



On the absence of self-control as the basis for a general theory of crime:

A critique

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Abstract

It is now approaching a decade since Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi promulgated what they called 'a general theory' of crime. This article scrutinizes the claims made by the theory as measured against the standards of science and the results of empirical inquiries into elements of the proposed theoretical construct.

Key Words

criminological theory • self-control

In the final sentence of *A General Theory of Crime*, Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi note that they 'will be happy if our theory helps renew some intellectual interest in criminology, a field that once engaged the finest minds in the community' (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 275). Putting aside the arguable proposition that minds currently grappling with the subject of crime are less keen than those that tackled the subject in earlier years, the present critique of Gottfredson and Hirschi's work, seen beneficently, seeks to contribute to the ultimate happiness of the progenitors of what in disciplinary shorthand has come to be known as

‘self-control theory.’ Seen less benignly, this article raises a number of issues that, if I am correct, fatally undermine the logic and implications and, more specifically, the value of self-control theory.

For starters, we can juxtapose the dictum about theorizing by Richard Feynman, a Nobel Prize physicist, to the position taken by Hirschi on the same issue. Feynman insists that full disclosure is a prerequisite for the responsible promulgation of a theory:

Details that could throw doubt upon your interpretation must be given, if you know them. You must do the best you can—if you know anything at all wrong, or possibly wrong—to explain it. If you make a theory . . . then you must put down all the facts that disagree with it.

(Feynman, 1985: 341)¹

Compare this with Hirschi’s position on the same matter:

A major mistake in my original oppositional comparison of social control and social learning theory was to grant a gap in control theory that might possibly be filled by social learning theory. Almost immediately, hordes of integrationist and social learning theorists began to pour through the hole I had pointed out to them, and control theory was to that extent subsequently ignored. It was there that I learned the lesson . . . the first purpose of oppositional theory construction is to make the world safe for a theory contrary to currently accepted views. Unless this task is accomplished, there will be little hope for the survival of the theory and less hope for its development. Therefore, oppositional theories should not make life easy for those interested in preserving the status quo. They should at all times remain blind to the weaknesses of their own position and stubborn in its defense.

(Hirschi, 1989: 45)

Hirschi’s position lays a particular burden on critics that the originators of self-control theory evade: to find, if they exist, flaws in the formulation. We shall look at self-control theory in regard to:

- (a) its definition of crime;
- (b) the matter of tautology;
- (c) its discussion of criminal law;
- (d) its inclusion of acts analogous to crimes;
- (e) exceptions to the theory;
- (f) the role played in the theory by the concept of opportunity;
- (g) its views about specialization in criminal behavior;
- (h) its handling of the matter of aging;
- (i) how it deals with white-collar crime;
- (j) research on the theory;
- (k) ideological issues; and
- (l) child-rearing and the theory.

Defining crime

Gottfredson and Hirschi note that ‘no theory of criminality has taken as its starting point a thorough examination of the concept of crime’ (1990: 23). They quote, only to reject, the position of Wilson and Herrnstein, who have written:

The word ‘crime’ can be applied to such varied behavior that it is not clear that it is a meaningful category of analysis. Stealing a comic book, punching a friend, cheating on a tax return, murdering a wife, robbing a bank, bribing a politician, hijacking an airplane—these and countless other acts are all crimes. Crime is as broad a category as disease, and perhaps as useless.

(Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985: 21)

For their part, Gottfredson and Hirschi say that ‘we intend our theory to apply to all these cases, and more. It is meant to explain *all* crime, at all times, and, for that matter, many forms of behavior that are not sanctioned by the state’ (1990: 116; my italics). But only a few pages later we are informed that there are crimes that are ‘rare,’ and ‘complex,’ and ‘difficult,’ and that therefore they offer ‘an inadequate basis for theory and policy’ (1990: 119). So much for the earlier idea that self-control theory explains ‘all crime, at all times.’ Nor is it accurate that only ‘rare,’ ‘complex,’ and ‘difficult’ (what precisely does ‘difficult’ mean?) crimes fail to come within the theoretical embrace of self-control theory. As I proceed I will offer samples of a considerable roster of proscribed acts that are neither complex nor difficult nor rare and yet which seem to have little relationship to either the presence or the absence of self-control.

