiting Dark Triad traits were not. Low self-control and the Dark Triad independently predicted criminal offending, but only the Dark Triad predicted victimization, controlling for low self-control.

Conclusions: The spuriousness thesis was not supported in this research. Specifically, the contention that alternative personality traits beyond low self-control bear no virtue in explaining crime or victimization was challenged by this work. The Dark Triad of personality is a promising constellation of personality traits linked to crime and victimization that criminologists can exploit to inform further research and theory.

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Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) seminal work, *A General Theory of Crime*, has elicited an enormous amount of empirical attention. Part of this interest stems from the theorists' bold claims concerning the causes of crime. Namely, Gottfredson and Hirschi argue that all delinquent and criminal behavior can be explained by a lack of self-control. According to the theory, all other covariates to deviancy, more traditionally recognized ones and otherwise, are spurious (i.e., spuriousness thesis) given that those with low self-control self-select into problematic and potentially criminogenic relationships, environments, and settings. In this way, rather than being a cause of crime or analogous behaviors, other potential covariates are simply relegated as another outcome of low self-control.

Recognizing that research finds this *spuriousness thesis* is weakly supported (e.g. Evans, Cullen, Burton, Dunaway, & Benson, 1997; Hay, Meldrum, & Piquero, 2013) and that self-control has experienced

modest support in the literature as a covariate to delinquency and crime (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Pratt & Cullen, 2000), it is unlikely that low self-control would render the association between *other personality traits* and antisocial behavior spurious. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) place little value, however, on looking beyond low self-control to other dimensions of personality because they believe that such leanings are tautological and or that other personalities in some way embody at least some elements of low self-control. Counter to these claims, empirical evidence indicates that Gottfredson and Hirschi's assessment of alternative psychological-based explanations of crime is unjustifiably limited. A number of personality constructs do not rely on low self-control in their conception or measurement, and researchers increasingly are taking care to develop personality inventories that do not include explicit indicators of criminal behavior. These facts provide researchers concerned with the nature and causes of crime motivation to examine the degree with which various personality traits can explain antisocial behavior when simultaneously evaluating the contribution made by low self-control. Given such an observation, a constellation of personality

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traits unified under what has become known as the *Dark Triad of personality* present an opportunity to satisfy such motivation.

The Dark Triad of personality refers to the traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). According to Paulhus and Williams (2002, p. 557), irrespective of their distinct beginnings, a number of qualities are shared between the Dark Triad personalities such that, “To varying degrees, all three entail a socially malevolent character with behavior tendencies [outcomes] toward self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity, and aggressiveness.” Contrary to Gottfredson and Hirschi’s claims (1990, pp. 108–111), research on the Dark Triad recognizes that these entities are not conceptually or statistically equivalent to low self-control (e.g., Jonason & Tost, 2010). While research examining the connection between psychopathy and treacherous outcomes is more prevalent than that found with Machiavellianism or narcissism, the characteristics of these three personality traits make them important to vet against low self-control because Gottfredson and Hirschi claim that such traits should be inconsequential for explaining antisocial behavior.

The aim of the present study, then, is to provide a specific tests of the spuriousness thesis by evaluating the relative contributions of the Dark Triad and low self-control for explaining substance use, criminal offending and criminal victimization. Using structural equation modeling, the extent to which the Dark Triad is associated with these outcomes, net of low self-control, is examined using survey data collected from several hundred young adults attending two large, public four-year universities located in the southeastern United States. Given the findings of this study, scholars invested in specifying theory would be assisted by results highlighting the virtue in evaluating personality constructs linked with malignant outcomes other than low self-control. Prior to presenting the methods and findings, however, discussions of self-control theory and the Dark Triad of personality are provided.

1. Gottfredson and Hirschi’s self-control theory

The central contention of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) theory is that the sole cause of crime is low self-control. Self-control is theorized to fully develop by age 10, then remain stable, and this quality above all else explains the presence or absence of an assortment of behavioral outcomes since these individuals fail to restrain themselves reasonably in their quest to maximize pleasure and avoid pain (hedonistic calculus). In this regard, an ever-growing number of studies provide evidence that low self-control is positively associated with a variety of delinquent and criminal behaviors (e.g. de Ridder et al., 2012; Pratt & Cullen, 2000), including both violent and non-violent forms of offending (e.g. Benda, 2005; Chapple & Hope, 2003; Hay, 2001; Perrone, Sullivan, Pratt, & Margaryan, 2004; Piquero, MacDonald, Dobrin, Daigle, & Cullen, 2005; Sellers, 1999; Vazsonyi, Pickering, Junger, & Hessing, 2001). Further, several studies have linked low self-control to the use of illicit substances (e.g. Baker, 2010; Baron, 2003; Chapple, Hope, & Whiteford, 2005; Meldrum & Clark, 2015; Wills, Ainette, Stoolmiller, Gibbons, & Shinar, 2008).

