Journal of Criminal Justice 42 (2014) 356–365

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Criminal Justice

Stability of self-control and gender

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 24 May 2014

ABSTRACT

Purposes: This study provides a rigorous test of gendered nature of self-control stability hypothesis by examining the existence and persistence of gender differences in self-control, and gender differences in developmental patterns of self-control and in source of self-control.
Methods: Five-wave longitudinal data of Korean youths from age 10 to 14 are analyzed. t-tests are conducted to examine whether males have significantly lower self-control than females and whether the self-control differences across two genders persist. To test gender differences in developmental patterns of self-control, growth mixture modeling is utilized. Finally, hierarchical linear modeling is used to examine gender differences in the relationships between social factors and self-control.
Results: The study shows that gender differences in self-control persist over the short term but not over the long term, that males and females experience similar developmental patterns of self-control, and that similarities appear in the relationships between social factors and self-control across both genders.
Conclusions: This study provides partial support for Gottfredson and Hirschi's arguments on persistent gender differences in self-control and parenting's main effect on self-control, while strong relative stability is found. The findings indicate that the stability postulate and the relationships between social factors and self-control are applicable to both genders.

Introduction

Gender differences in crime rates have been a keen issue in social science, questioning why males are more likely to commit crime than females and whether males and females commit crime for the same reasons (Chesney-Lind, 1986; Daigle, Cullen, & Wright, 2007; Hagan, Simpson, & Gillis, 1979; Katz, 2000; LaGrange & Silverman, 1999). This has led scholars to a debate over the need for gender specific theories. Some argue that general theories do not provide a satisfactory explanation of female crimes; alternatively, gender specific theories incorporating women's unique characteristics may be necessary to fully understand the gendered nature of crime (Boisvert, Vaske, Taylor, & Wright, 2012; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Chapple, Vaske, & Hope, 2010; Gibson, Ward, Wright, Beaver, & DeLisi, 2010; Miller & Burack, 1993).

Providing a general theory of crime, including a statement that "variables related to differences in criminality among boys are the same as those for girls" (p. 148), Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that gender differences in crime rates stem from variation in levels of self-control, which can be developed by adequate parenting. That is, boys' misconduct is less monitored, recognized, and corrected by their parents than girls' misbehaviors. As a result, girls develop higher levels of self-control and engage in fewer deviant behaviors than boys. According to the authors, gender differences in crime rates persist because the primary cause of those differences, level of self-control, is stable over the life-course once it fully develops around age 8 to 10.

Recently, the stability hypothesis has received attention from researchers, whereas the gendered nature of this hypothesis has not been fully addressed (Turner & Piquero, 2002; Winfree, Taylor, He, & Esbensen, 2006). For Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) arguments on self-control stability to be generalized across genders, there are several assumptions to be considered: gender differences in self-control should be stable over time; males and females should have similar developmental pathways of self-control; and predictors of self-control stability should work similarly across both genders.

Researchers have examined only the first assumption and found that females had significantly higher self-control than males over a 13-year period (Turner & Piquero, 2002) or a 5-year period (Winfree et al., 2006). These findings are based on the assumption that individuals in each gender are homogeneous and follow the same developmental pathways of self-control. Studies, however, have indicated that multiple trajectories may exist within a population (Hay & Forrest, 2006; Jo, 2012; Jo & Zhang, 2012; Vaske, Ward, Boisvert, & Wright, 2012), which implies that multiple subgroups, having different trajectories of self-control, may occur within each gender. If multiple trajectories exist within each gender, simple mean comparisons obscure this variation in self-control development. In addition, prior studies have failed to explore gender similarities/differences in the influences

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2014.05.001
0047-2352/

of social factors on self-control stability. Research on whether theoretical predictors of crime vary by gender has produced mixed results. For example, in looking at a variety of factors from feminist, traditional, and life course perspectives, Daigle et al. (2007) found that, while most predictors showed similar effects for males and females, some theoretical factors were better predictors of either male or female offending.

Given the prior theoretical research and the limited attention paid to gender differences within the existing stability of self-control literature, it is worth asking whether females have different pathways of self-control as compared to males and whether different factors might influence stability/change of self-control across both genders. Thus, the current study contributes to the literature by examining three gender issues related to the stability hypothesis: the existence and persistence of gender differences in self-control, gender differences/similarities in developmental patterns of self-control, and gender differences/similarities in stability/change of self-control. To do this, longitudinal data from South Korean adolescents were used.

Stability of self-control and gender

In *A General Theory of Crime*, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that low self-control, established at an early stage of life as a result of inadequate parenting, is the primary cause of deviant behavior. The authors also insist that between-individual or group differences in crime persist over time due to stable individual or group differences in self-control. While researchers have tested two types of stabilities (i.e. within-individual stability and between-individual stability), Hirschi and Gottfredson (2001) focus on between-individual stability, stating "The differences observed at ages 8 to 10 tend to persist from then on. Good children remain good. Not so good children remain a source of concern to their parents, teachers, and eventually to the criminal justice system" (p. 90).