Crime for Gottfredson and Hirschi is not to be defined in strictly behavioral or legalistic terms because one and the same act may be criminal in some contexts and not in others (1990: 175). But research in Nigeria would point out that self-control theory does not travel well because it contains ‘unacknowledged value assumptions’ that ‘undermine its claim to universality’ (Marenin and Reisig, 1995: 501).

There is also the interesting observation by Gottfredson and Hirschi that ‘if a society defines an act as criminal, our definition should be able to comprehend the basis for that society’s definition’ (1990: 175). How, for example, does self-control theory advance our understanding of legislative enactments that penalize some drug usages and ignore others? Does the answer lie in the Hirschi–Gottfredson formulation or is a more adequate comprehension likely to emerge from a focus on power relationships?

Gottfredson and Hirschi decide that the core characteristic of criminal behavior—its ‘essential nature’ (1990: xiv)—is that nearly all crimes are ‘mundane, simple, trivial, easy acts aimed at satisfying desires of the moment’ (1990: xiv–xv). They also insist that modern criminologists have rarely appreciated that ‘various types of behavior—some criminal, some

noncriminal—may have enough in common to justify treating them as the same thing' (1990: 53). While some crimes do appear to possess etiological similarities, many of the behaviors that Gottfredson and Hirschi force under one rubric appear distinctive enough to require other kinds of explanations if we expect to be able to understand them and to predict their occurrence with some accuracy.

Gottfredson and Hirschi see criminal behavior as involving 'acts of force or fraud undertaken in the pursuit of self-interest' (1990: 14). This embraces an enormous spread of human activity, particularly if 'fraud' is viewed as the tendency to twist the truth to serve our own purposes. It seems reasonable to conclude that all human activity has self-interest at its base. Presumably any path in pursuit of our self-interest that is not absolutely honest is fraud.

Then Gottfredson and Hirschi add that criminal behaviors also provide 'immediate, easy, and certain short-term pleasure' (1990: 41). 'We are careful,' the authors note, 'to avoid an image of crime as a long-term, difficult, or drawn-out endeavor' (1990: 115). But what about law-breaking, such as many acts of kidnapping for ransom, that do not manifest these latter elements? Also, the 'certain' tag that they attach to short-term pleasure is puzzling. Few of us know with assurance the outcomes of many of our endeavors, short or long term. Is an act to be excluded from the theory's embrace if the pleasure it promises is not 'certain' or if the long-term consequences are far from assured, and, indeed, may never ensue?

Criminal acts are said to be 'exciting, risky or thrilling' (1990: 89), with the first and third conditions rather difficult to distinguish from each other. Presumably these characteristics of crime may be juxtaposed to the uneventful, safe, and boring behavior that denotes the acts of choice for those who demonstrate self-control. Criminal acts are also said often to produce 'pain or discomfort for the victim' (1990: 89). Such harmful consequences are believed by Gottfredson and Hirschi to be a matter of indifference to those with low self-control since they tend to be self-centered and insensitive to the needs of others. But there are legions of noncriminal acts, beyond those casually listed by Gottfredson and Hirschi, in which such harm-inflicting indifference is manifest. Essentially what Gottfredson and Hirschi do is to list what they believe are the elements of criminal activity as well as the elements of low self-control and then to insist that the second causes the first—or, rather, that it tends to cause the first.

Some other criminological theories are critiqued by Gottfredson and Hirschi on the ground that they 'are betrayed by the assumption that crime is analogous to an occupation, a career, or an organized way of life' (1990: 161). Crime, it is said, is not a full-time job and takes little in the way of time and energy. Were crime to require such dedication, it would not be attractive to offenders (1990: 63). Tell that to, among others, embezzlers who refuse to take vacation time out of fear that their cooking of the books will be discovered.

