

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267752761>

GENERAL THEORIES OF CRIME

Thesis · November 2014

DOI: 10.13140/2.1.4956.0003

CITATIONS

0

READS

4,618

1 author:



[Collins Irungu Njoroge](#)

University of the Fraser Valley

3 PUBLICATIONS 0 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

All content following this page was uploaded by [Collins Irungu Njoroge](#) on 05 November 2014.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file. All in-text references [underlined in blue](#) are added to the original document and are linked to publications on ResearchGate, letting you access and read them immediately.

General Theories of Crime: Self-Control Theory

Collins Njoroge

200105390

CRIM 310: Advanced Theoretical Perspectives

Dr. Jonathon M. Heidt

4TH November, 2014

Theory is central to any social science discipline ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#)). In criminological discourse, for instance, theory “gives us our organizing concepts, frames our research questions, guides our scholarly interpretations, and is an unavoidable presence in crime control policy, practice, and decision-making” (Kraska, 2006, pp. 167-168). Stated differently, theory provides a framework through which objects of study, crime and criminality, are operationalized. Given the vast number of criminological theories, each offering varying explanation(s) of criminal behaviour, any standpoint supporting general theories of crime – theories that identify common elements in all criminal and deviant acts regardless of contingent variables such as type of crime and offender characteristics (e.g., intelligence, race, age, class and gender) (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2008; [Lilly, Ball, & Cullen, 2011](#)) – is arguably problematic.

[Braithwaite \(1989\)](#), for example, alludes to the difficulty inherent in defining crime and the notion that individuals are subject to differential predispositions vis-à-vis criminality as sufficient grounds to reject general theories. That said, however, the notion of multiple causal factors in criminality does not refute the likelihood that certain factors are present in all forms of crime. Indeed, “a general theory is not required to explain all of the variance in all types of cases, but some of the variance in all types of cases” (Braithwaite, 1989, p. 130). Given these two divergent perspectives, this paper will evaluate self-control theory, arguably the most popular general theory of crime ([Goode, 2008](#); Williams & McShane, 2010), in order to (i) determine the theory’s ability to plausibly account for crime and criminality, and (ii) sanction or repudiate general theories of crime as viable theoretical paradigms in criminology.

Self-control theory, credited to criminologists Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson, falls within the ambit of social control theories – theories that attribute crime and delinquency to sociological factors such as peers, family and educational milieus (Williams & McShane, 2010). Though a matter of widespread debate, self-control theory borrows significantly from Hirschi’s social bond theory (Taylor, 2001). Indeed, “self-control theory developed because of [Hirschi and Gottfredson’s] interest in reconciling the assumptions of [social bond] theory with an additional set of empirical findings” (Gottfredson, 2006, p. 80). For this reason, therefore, this paper will briefly discuss social bond theory.

Formulated by Hirschi in 1969, social bond theory draws upon the works of previous social control theorists, including but not limited to Durkheim, Hobbes, Nye, Reckless, and Sykes and Matza (Kempf, 1993). While Hirschi’s reasoning has changed significantly over time (Lilly et al., 2011; Taylor, 2001), some of his fundamental claims still hold true. For instance, Hirschi postulates that individuals are de facto hedonistic (i.e., they pursue acts that maximize pleasure and avoid pain) (Williams & McShane, 2010). Ipso facto, Hirschi presupposes the motivation to commit crimes as intrinsic to human nature (Lilly et al., 2011). However, and considering not all individuals resort to crime, Hirschi sets out to establish those links that instill conformity or “why people obey the rules of society” (Hirschi, 1969, p.10). In his conception, Hirschi (1969) identifies four social bonds: attachment – emotional bond with valued others (e.g., parents), commitment – investment in conventional aspirations (e.g., career, education), involvement – participation in conventional activities (e.g., hobbies), and beliefs – respect for societal rules. Presence of the aforementioned bonds, or lack thereof, influences the quality of ties between an individual and the society; these ties, according to Hirschi (1969), are a strong

predictor of criminal and deviant behaviour. As will be shown later in this paper, the attachment bond is of particular significance in self-control theory.

