



Hirschi's Reconceptualization of Self-Control: Is Truth Truly the Daughter of Time? Evidence from Eleven Cultures



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The conceptualization and measurement of self-control remains a debated topic, in criminology as well as other social and behavioral sciences. The current study compared the relationships between the Grasmick and colleagues (1993) self-control scale and the redefined self-control measure by Hirschi (2004) on measures of deviance in samples of adolescents.

Methods: Anonymous, self-report data were collected from over N = 16,000 middle and late adolescents in China, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Japan, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United States.

Results: Based on latent constructs with items parcels in an SEM framework, multi-group tests were used to examine both the relative predictive utility of each self-control measure on deviance and the extent to which these relationships varied across cultures. Both scales appear to tap into self-control; however, findings provide evidence that the Grasmick et al. measure explains more variance. These links did not vary across cultural contexts.

Conclusions: Hirschi provocatively suggested that the truth is the daughter of time; yet, we find that the measure developed by Grasmick and colleagues, the most widely used scale, retains greater explanatory power, and does so in an invariant manner across all eleven developmental contexts examined.

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Introduction

The study examined one specific redefinition to one of the most influential recent criminological theories, namely self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Hirschi (2004) differently conceptualized and operationalized self-control by linking self and with social control theory (Hirschi, 1969); specifically, self-control was redefined to encompass indicators of social bonds (both in number and salience). He argued that doing so truly captured the essence of self-control, which of course departs quite radically from some of the original arguments presented in *The General Theory of Crime* (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), but also from most empirical work completed over the past two decades. On the other hand, some of Hirschi's argument is consistent with what he has argued previously (e.g., Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1993), namely that behavioral measures of self-control (see e.g., Keane, Maxim, & Teevan, 1993) are preferred over attitudinal measures, such as the one developed by Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, and Arneklev (1993)¹. In the current study, we review the modest number of scholarly efforts that have been based on Hirschi's (2004) redefinition of self-control, based mostly on college-aged youth from the United States, followed

by our own empirical test which juxtaposes the Grasmick et al. measure against the redefined Hirschi measure in explaining deviance. For this, we employ large samples of over 16,000 youth from eleven different cultural contexts, thus adding a novel quasi-experimental (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997), cross-national comparative piece to this literature that has followed Hirschi's redefinition.

Literature review

The General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) has sparked a substantial amount of empirical inquiry on self-control and its effects on crime and deviance (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Pratt & Cullen, 2000), but also victimization (Pratt, Turanovic, Fox, & Wright, 2014); this work has also often transcended disciplinary boundaries (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012), thus establishing self-control as a pivotal individual difference in behavioral adjustment and developmental outcomes over the lifecourse (Moffitt et al., 2011). Much of this work has been carried out with attitudinal measures of low self-control, particularly within criminology and criminal justice, but less so in the psychological or developmental sciences. Almost a decade and a half after the publication of the seminal theory, Hirschi (2004) redefined what self-control was and how it should be operationalized.

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Self-control redefined

Hirschi (2004) redefined self-control as “the tendency to consider the full range of potential costs of a particular act” (p. 543). This departs from the original conceptualization in which self-control was termed to be “the tendency to avoid acts whose long-term costs exceed their momentary advantages” (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 3). The redefined self-control encompasses both short- and long-term costs, instead of merely long-term costs of deviant acts. Self-control, as redefined by Hirschi (2004), seems more akin to rational choice theories, as decisions are made within the moment of an act and less attuned to persistent trait-like, individual differences. He notes, “Fortunately, in this case at least, truth is indeed the daughter of time, and we can now see the errors introduced by our excursion into psychology and by the measures of self-control stemming from it” (p. 542) and that most measures used since the publication of the theory have lost what he considered “elements of cognizance and rational choice” (p. 542).

Hirschi (2004) further notes that self-control is a “set of inhibitions one carries with one wherever one happens to go” (p. 543). These inhibitions are linked to social bonds (attachments, commitments, involvements and beliefs) that Hirschi (1969) identified as part of social control theory. The more “bonded” an individual is or the more inhibitions a person has the higher level of self-control the person exhibits. Hirschi (2004) also includes a salience dimension, so it is not merely a large number of inhibitions affecting self-control, but also the level or importance of those inhibitions to the individual. This redefinition seems to offer a combination of social control and self-control theories, perhaps a joining or equilibrating of social and self-control.