Tautology and self-control theory

Probably the most common criticism of Gottfredson and Hirschi's self-control theory is that it is tautological (see, for example, Akers, 1991; Meier, 1995), that is, to use a dictionary definition, it is characterized by a 'needless repetition of an idea . . . without imparting additional force or clearness' (Stein, 1969: 1456). '[I]t would appear to be tautological to explain the propensity to commit crime by low self-control,' Akers (1991: 204) observes. 'They are one and the same, and such assertions about them are true by definition. The assertion means that low self control causes low self control.' The tautological underpinning of self-control theory surfaces in statements by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990: 87) such as their depiction of self-control as 'the differential tendency of people to avoid criminal acts whatever the circumstances in which they find themselves.'

Hirschi and Gottfredson (1993: 54), maintain, slyly, that this criticism is 'a compliment,' because it demonstrates that they 'followed the path of logic in producing an internally consistent result' (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1993: 52). One can only hope that the authors allowed themselves a bit of a smile here, well aware of the taradillic nature of their position. A similar hope attaches to their observation that the fact that the 'apparently modest results' achieved in tests of their position 'may in fact be highly supportive of the validity of the theory' (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1993: 48).

Criminal law and self-control theory

Disconcerting issues arise from the Gottfredson and Hirschi pronouncement that self-control theory stems from the 'essential nature' of criminal behavior (1990: xii). The most (and perhaps the only) common element of all criminal acts is that they are in violation of the law. Gottfredson and Hirschi maintain that law is but one of the many forces that inhibit or fail to inhibit criminal activity (1990: xv), and one that is no more and often less important than an array of other items, such as social values, moral codes, and the anticipated displeasure of family and friends. There is some wisdom in this position, but it falls short when what the law is proscribing is not a behavior that requires self-control to avoid but rather one rooted in morality.

The Gottfredson and Hirschi position also cannot explain satisfactorily significant hunks of human activity that are proscribed by penal codes. To cheat on income taxes is most unlikely to have long-term harmful consequences and will likely produce short-term gains. Crimes of omission (such as not registering for selective service during the war or failing to install safety equipment in a workplace) and those imposing strict liability also are an unmanageable explanatory fit with self-control theory. Other serious criminal acts that at best are arguably tied to an absence of self-control include terrorism conducted for political ends, campaign finance

finagling, and call-girl prostitution to earn a satisfying livelihood. Note, for instance, Hoffman's (1998: 157) summary of the roots of terrorism in regard to matters of self-control: 'The wrath of the terrorist is rarely uncontrolled. Contrary to popular belief and media depiction, most terrorism is neither crazed nor capricious. Rather, terrorist attacks are generally both premeditated and carefully planned.'

Acts analogous to crimes

Crime, as we noted briefly earlier, is but one of a number of behaviors that Gottfredson and Hirschi attest can be explained satisfactorily by their theory. The theory is said to embrace events such as 'accidents, victimizations, truancies from home, school, and work, substance abuse, family problems, and disease' (1990: ix). Disease? Tell that to cancer victims with no history of smoking or other apparent etiological precursors that reasonably can be tied to their own actions.

Empirical work also challenges the noncrime reach of Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory when it departs from the penal codes. While lack of self-control was found to be related to gambling and drinking, it failed to differentiate smokers and nonsmokers. This result led Arneklev and his colleagues to suggest that 'the theory may not be as general as the authors think' (Arneklev et al., 1993: 244).

In the context of its excursion into acts said to be analogous to crime, Marenin and Reisig offer a particularly sage observation on self-control theory:

Of course, this is not a theory of crime, but of imprudent or risk-taking behaviors. The theory explains bungee-jumping or skydiving as much as theft or rape. Whether behavior is criminal and condemned, or simply imprudent but admired is determined by social conventions and law.

