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Early childhood temperament, maternal monitoring, reactive criminal thinking, and the origin(s) of low self-control

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to determine whether difficult temperament is capable of predicting low self-control after controlling for parenting factors (maternal monitoring) and whether low self-control precedes reactive criminal thinking in the development of a delinquent lifestyle.
Methods: Two hypotheses were tested in 2,697 children (1,365 boys, 1,332 girls) from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth–Child study using a non-experimental partial cross-lagged longitudinal panel design.
Results: In support of the first hypothesis, difficult temperament at age 0-2 years predicted low self-control at age 10-11 years when maternal monitoring at age 6-9 years was controlled. In support of the second hypothesis, the path from temperament at age 0-2 years to maternal monitoring at age 6-9 years to low self-control at age 10-11 years to reactive criminal thinking at age 12-13 years was significantly stronger than the path from temperament to maternal monitoring to reactive criminal thinking to low self-control.
Conclusions: These findings indicate that factors other than direct parenting, such as temperament, may be important in the development of low self-control and that antisocial conduct (low self-control) precedes antisocial cognition (reactive criminal thinking) in the development of a delinquent or criminal lifestyle.

Introduction

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime is currently one of the most influential and popular theories in criminology (Agnew, 1995). There are several reasons for this. First, it attributes all manner of offending—from street crime to white-collar crime— to a general disposition to engage in antisocial behavior (low self-control). Consequently, researchers and practitioners need not employ different theories to explain different crimes but can apply a single theory to all crime. Second, the theory is highly parsimonious, with very few assumptions and only a handful of constructs. In fact, the overall theory can be boiled down to a few postulates organized around three core concepts: low self-control, direct parenting, and opportunity. Third, an impressive array of empirical support has sprung up around the general theory of crime (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Jo & Zhang, 2014; Muraven, Pogarsky, & Shmueli, 2006; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007; Vazsonyi & Huang, 2010). Despite its popularity the general theory has not gone unchallenged. Views critical of the theory were voiced soon after its publication (see Akers, 1991), with much of the criticism being directed at one or more of the five key postulates in Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory. The current study was designed, in part, to evaluate one of these postulates (i.e., the exclusivity postulate).

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) views on low self-control can be organized into five postulates: stability, resiliency, versatility, universality, and exclusivity. The stability postulate holds that self-control is relatively stable after age 8-10 years. Research on this postulate denotes that while self-control is reasonably stable in most children by age 8-10 years there are some children who continue to display moderate change in their self-control up through adolescence and an even into adulthood (Hay & Forrest, 2006; Turner & Piquero, 2002). The resiliency postulate maintains that intervention programs conducted after age 10 years will have little impact on self-control. This postulate is inconsistent with a growing body of research showing that evidence-based interventions are capable of reducing recidivism in adult and juvenile offenders (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). The versatility postulate, which states that offenders tend to commit a wide variety of crimes rather than specializing in one type of offense, has received fairly strong support (Chapple & Hope, 2003; Lussier & Cale, 2013). In their universality postulate Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) contend that low self-control explains all categories of crime. This postulate has been challenged by criminologists working with white-collar offenders (Benson & Moore, 1992; Reed & Yeager, 1996).

The exclusivity postulate—a focal point of the current investigation—asserts that inadequate or weak parenting is the principal cause of low self-control. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) maintain that parents who regularly monitor the behavior of their offspring, recognize when their child is misbehaving, and consistently and proportionally punish a misbehaving child produce children who grow into

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high self-control adolescents and adults, whereas parents who fail to monitor, recognize, and appropriately discipline their offspring's misbehavior have children who grow up to be low self-control adolescents and adults. Variables other than parenting, however, may also contribute to the development of self-control in children. Genetics (Beaver, Wright, DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2008; Yancey, Venables, Hicks, & Patrick, 2013), early neuropsychological deficits (Jackson & Beaver, 2013), neighborhood context (Pratt, Turner, & Piquero, 2004), and reactive criminal thinking (Walters, 2012) have all been implicated as possible causes of low self-control. Genetic explanations of low self-control, in particular, are gaining adherents (Beaver, 2011; Boisvert, Wright, Knopik, & Vaske, 2012; Wright, Schnupp, Beaver, DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2012) but there is a need for clarification on exactly what it is that is being inherited.

One genetically relevant trait that may contribute to the development of self-control is temperament. Up until just recently, however, there had been very little empirical work or theoretical speculation done on the role of temperament in delinquency development. This all changed with publication of DeLisi and Vaughn's (2014) comprehensive review of research on temperament and their temperament-based theory of antisocial behavior. According to DeLisi and Vaughn (2014), antisocial behavior and criminal justice involvement can be traced to two temperamental constructs, weak effortful control and negative emotionality. Around the same time, Walters was looking for a way to elaborate on his two-dimensional model of crime (Walters, 2008) and found what he was looking for in a two-dimensional model of temperament (Walters, 2014a, 2015). One dimension in the Walters model (disinhibition), in fact, is similar in many ways to DeLisi and Vaughn's low effortful control-high negative emotionality construct. Both theories propose that temperament exerts its effect on distal antisocial behavior by influencing more proximal variables. Using a multi-step mediational design to study this chaining process, Walters (2014b) discovered that difficult temperament at age 1 indirectly predicted delinquency at age 9 via the mediating effect of externalizing behavior (low self-control) at age 5. In addition to providing support for both temperament models this study also suggests that externalizing behavior or low self-control may be one of the proximal factors that links temperament to subsequent antisocial behavior.