Self-control theory, according to [Gottfredson and Hirschi \(1990\)](#), was inspired by the inability of academic criminology to offer plausible accounts of criminal behaviour. In fact, Hirschi (2004) rejected prior explanations of crime and criminality, citing for example, strain and subcultural theories as inconsistent with notions of free will or internal control. As a result, [Gottfredson and Hirschi \(1990\)](#) break with tradition and, instead, redefine crime altogether by combining two previously incompatible criminology traditions: classical and positivist schools. The former, concerned primarily with criminal acts, attributes crime to free will while the latter, focusing on criminality, attributes criminal behaviour to external circumstances such as biological, psychological, and social factors (Lily et al., 2011; Williams & McShane, 2010). Heretofore, the definition of the terms “crime” and “criminality” has been taken at face value; however, and considering Hirschi and Gottfredson’s paradigm shift, operationalization of these two key terms is imperative.

In their formulation, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) define crimes as “acts of force or fraud undertaken in pursuit of self-interest” (p. 15). This definition is significant for several reasons. First, it endeavors to elucidate criminality through the attributes of criminal acts (Heidt, 2011). Indeed, this definition of crime highlights a marked departure from the customary cause-effect approach in contemporary criminology whereby criminality is inferred from the characteristics of offenders ([Goode, 2008](#); [Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990](#)). Second, the definition casts a wider net, capturing behaviour that is not necessarily criminal such as smoking, drinking, and engaging in teenage sex ([Goode, 2008](#)). By the same token, behaviour

that is considered criminal, at least from a legalistic perspective, falls through the cracks ([Goode, 2008](#)). Terrorism, for example, is not considered a crime because terrorists consider the long term consequences of their actions (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2001). Other legal crimes that are precluded by Gottfredson and Hirschi's definition of crime – presumably, due to the absence of force or fraud and self-interest – include accidental or negligence crimes (Williams & McShane, 2010).

Third, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) definition of crime is consistent with some underlying assumptions of social control-, routine activities-, and rational choice- theories (Hirschi, 1989; as cited in Heidt, 2011). As noted earlier, social bond theory ascribes criminal acts, in part, to hedonism. In what appears to be a convergence of social bond- and rational choice- theory assumptions, [Gottfredson and Hirschi \(1990\)](#) suggest that “all human conduct can be understood as [hedonistic]...all crimes are alike... people behave rationally when they commit crimes and when they do not” (p. 5). Similarly, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) reject motivation as a significant factor in crime causation. It follows, therefore, that individuals who commit any one crime are more likely to indulge in all other crimes, subject to opportunity, of course (Hirschi, 2004). Worthy of note, opportunity is key for the completion of the crime cycle in self-control theory. Drawing from routine activities theory, Gottfredson and Hirschi view crime as an event occurring in time and space bringing together a potential target in the absence of undesirable consequences (Williams & McShane, 2010). For the above reasons, the vast majority of crimes have similar characteristics: predictability, simplicity and requiring little planning, focus on immediate gratification, confined by spatial and temporal constraints, and marked by short-lived gains ([Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990](#)).

Contrary to their analysis of criminal acts vis-à-vis the classical school, [Gottfredson and Hirschi \(1990\)](#) did not fully extrapolate the findings of the positive school to criminality. It appears that Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) overestimated positivism's ability to distinguish between criminals and non-criminals beyond their propensity to commit crimes. That said, however, both authors remained true to their original intent of explaining criminality via the characteristics of criminal acts. As such, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) define criminality as the propensity to engage in crime. They depict those individuals likely to engage in criminal acts as "impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short-sighted, and non-verbal" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 90). As suggested in social bond theory, not all individuals with deviant proclivities resort to crime. The ultimate question, then, is what factor(s) account for individual differences vis-à-vis the propensity for engaging in criminal and deviant behaviour. The answer, according to [Gottfredson \(2006\)](#), lies in self-control, "the most important individual-difference cause of crime and delinquency (p. 83).