Hirschi (2004) found empirical support for this redefinition by developing a nine item dichotomous scale, focusing on social bonds and their importance based on the Richmond Youth Project. The items focused on parents, teachers, and school. He found that the more inhibitions an individual possessed, the less likely the person was to commit delinquent acts. Basing the measure upon inhibitions, instead of traits or behaviors (i.e., past offenses predicting future offenses), permitted Hirschi to effectively address one of the strongest criticisms of self-control theory, namely the tautology issue raised by Akers (1991), although Hirschi (2004) suggests that the redefinition was not influenced by the issue. Self-control, redefined, according to Hirschi (2004), enhances the General Theory by placing self-control decisions into the realm of cognitive processes in a given instance. The redefinition of self-control encompasses elements of social control theory and

also aligns with rational choice theory, attempting to expand self-control into a truly “general” theory.

While the redefinition of self-control would seem to be a turning point, the empirical evidence following this fairly strong departure from the original theoretical work has generated only a handful of empirical efforts, with mostly mixed and inconsistent findings. Table 1 provides an overview of these studies, along with a brief synopsis of each.

Two main themes of findings emerge from these studies. Five of the studies (Gunter & Bakken, 2012; Higgins, Wolfe, & Marcum, 2008; Morris, Gerber, & Menard, 2011; Piquero & Bouffard, 2007; Rocque, Posick, & Zimmerman, 2013) compared and contrasted different measures of self-control. Each study used a measure developed based on the redefinition of self-control and compared its effectiveness of predicting or explaining deviance against the most commonly used scale by Grasmick et al. (1993). The other two studies (Bouffard & Rice, 2011; Ward, Boman, & Jones, 2012) measure self-control according to the redefinition and then examine the influence of social bonds on self-control.

Empirical tests of Hirschi's redefined self-control measure

Piquero and Bouffard (2007) provided the initial empirical test of Hirschi's (2004) reformulation based on a sample of $N = 212$ college students, and focused on drunk driving and sexual coercion. The study used vignettes about drunk driving as well as one about sexual coercion (males only). Following each vignette, respondents were asked to list up to seven “bad” things that may happen if they engaged in the activity, capturing Hirschi's redefined self-control. Participants rated the importance of “bad” things and the likelihood of not engaging in the act. Findings showed that only the redefined self-control measure remained significant when both the Grasmick et al. measure and the “new” measure were tested simultaneously, for both dependent measures, thus leading Piquero and Bouffard to conclude that they found potential within Hirschi's redefinition of self-control as it was more effective in predicting the likelihood of engaging in deviant acts. Gunter and Bakken (2012) essentially replicated this work in a random sample of $N = 1,458$ college students, with some minor modifications, including the focus on cheating on a test instead of sexual coercion; they also used controls for previous offending (past-DUI's or past-cheating) in their analyses. Interestingly, this work showed that only the Grasmick et al. (1993) measure remained statistically significant once combined with a reconceptualized Hirschi (2004) measure in a regression

Table 1
Studies testing Hirschi's reconceptualized self-control

Study	N <i>M_{age}</i>	Measurement	Key Findings
Piquero and Bouffard (2007)	$N = 212$ <i>M_{age}</i> = 20.6	1. Hirschi's redefined self-control (self-generated inhibitions) 2. Grasmick et al. (1993)	Only Hirschi's measure remained a significant predictor for drunk driving (both sexes) and sexual coercion (males only).
Higgins et al. (2008)	$N = 358$ <i>M_{age}</i> = 21	1. Self-generated inhibitions (Piquero and Bouffard measure) 2. Bonding self-control measure (Hirschi measure) 3. Grasmick et al. (1993)	All three measures modestly predicted digital piracy.
Morris et al. (2011)	$N = 1,139$ <i>M_{age}</i> = 36–44	1. Hirschi's redefined self-control	Both measures predicted adult offending.
Bouffard and Rice (2011)	$N = 311$ <i>M_{age}</i> = 20.8	2. Grasmick et al. (1993) attitudinal self-control measure 1. Hirschi's redefined self-control (modified Piquero and Bouffard) 2. Social bonding measure	Hirschi's measure was a significant predictor of drunk driving.
Gunter and Bakken (2012)	$N = 1,458$ <i>M_{age}</i> = 20.2	1. Hirschi's redefined self-control (replication of Piquero and Bouffard) 2. Grasmick et al. (1993)	Only the Grasmick et al. (1993) measure remained significant for drunk driving and cheating on an exam.
Ward et al. (2012)	$N = 2,243$ <i>M_{age}</i> = 15.4	1. Hirschi's redefined self-control 2. Social bonding measure	Hirschi's redefined self-control was a significant predictor of marijuana use.
Rocque et al. (2013)	$N = 2,400$ <i>M_{age}</i> = 12–14	1. Grasmick et al. (1993) attitudinal self-control measure 2. Hirschi (2004) self-control measure	Both self-control measures were significantly related to deviant behaviors (violence, property crime, and alcohol consumption).

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