The labeling of constructs can vary across professions such that the same construct is labeled one thing in one profession and another thing in another profession. This, in fact, may be the case with low self-control. What criminologists refer to as low self-control has been studied by psychologists using such terms as impulsivity, irresponsibility, thrill-seeking, and externalizing behavior (Achenbach, 1991). Hence, even though the mediating variable in Walters (2014b) was labeled externalizing behavior it could just as easily have been labeled low self-control (child can't concentrate or pay attention for long; child can't sit still, is restless or hyperactive; child is disobedient; child doesn't seem to feel guilty after misbehaving; child is stubborn, sullen or irritable; and child has temper tantrums or a hot temper). Another definitional issue relevant to research on low self-control concerns how the construct has been measured by criminologists in the past. The most commonly used measure of low self-control in research on the general theory of crime is the 24-item self-report scale created by Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, and Arneklev (1993). This conflicts with Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) recommendation that self-control be measured behaviorally. The fact that much of the research conducted on low self-control has operationally defined self-control in a manner unacceptable to its creators is an obvious source of concern.

Self-report is a popular means of assessment in criminology. It may be somewhat limited, however, when it comes to defining low self-control. If the self-report measure involves rating behaviors clearly indicative of low self-control then there may not be much of a problem but if it measures attitudes and beliefs then it is probably assessing something other than low self-control, at least as defined by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990). A review of the individual items on the Grasmick scale indicates that it is assessing a range of attitudes and beliefs, which while related to low self-control, require greater subjectivity and interpretation than a straight behavioral assessment. Turner and Piquero (2002) also used self-report to assess low self-control in children. Using six self-report items from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Child (NLSY-C) data set they compared the results to a behavior rating of low self-control provided by the mother. Given the attitudinal nature of the questions it is not surprising that the two measures correlated only modestly. Walters (submitted for publication) reinterpreted these six items as indicators of reactive (impulsive, spontaneous), as opposed to proactive (planned, callous), criminal thinking and discovered that they were both a cause and effect of early antisocial behavior. According to lifestyle theory (Walters, 2012), the three main reactive criminal thinking styles are cutoff (weak impulse control), cognitive indolence (pursuit of immediate gratification, pleasure, and excitement), and discontinuity (poor planning and easy distractibility), each of which derives from early criminal behavior and each of which is represented by one or more of the six NLSY-C self-report items.

Using the same general data set as Turner and Piquero (2002), the current study set out to determine the effect of early childhood temperament, maternal monitoring, and reactive criminal thinking on the development of behaviorally define self-control in children from the NLSY-C. For the purposes of this study self-control was measured behaviorally (maternal ratings) and was first assessed at the point where Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) assert it initially stabilizes (i.e., age 10-11—which also happens to be the earliest age during which the reactive criminal thinking items were administered to NLSY-C participants). This measure of self-control was then paired with indicators of early temperament (age 0-2 years), maternal monitoring (age 6-9 years), reactive criminal thinking (ages 10-11 and 12-13 years), and subsequent self-control (age 12-13 years) in a longitudinal path analysis. If direct parenting is the exclusive cause of low self-control then age 0-2 temperament should not correlate with age 10-11 self-control when age 6-9 maternal monitoring is included in the path analysis. Similarly, if behavior precedes cognition in the development of a criminal lifestyle, as Walters (2012) contends, then the effect running from low self-control to reactive criminal thinking should be significantly stronger than the effect running from reactive criminal thinking to low self-control.

Hypotheses

Two hypotheses were tested in this study. The first hypothesis predicted that difficult temperament measured at age 0-2 years would predict low self-control at age 10-11 years, controlling for maternal monitoring at age 6-9 years. The second hypothesis held that pathways in which low self-control (LSC) precedes reactive criminal thinking (RCT) (temperament → monitoring → LSC → RCT; temperament →LSC → RCT; LSC → RCT) should display a significantly stronger effect than pathways in which RCT precedes LSC (temperament → monitoring → RCT → LSC; temperament → RCT → LSC; RCT → LSC).

Method

Participants

Data for the current study came from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Child Data (NLSY-C: Center for Human Resource Research, 2009), a convenience sample of boys and girls born to women from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY-79). There were 6.594 members of the NLSY-C with complete data on at least one of the six independent, dependent, and mediating variables included in this study (i.e., difficult temperament, maternal monitoring, low self-control at two different ages, and reactive criminal thinking at two different ages). In order that no variable had more than 50% missing