Gottfredson and Hirschi used the self-control stability hypothesis to explain persistent gender differences in crime rates, arguing that "gender differences for all types of crime are established early in life and that they persist throughout life. This fact implies a substantial self-control difference between the sexes" (1990, p. 147). According to the authors, parents are more likely to monitor, recognize, and correct daughters' misconduct than sons'. As a result, girls are expected to develop higher self-control than boys, and the gender gap in self-control becomes stabilized and remains constant throughout life (see Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, pp. 144–149 for a complete explanation of gender difference in crime and child-rearing). Three assumptions on the gendered nature of self-control stability can be drawn from these arguments. First, females should exhibit higher self-control than males, and self-control differences by gender should persist over time. Second, both males and females should experience similar developmental patterns of self-control, in that self-control level is flexible until age 8 to 10 but stable thereafter. Third, adequate parenting should play the main role in establishing self-control, while other factors (e.g., teachers, peers, and community environments) will have minor, if any, effects on stability/change of self-control.

Despite recent increased attention and research on this stability hypothesis (Hay, Meldrum, Forrest, & Ciaravolo, 2010; Jo, 2012; Jo & Zhang, 2012; Meldrum, Young, & Weerman, 2012; Na & Paternoster, 2012; Vaske et al., 2012; Vazsonyi & Huang, 2010; Yun & Walsh, 2011), only two studies have directly addressed gender issues in the stability argument (Turner & Piquero, 2002; Winfree et al., 2006). Utilizing both attitudinal and behavioral measures of self-control, Turner and Piquero (2002) found that males had significantly lower self-control than females and that gender differences in self-control persisted over a 13-year period, regardless of the measurement of self-control. Using only impulsivity and risk-seeking items, Winfree et al. (2006) found persistent gender differences in the total self-control scale and in the risk-seeking measure over a five-year follow-up period across six cities. Gender differences in the impulsivity measure, however, appeared only for the latter three years. The findings from these studies provide support for Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control stability argument that group differences in self-control are constant over time. In particular, gender differences in self-control remain unchanged. Although these findings are informative in testing gender differences in the stability postulate, the other two gender issues in self-control stability mentioned earlier remain unexplored.

One of the assumptions pertains to gender differences in developmental patterns of self-control. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) seem to suggest that all people have a similar developmental pathway of self-control, in which self-control is dynamic until age eight or ten and becomes stabilized after that point. The studies examining gender differences in stability did not provide any evidence for this assumption due to methodological limitations. Both studies (Turner & Piquero, 2002; Winfree et al., 2006) used mean comparisons across males and females to estimate group differences in self-control although longitudinal panel data were used. One limitation of these techniques is to assume that all males and all females act as a homogeneous group without considering the possibility that multiple subgroups may exist within each gender. The methods also fail to measure developmental change of self-control over time because they estimate gender differences in each wave instead of incorporating all of the waves in the analysis simultaneously. Finally, the statistical approaches do not show a clear relationship between time and self-control (linear or curvilinear) although studies have found curvilinear change in self-control over time (Hay & Forrest, 2006).

Recently, a few researchers have found the existence of multiple developmental patterns of self-control by using a group-based modeling approach (Hay & Forrest, 2006; Jo, 2012; Jo & Zhang, 2012; Vaske et al., 2012). Hay and Forrest (2006) found eight subgroups that had different intercepts and slopes of self-control. Jo and Zhang (2012) extended Hay and Forrest by utilizing both attitudinal and behavioral measures, and their analyses showed four and three heterogeneous groups, respectively. These findings imply that more than one developmental pattern may exist within each gender group. Therefore, techniques that do not deal with this issue appropriately may produce biased estimations.

The other assumption that has not been fully examined is whether similar factors affect stability or change in self-control across the sexes. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), parenting, consisting of monitoring, recognition, and punishment, is the unique factor in the development ofself-control. Research examining the source of self-control has found that even though parenting was a strong predictor of self-control (Cullen, Unnever, Wright, & Beaver, 2008; Hope, Grasmick, & Pointon, 2003; Wright & Beaver, 2005), other social factors such as neighborhood environments (Pratt, Turner, & Piquero, 2004), delinquent peer association (Burt, Simons, & Simons, 2006; Meldrum, 2008; Meldrum et al., 2012), and school environments (Meldrum, 2008; Turner, Piquero, & Pratt, 2005) were found to impact the development of self-control independent of parenting.

A few studies have directly examined the effects of social factors on stability/change of self-control (Burt et al., 2006; Hay & Forrest, 2006; Meldrum et al., 2012). Using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), Hay and Forrest (2006) found that change in parental socialization was significantly related to the change in self-control. This study, however, did not include other social factors, such as teachers, peers, and community variables. After finding weak stability, Burt et al. (2006) explored factors that affected the change in self-control. The results indicated that association with different types of peers (deviant peers vs. pro-social peers) and attachments to teachers significantly affected changes in self-control, even after controlling for parenting. When juveniles spent less time with deviant peers, their self-control increased, whereas self-control increased even after age 10 when they spent more time with pro-social peers and when their attachments to teachers increased. Meldrum et al. (2012) found that peers' self-control level and delinquency were significantly related to change/stability of respondents' self-control, net of parental social control. Although these