(Marenin and Reisig, 1995: 516)

There are other perplexing aspects of this extension of Gottfredson and Hirschi's formulation beyond crime. For one thing, it totally neglects what, for a very large number of persons, at least in the US, represents the quintessential absence of self-control: overeating. Should not overeaters be placed on the same short-term pleasure/long-term pain roster that is said to include both criminal acts and also a variety of noncriminal behaviors 'such as gambling, having sex, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and quitting a job' (1990: 178)? Moreover, how can the theory incorporate the uncounted number of criminal abortions undergone by women before the procedure was legalized by *Roe v. Wade* in 1973? (Reagan, 1993). Surely, it would be stretching matters greatly to maintain that the actions of women who opted for illegal abortions could be understood in terms of an absence of sufficient self-control.

Take another item on this roster of noncriminal matters. One of the entries is 'having sex.' In his earlier days Hirschi criticized Kingsley Davis

for using the term ‘sexual irregularities’ (Davis, 1961: 284), a descriptor Hirschi found ‘new and strangely vague’ (Hirschi, 1973: 162). He and Gottfredson apparently intend ‘having sex’ to mean intercourse or a reasonable facsimile thereof, without the sanction of the state. But there must be a very large number of very passionate marital interludes that might be seen to demonstrate inadequate self-control. Are the marital orgies differentiated from nonmarital forms of ‘having sex?’ Or are we faced with a moral rather than a social scientific judgment? And is the singling out of ‘the wife who has love affairs’ to illustrate behavior engaged in without satisfactory consideration of long-term interests merely illustrative or is it meant to differentiate her situation from that of her mate?

Self-control theory and its exceptions

Gottfredson and Hirschi’s self-control theory, as Reed and Yeager (1996: 359) observe, is probabilistic rather than deterministic. But how much need there be of a sometimes-result to justify treating diverse behaviors as the same?

The ‘nearly’ in the definition of crime by Gottfredson and Hirschi is a tactic that allows the authors a great deal of room to maneuver. They tend to have a strong tendency to employ the word ‘tend’ for the same purpose; thus, among innumerable other examples: ‘[O]ffenders . . . tend to be involved in accidents, illness, and death at higher rates than the general population; they tend to have difficulty persisting in a job regardless of the particular characteristics of the job’ (1990: 94).

The difficulty with these equivocations lies in determining the tolerance to be allowed a theory that insists it has the right to claim that it is a ‘general theory.’ How many exceptions are to be permitted before the theory can be said to have been disconfirmed or falsified? Observe, in this regard, satirist Jonathan Swift’s 18-century depiction of how Brobdingnagian pedants resolved the question of a human exemplar who did not mesh with the regnant theoretical construct:

He was then handed over for examination by the great scholars attending the court, who eventually agreed that he must be a ‘*lusus naturae*’—a freak of nature. Such a conclusion, reached after extensive empirical observation, mocks the pretensions of scientists who seek to explain the workings of the natural world. For in the face of a phenomenon that does not fit in with their preconceived ideas, the scholars make no attempt to revise their thinking, but only produce a meaningless formula that dismisses the phenomenon as an exception. The professors of Europe no longer rely on the supernatural to explain the apparently inexplicable, but this does not mean that the theories they advance are any more logical or scientific than those of their forebears. They, like the Brobdingnagians, have developed the concept

of the '*lusus naturae*' as a wonderful solution to all difficulties, to the unspeakable advancement of human knowledge.

(Swift, 1726: 143)²

The opportunistic use of 'opportunity'

Gottfredson and Hirschi not only exempt from their general theory 'rare' matters that do not fit, they also include a variable of basic importance that they hardly make any effort to address systematically, but rather they use as a catchall refuge to explain what otherwise might be inexplicable. Their contemporary *lusus naturae*—the idea of opportunity—is employed to account for predictions based on their formulation that might fall short. To be useful a theory ought to be able to specify with some precision those 'opportunities' that will or will not trigger the allegedly latent trait that is claimed to 'cause' the criminal behavior. Opportunity apparently refers to the availability of a target and the possibility of criminally taking advantage of that availability. Admittedly, those without fingers will find it difficult to pick pockets and those without jobs will be unable to violate the antitrust laws. But the opportunity to steal, rape, and murder seems virtually ubiquitous: it is about as unproblematic as the ability to smoke or overeat. Gottfredson and Hirschi grant as much: 'criminal acts,' they note, 'require no special capabilities, needs or motivation; they are, in this sense, available to everyone' (1990: 88). They use this point to oppose learning theories: 'There is nothing in crime that requires the transmission of values or the support of other people . . . [or] the transmission of skills, or techniques, or knowledge from other people' (1990: 151), a statement followed a few pages later with the comment that 'some acts will be outside the repertoire of some offenders (since no direct learning of those acts has been available)' (1990: 156).