Central to Gottfredson and Hirschi's conception is the understanding "that differences in self-control established early in life are highly stable, and account for a large array of criminal, delinquent, deviant, and reckless acts" ([Hirschi, 2002](#), p. xiii). Closely related to the foregoing paradigm is the age-invariance thesis, which assumes the effects of age on criminal and deviant behaviour are similar – and thus impervious to change – across all social and demographic milieus (Hirschi, 2004). Also central to [Gottfredson and Hirschi's \(1990\)](#) definition of criminality is the dictum: "the best predictor of crime is prior criminal behaviour" (p. 107). Considering all individuals are potentially able to engage in acts of force and fraud (as hedonism dictates) and are subject to differential predispositions to criminal behaviour, Hirschi and

Gottfredson (2001) presuppose that individuals with low self-control will likely engage in potentially costly acts and vice versa. Additionally, Hirschi and Gottfredson (2001) suggest that children as young as 8-years can learn to control inappropriate predispositions. According to [Gottfredson and Hirschi \(1990\)](#), therefore, low self-control – similar to the attachment bond in Hirschi’s social bond theory – is caused by ineffective socialization and child-rearing. To inculcate self-control in children, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) suggest that parents, at the very least, should monitor their children’s behavior, recognize deviance when it occurs, and punish such behaviour.

While there exists significant empirical support for self-control theory ([Lilly et al., 2011](#); [Pratt & Cullen, 2000](#)), critics have highlighted several issues. Among its major criticisms is the age-invariance thesis insofar as it invalidates cohort or longitudinal studies as valid descriptors of criminality ([Lilly et al., 2011](#); [Taylor, 2001](#)). Moreover, [Taylor \(2001\)](#) argues that the age-invariance thesis not only devalues the overall effects of external social factors (e.g., marriage) on criminality, but also invalidates potential policy reforms aimed at rehabilitation. Second, and closely related to the first, Hirschi and Gottfredson’s assumption about the stability of self-control beyond early childhood tacitly denies individuals’ capacity for change ([Taylor, 2001](#)). Third, the significance of ineffective parenting as a primary source of low self-control is likely overstated ([Lilly et al., 2011](#); [Unnever, Cullen, & Pratt, 2003](#)). Indeed, to counter the significance of parenting, [Lilly et al. \(2011\)](#) cite several empirical studies showing equivocal support vis-à-vis parenting and self-control. Finally, self-control is criticized due to its presumed tautological nature ([Akers, 1998](#); [Taylor, 2001](#)). Hirschi and Gottfredson (2001), while alive to this criticism, contend that pure theory is always tautological. Indeed, “crime and low self-

control are derived from one another. To this extent the relation between them is definitional or tautological" (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 217).

Discussion

According to Hirschi (2006), "[t]heories should be judged by the adequacy of the answers they give to the questions they ask" (as cited in Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 217). Borrowing from Hirschi's postulate, it would seem fair to judge self-control on the claims the theory makes and, subsequently, how these claims impact criminal justice policy. In this regard, self-control appears to be equivocal, at best. Over the past 40-years, many western democratic countries have departed from traditional crime discourses of reforming individual offenders to an increased focus on risk-based management paradigms (Willis & Mastrofski, 2012). This shift is consistent with Hirschi and Gottfredson's (2001) recommendations against rehabilitation, incarceration, and incapacitation as plausible crime control policies. Instead, Hirschi and Gottfredson (2001) advocate for interventions that focus on early childhood education and supervision, supporting two-parent families, and reducing teenage pregnancies. Notably, all of the above mentioned policy initiatives focus on effective parenting, a likely overstated predictor of criminal behaviour as noted earlier. While, of course, parental influence on children's behaviour is likely significant, it is hardly a panacea for crime control.

Another policy-related shortcoming of self-control theory is inherent in its operationalization of crime and criminality. As noted earlier, the definition of crime, and criminality by extension, has been depicted as potentially incongruent with legalistic perspectives. For example, it is unlikely, perhaps even illogical, for jurisdictions to consider removing certain crimes (e.g., terrorism, organized crime, accidental crimes, white-collar

crimes, or any other major crime outside the parameters specified in self-control) from the ken of criminal law. It is even more unlikely for the same jurisdictions to uncritically accept Hirschi and Gottfredson's (2001) rationale that "the range and frequency of acts [self-control] fails to cover...is small, especially when compared... to the very large number of acts ignored by traditional definitions of crime (pp. 94-95). Of what practical use, then, is such a theory? An argument can be made, of course, that legalistic perspectives are socially constructed ([Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990](#)). Is human behaviour any different? Common sense dictates that a crime in the Middle East is not necessarily a crime in North America, regardless of force or fraud and self-interest.

