



Sex offending and low self-control: An extension and test of the general theory of crime



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The research reported in this article tests the General Theory of Crime using a sample of repeat sex offenders.

Methods: Logistic regression analyses were conducted on a sample of 69 repeat sex offenders interviewed while incarcerated in a Canadian penitentiary.

Results: Findings show support for the General Theory of Crime. The current analyses found low self-control to be a significant predictor of offence behaviors that correspond closely to elements of the personality trait identified in the General Theory of Crime. Sexual offenders lower in self-control exhibited behaviors during various stages of the sexual offence that were impulsive, risky, insensitive, short-sighted, physical, and aggressive, all of which correspond to the theoretically defined personality trait of low self-control.

Conclusions: As a point of theoretical extension, we propose that future studies consider self-control in a situational manner. Moreover, the study questions the relative stability of low self-control during the entire criminal event.

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1. Introduction

Since 1990, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) crime theory has provided great empirical value for understanding criminal behavior. Accordingly, a substantial body of literature has been generated from the theoretical notions that were presented in the researchers' seminal publication (see Arneklev, Grasmick, Tittle, & Bursik, 1993; Arneklev, Cochran, & Gainey, 1998; Brownfield & Sorenson, 1993; Burton, Evans, Cullen, Olivares, & Dunaway, 1999; Cochran, Wood, Sellers, Wilkerson, & Chamlin, 1998; Evans, Cullen, Burton, Dunaway, & Benson, 1997; Gibbs & Giever, 1995; Gibbs, Giever, & Martin, 1998; Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993; Keane, Maxim, & Teevan, 1993; LaGrange & Silverman, 1999; Longshore, 1998; Longshore and Turner, 1998; Piquero & Tibbetts, 1996; Piquero, MacIntosh, & Hickman, 2000; Polakowski, 1994; and Wood, Pfefferbaum, & Arneklev, 1993). Granted studies within the existing body of literature provided empirical support for self-control theory (see Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Vazsonyi, Pickering, Junger, & Hessing, 2001) the theoretical propositions set forth by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) are not without criticism. The argument made by the researchers in favor of a unidimensional construct of deviance, the single personality trait of low self-control as the core explanation for crime, has been contested and challenged in the existing literature (see Arneklev, Grasmick, & Bursik, 1999; Longshore and Turner, 1998; Longshore, Rand, & Stein, 1996; Miller & Lynam,

2001; Piquero & Rosay, 1998; Piquero et al., 2000; Vazsonyi et al., 2001). More precisely, researchers have questioned the accuracy and, accordingly, generalizability of Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) claim of self-control as the main individual-level predictor of criminality and related deviant behaviors. As such, decades of investigative efforts into self-control theory have revealed three prominent issues with regard to the current state of research.

The first issue relates to the operationalization of the core theoretical constructs, self-control and opportunity (see Grasmick et al., 1993, for a discussion). Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) asserted that low self-control is the primary determinant of crime when interacted with exposure to crime opportunities thus, studies ought to include adequate measures for both constructs to be interpretable as tests of the theory. As this may be, the existing body of research places primary focus on the conceptualization of self-control, while little attention is directed toward measures for crime opportunity. Although Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) say relatively little about crime opportunity in comparison to their discussions on self-control, the theory clearly distinguishes crime opportunity as a key independent variable. Therefore, to adequately evaluate the *General Theory of Crime* (1990) researchers must not only, include but also accurately translate crime opportunity into a measurement concept. Studies that fail to incorporate self-control and crime opportunity in the empirical analysis run the risk of misspecification. Thereon, the empirical question becomes whether the theoretical derivations as outlined in *A General Theory of Crime* (1990) and the operationalization within the current literature are congruent. The issue therefore is empirical, as it pertains to whether

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researchers have been able to adequately measure and include low self-control and crime opportunity as conceptualized by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) into measurement concepts that can be analytically validated. In an attempt to resolve the limitations that stem from measurement related issues, self-control and crime opportunity are included in the current study.

By a similar token, the second limiting area in the research relates to a lack of variation in study populations (see Longshore & Turner, 1998). Even though, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) explicitly recommended that researchers incorporate samples that provide adequate variation on crime-related dependent variables, it remains that many studies continue to rely on samples with relatively low levels of criminality (Longshore and Turner, 1998). As a consequence, the generalizability of Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory remains bounded as current empirical analyses rarely extend to populations high in serious criminality, thereby restricting the range of offenders and offences with which the theory applies. Furthermore, the researchers emphasized that their theory is applicable to virtually all crime types of force and fraud and so, the generalizability and predictive power of the theory rests on the notion that empirical evaluations include a broad range of crime types. By applying the theoretical backdrop of the General Theory of Crime and, appropriately, devising a way to test Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) claims on a distinguish population of serious offenders, the current study contributes to the theory's ability to explain behavior across samples.