Note in this context the following observation:

criminal acts are problematically related to the self-control of the actor: under some conditions people with low self-control may have few opportunities to commit crimes, and under other conditions people with high self-control may have many opportunities to commit them. If such people are mixed together in the same sample, differences in opportunities to commit crime will be confounded with differences of self-control such that the researcher may mistake the influence of one for the effects of the other.

(1990: 219–20)

After this is the statement that '[t]he fact that crime is by all odds the major predictor of crime is central to our theory' (1990: 232). This fact somehow tells Gottfredson and Hirschi that low self-control is a 'unitary phenomenon that absorbs its causes' and that therefore 'the search for personality correlates of crime other than self-control is unlikely to bear fruit' (1990: 232). These remarks segue into the determination that short-term institutional experience (why only short-term?) such as treatment programs as

well as jobs 'are incapable of producing any meaningful change in criminality' (1990: 232).

'In our view,' Gottfredson and Hirschi observe, 'lack of self-control does not require crime and can be counteracted by situational characteristics or other properties of the individual' (1990: 89). This is saying, in essence, that absence of self-control causes all crimes except those that it does not cause. And that the exceptions may be regarded as lying in a quite amorphous range of possibilities either within the social setting or within the person.

Are criminals polymorphously perverse?

Gottfredson and Hirschi maintain that 'specialization in particular criminal acts' is 'contrary to fact' (1990: 77, 266) and that the forms that illegal acts take are interchangeable (1990: 21–2). Research indicates, however, that criminal offenders are not necessarily polymorphously perverse. It shows that the nature of their law-breaking at any given time is not only a response to what is available when the self-control they allegedly failed to acquire before around the age of six or eight or so (1990: 272) (suddenly) prompts them into illegal action. Offenders often specialize.

The Gottfredson and Hirschi stress on the ubiquity of offending forms for all offenders again raises the question of how much specialization is necessary to render their categorical observation incorrect. 'Our portrait of the burglar applies equally well to the white-collar offender, the organized-crime offender, the dope dealer, and the assaulter; they are, after all, the *same* people,' Gottfredson and Hirschi insist (1990: 74). 'They *seem* to do just *about* everything they can do: they do not specialize' (1990: 190; my italics). Benson and Moore (1992: 252) note that '[c]ontrary to the claim of Gottfredson and Hirschi, we find that those who commit even run-of-the-mill, garden-variety white-collar offenses, can, as a group, be distinguished from those who commit "ordinary street offenses".' Similarly, Wright et al. (1995) have argued that burglars are likely to *specialize* in that offense because they acquire expertise. Wright et al.'s (1995: 40) interviews with 47 active residential burglars showed 'strong evidence of technical and interpersonal skill and knowledge relevant to specific crime opportunities.'

Aging and self-control

Gottfredson and Hirschi scoff at the idea that 'maturational reform' lies at the heart of desistance from criminal activity as people age, calling it and other such concepts an 'unexplained process.' But one can search their writing in vain for a clear and convincing alternative explanation for why people learn to control their 'stable' absence of self-control. They maintain that other writers have 'confuse[d] change in crime (which declines [with age] with change in tendency to commit crime (which may not change at

all)' (1990: 137, 144). But research findings advance the view that as they grow up some antisocial children strengthen their prosocial ties. Researchers also maintain that poor early behavior triggers hostile responses that feed into subsequent wrongdoing and that it is not the absence of self-control that is causative (Simons et al., 1998). '[Other theorists] are reluctant to acknowledge the idea of stable characteristics of the individual bearing on criminal behavior,' Gottfredson and Hirschi note critically (1990: 114). But how do you prove the existence of a trait that lies dormant?