Closely related to the foregoing shortcoming is self-control's seemingly simplistic depiction of crimes and criminals. Hirschi and Gottfredson's (1990) contention that the majority of crimes are predictable and perpetrated by impulsive, short-sighted and non-intellectual criminals would seem implausible insofar as complex, transnational crimes like human trafficking and cybercrimes. Falling under a similar category, according to Hirschi and Gottfredson (2001), are crimes such as income tax evasion, white-collar crime, corporate crime, and organized crime. Interestingly, all of the above mentioned crimes fit the force/fraud and self-interest criteria, and can hardly be defined as 'small and infrequent acts.' For a theory that is touted to "predict rate differences everywhere, for all crimes, delinquencies and related behaviors, for all times, among all groups and countries" (Gottfredson, 2006, p. 83), self-control is arguably untenable. Indeed, no general theory of crime is likely to unequivocally identify common elements in all crimes and/or criminality. In other words, while self-control is likely a

strong predictor of crime and criminality, it is neither existent in all criminal acts nor does it necessarily influence all criminal and deviant behaviour.

Conclusion

Without doubt, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory is a paradigm shifter in criminological discourse. Taking the path less-travelled – combining the classical and positivist schools – Hirschi and Gottfredson aim to liberate the definition of crime and criminality from legal authorities. In doing so, however, self-control makes sweeping and potentially indefensible claims about criminal and deviant behaviour. After careful scrutiny, self-control is established to be fundamentally flawed insofar as its simplistic depiction of crime and criminality. Attributing virtually all criminal acts and behaviour to self-control, in essence, makes the theory impractical. Indeed, “[t]he problem with most theories is they are often illogical...human behaviour is complex, and any simplistic theory will be incorrect” (Williams & McShane, 2010, p. 3). A more pragmatic solution, it would seem, is to reduce the scope of self-control theory.

References

- Akers, Ronald L. (1998). *Social structure and social Learning: A general theory of crime and deviance*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Braithwaite, J. (1989). *Crime, shame, and reintegration*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Oxford, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Goode, E. (2008). *Out of control: Assessing the general theory of crime*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford Social Sciences.
- Gottfredson, M.R., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A General theory of crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gottfredson, Michael R. (2006). The empirical status of control theory in criminology. In *Taking Stock: The Status of Criminological Theory*. Francis T. Cullen, John Paul Wright, and Kristie Blevins (eds.). New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Hirschi, T. (2002). *Causes of delinquency*. New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers.
- Hirschi, T. (2004). Self-control and crime. In *Handbook of self-regulation: Research, theory, and applications*. Roy F. Baumeister and Kathleen D. Vohs (eds.). New York: The Guildford Press.
- Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M. (2001). "Self-Control Theory." In Paternoster, R., & Bachman, R. (2001). *Explaining criminals and crime: Essays in contemporary criminological theory*. Los Angeles, Calif: Roxbury, 81-96.

Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M. R. (2008). Chapter 15: Critiquing the critics: The authors respond.

In *Out of Control: Assessing the General Theory of Crime* (pp. 217-231). Stanford University Press.

Kempf, K. L. (1993). The empirical status of Hirschi's control theory. In Adler, F., & Laufer, W. S.

New directions in criminological theory. New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers.

Kraska, P. B. (2006). [Criminal justice theory: Toward legitimacy and an infrastructure. *JQ: Justice*](#)

[Quarterly, 23\(2\), 167-185. doi:10.1080/07418820600688735](#)

Lilly, J. R., Ball, R. A., & Cullen, F. T. (2011). [Criminological theory: Context and consequences.](#)

[Los Angeles, California: Sage.](#)

Pratt, T.C. and F.T. Cullen (2000). —[The empirical status of Gottfredson and Hirschi's General](#)

[Theory of Crime: A Meta-Analysis. *Criminology* 38: 931-964.](#)

Taylor, C. (2001). [The relationship between social and self-control: Tracing Hirschi's](#)

[criminological career. *Theoretical Criminology*, 5\(3\), 369-388. doi:](#)

[10.1177/1362480601005003004](#)

Unnever, J. D., Cullen, F. T., & Pratt, T. C. (2003). [Parental management, ADHD, and delinquent](#)

[involvement: Reassessing Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory. *JQ: Justice*](#)

[Quarterly, 20\(3\), 471-500.](#)

Williams, F. P., & McShane, M. D. (2010). *Criminological theory*. Upper Saddle River, N.J:

Prentice Hall.

Willis, J. J., & Mastrofski, S. D. (2012). Compstat and the new penology. *British Journal of*

Criminology, 52(1), 73-92.