In a more recent theoretical elaboration, Schreck (1999) argued that low self-control should not only account for significant variation in delinquency, crime, and substance use, but that it should also explain variation in criminal victimization, a claim consistent with Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) observation that, “... victims and offenders tend to share all or nearly all social and personal characteristics” (p. 17). Given that individuals who are low in self-control are characterized as being, among other things, risk-seeking, impulsive, and angry (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p 90), such individuals are likely to place themselves in situations in which the risk of victimization is heightened (Turanovic & Pratt, 2014). In support of these arguments, a growing number of studies find that low self-control is positively associated with both violent and non-violent forms of victimization (e.g. Higgins, Jennings, Tewksbury, & Gibson, 2009; Holtfreter, Reisig, & Pratt, 2008; Pratt, Turanovic, Fox, & Wright, 2014).

1.1. The spuriousness thesis

A central premise of self-control theory is that all other competing theories and therefore proposed causes of crime and analogous behaviors are spurious to low self-control. This has become known as the *spuriousness thesis* (e.g., Hay et al., 2013), which in its simplicity means that all competing explanations to crime are caused by having low self-control. For example, having delinquent peers, a well-documented correlate of delinquency, is argued to result from individuals with similar levels of self-control becoming friends. In that way, the real contribution of having delinquent peers on behavior is rather from having low self-control as opposed to any influence from others. The notion that an alternative mechanism, such as social learning, may be taking place in the context of peer groups is excused by the theorists. However, a number of studies have vetted competing explanations to crime and analogous behaviors against the general theory in efforts to elucidate the contribution of low self-control as the sole cause of crime (e.g. Ellwanger & Pratt, 2014; Flexon & Meldrum, 2013; Hay et al., 2013; Meldrum, Young, & Weerman, 2009; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Welch, Tittle, Meidinger, & Grasmick, 2008; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1999), with clear evidence that the spuriousness thesis is not supported.

1.2. The role of alternative personality traits

In articulating the spuriousness thesis, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) provide specific reasons underlying the inadequacies of other psychologically based approaches to explaining crime. The scholars lament (1990, p. 109), “Contrary to the psychological view, the evidence for personality differences between offenders and non-offenders *beyond self-control* is, at best, unimpressive” [italics added]. They argue that psychologically-based constructs include behavioral attributes, particularly related to criminality, in their conception and measurement rendering these explanations tautological. Moreover, Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that because personality research is plagued with measurement ambiguities concerning this tautology, “It seems fair to say that no one has found an independently measured personality trait substantially correlated with criminality” (1990, p. 109).

In part, their argument relies on the notion that researchers are necessarily tied to commercially available measures used for diagnostic purposes (e.g., Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, MMPI), which include behavioral components and therefore cannot be used to isolate personality traits independent of criminally linked outcomes (1990, p. 109). However, this argument assumes that researchers are unaware of the needed accommodations to deal with the limitations tied to this tautology argument, which is simply not the case (e.g. Cook & Michie, 2001; Flexon, 2015a; Flexon & Meldrum, 2013). Researchers concerned with linking personality constructs to criminality have been sensitive to these above concerns and have moved beyond such behaviorally intertwined measures (e.g. Flexon, 2015a, b; Flexon & Meldrum, 2013), just as researchers have accommodated the same concerns regarding tautological reasoning with self-control theory (see Akers, 1991) by relying on attitudinal as opposed to behavioral measures of self-control (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993; Hay & Forrest, 2008; Meldrum, 2008; Tittle, Ward, & Grasmick, 2003).

It is curious that Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, p. 110) insist that a problem with these other personality constructs is the intertwining of the constructs and measures with aggressiveness (such is perhaps an artifact of the psychometric approach) given that this very criticism has been directed at measures of low self-control (Akers, 1991). Certainly, if low self-control can be distinguished from criminal behavior, then so too can other personality traits. Yet, Gottfredson and Hirschi also proffer that other personality constructs are indistinguishable from low self-control. On this point, we simply have to disagree, as the nature and character of alternative personality constructs have not been perfectly united in other research with low self-control, either conceptually or statistically (e.g., Flexon & Meldrum, 2013). One final

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