Finally, to our knowledge studies testing the General Theory of Crime have focused on the ability of low self-control to explain criminal involvement. However, none of these studies have examined the effect of low self-control on different aspects of the crime-commission process. Although Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) have postulated that low self-control is relatively stable throughout the life-course, it is possible that during the criminal event, the effect of self-control is curvilinear instead (DeLisi & Wright, 2014). Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) did express in *A General Theory of Crime* that 'situational conditions' and 'other propensities of the individual' can counteract the effects of low self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 89:96). Because, situational circumstances and individual characteristics could mute or counteract the effects low self-control, it seems fitting to devise a way to systematically find out what those circumstances could be. Therefore, by examining the effects of low self-control on varied aspects of a sexual offence (each of which presents different situational circumstances) we were able to tap into the influences or, lack thereof, of situational characteristics as related to criminal opportunities and, the expression of low self-control. Even though, the personality trait of low self-control is stable throughout the life course, its expression may actually be contingent on the situation, as certain opportunities may lead to greater manifestations of the trait. Demonstrating whether low self-control is curvilinear in nature, requires that we test the impact of low self-control on more than one criminal event, that would allow variance in situational characteristics.

2. Review of literature

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory has been established as one of the leading contemporary theories in criminology. In the years following the publication of *A General Theory of Crime* (1990), a comprehensive volume of scholarly articles emerged that assessed the theoretical and practical implications of the crime theory. Most notable within the body of literature is the empirical evaluation of the core construct of low self-control with which these researchers relied to explain individual differences, or propensities, that predispose individuals toward offending. Drawing from the tradition of control theory, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argued that individual differences in deviant or criminal behavior relate to low levels of self-control. As follows, those who exhibit this personality trait have an enduring propensity to ignore long-term consequences of behavior and because they have little

internal constraint thus, find it difficult to resist temptation. According to the researchers, low self-control is established during childhood and, once developed, is unaffected by life experiences, thereby remaining stable throughout the life course (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 2004).

It is apparent that low self-control is a key construct in Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) crime theory; however, the researchers further elaborated that low self-control is not the primary determinant of crime. More precisely, crime opportunity that specifies the conditions under which low self-control is most likely to lead to crime was identified as a fundamental factor in Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory. Accordingly, the key causal argument that underlies self-control theory is that low self-control in conjunction with crime opportunity leads to criminal behavior (Grasmick et al., 1993). As independent constructs neither low self-control nor the presence of crime opportunity is the primary cause of crime, rather the interactive effect of both factors perpetuate crime. Moreover, because Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) believed almost all crimes to be "mundane, simple, trivial, easy acts" they asserted that the General Theory of Crime applies to nearly all crime types and, hence, the theorized effects of self-control are relevant to a broad range of crime and analogous behaviors. As previously alluded, since inception the General Theory of Crime (1990) has generated a vast body of theoretical and empirical research. One particular area of research has concerned the definition and operationalization of self-control, where researchers have examined its predictive power empirically with varied samples (Piquero & Bouffard, 2007). In two early tests of the theory, Grasmick et al. (1993) created a 24-item measure that comprised attitudinal questions measuring each of the sub-dimensions of self-control and, then, used this scale to predict acts of force and fraud (Piquero & Bouffard, 2007). Additional research that concerns the measurement of self-control is identifiable throughout the literature (Greenberg, Tamarelli, & Kelley, 2002; Longshore and Turner, 1998; Longshore et al.1996; Piquero & Bouffard, 2007; Piquero & Rosay, 1998). However, to date, the most widely used measure of self-control is the 24-item, six-factor scale, developed by Grasmick et al. (1993) often referenced as the Grasmick et al. (1993) scale.

Although many studies have focused on the operationalization of low self-control, few empirical studies have accounted for both low self-control and crime opportunity. Grasmick et al. (1993) made clear in their research that crime opportunity was a requisite element that need be considered when testing Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) crime theory. The researchers recognized early on that the General Theory of Crime was not meant to be a strictly personality based theory, as crime opportunity was mentioned as a second key independent variable. Therefore, if researchers are to test the theory as it was interpreted by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), social structure, which likely affects an individual's exposure to crime should be incorporated into empirical evaluations. As such, Grasmick et al. (1993) in creating their measurement scale of low self-control, formulated questions that tapped into crime opportunities.

Following Grasmick et al. (1993); Longshore and Turner (1998) tested two major hypotheses drawn from the General Theory of Crime (1990). The first hypothesis was that low self-control is a major individual-level cause of crime. Secondly, the researchers sought to highlight the role of crime opportunity by testing the hypothesis that low self-control is contingent on criminal opportunities. Longshore and Turner (1998) operationalized crime opportunity with two proxy variables: gender and crime involved friends, while low self-control was measured using a 23-item self-report index. Testing the major premises of the General Theory of Crime on a sample of 522 criminal offenders, Longshore and Turner (1998) found evidence that the effect of self-control on crimes of fraud were contingent on crime opportunity. However, the researchers found that the effect of self-control was not contingent on crime opportunity for crime of force. Longshore (1998) also conducted a prospective test of self-control and opportunity as predictors of property crime and personal crime amongst a sample of drug using

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