Self-control and white-collar crime

Theories such as that proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi often have fallen prey to behavior that is defined as white-collar crime, namely, 'a crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of his occupation' (Sutherland, 1949: 9). Gottfredson and Hirschi sought to overcome this obstacle by insisting that white-collar crime is no different from any other form of crime and that its perpetrators also are marked by an absence of self-control (1990: 180–201; see also Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1987). They rely on the definition of the Yale studies of white-collar crime (see, for example, Weisburd et al., 1991) which examined a sample of 'white-collar criminals' that included, for instance, a female population in which one-third of the persons was unemployed (Daly, 1989).

Several major reviews of self-control theory and white-collar crime have demonstrated that its application to white-collar crime, defined as it traditionally has been, shows gaping holes. Reed and Yeager (1996: 359) point out that Gottfredson and Hirschi rely upon the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), which provide what they regard as a faulty measure of white-collar crime, since it focuses only on acts that most resemble conventional law-breaking (see also Steffensmeier, 1989; Benson and Moore, 1992; Curran and Renzetti, 1994: 216–18) for a differing view on corporate crime and self-control see Herbert et al., 1998). To say that an absence of self-control prods the decisions of top-level business officers who violate the law is to trivialize the roots of their actions. As Jamieson (1994: 216–18) has observed: 'The complexities behind decisions of corporate executives to engage in illegal behaviors cannot be overestimated.' But they may be underestimated.

Finally, we might note a study of savings and loan swindles that concluded that what it learned 'moves in exactly the opposite direction to Gottfredson and Hirschi's theoretical position by suggesting that many forms of white-collar crime are not reducible to individuals and their characteristics, but are embedded in large institutional and organizational arrangements' (Tillman and Pontell, 1995: 1459).

Research on self-control theory

There has emerged a flourishing criminological cottage industry that has seized upon self-control theory as a research topic. A researcher defines self-control, locates this or that sample, and then determines the relationship between self-control and criminal activity and/or some of the cognate behaviors specified in the general theory.

The research that has been published to date on social control theory finds pretty much what the initial reviewers of the Gottfredson and Hirschi book presumed they would find. Grasmick et al. (1993), for instance, used a survey instrument on Oklahoma City adults to measure self-control, found ‘inconsistencies,’ and noted that ‘criminal opportunity has a significant main effect.’ ‘The [self-control] theory,’ they concluded ‘is in need of modification and expansion’ (Grasmick et al., 1993: 22). A notably sophisticated analysis of National Youth Survey data by Greenberg et al. (forthcoming) found that the results suggested that, contrary to Gottfredson and Hirschi’s thesis, ‘different kinds of delinquent/criminal or risky behaviors have distinct causes.’

To determine whether self-control relates to differences in crime by gender, Burton et al. (1998) introduced a curious measure of opportunity—‘the number of evenings per week you go out for recreation activities.’ Though they find their results ‘largely consistent’ with self-control theory, they grant that their measure of opportunity is at best ‘limited’ and probably has little to do with, say, work-related crimes and income tax evasions. They conclude, inconclusively, that the theory has ‘implications’ for understanding gender-related differentials (see also Cochran et al., 1998; LaGrange and Silverman, 1999). It seems a rather long stretch to self-control from evenings out; and in many ways the Burton et al. (1998) research illustrates the problems likely to arise in an attempt to prove or disprove the Gottfredson and Hirschi postulates.

There also have been attempts to determine through questionnaires given to university students whether parental behavior is a ‘primary’ influence on the development of a child’s self-control, using self-report data on class absenteeism, academic cheating, and alcohol consumption as the measures of aberrance. The results offer ‘modest support.’ That the support is not stronger is self-effacingly credited by the authors to the fact that ‘our particular methods may be a source of particular error’ (Gibbs et al., 1998: 40, 65; see also Longshore, 1998).

The research reports almost invariably include disclaimers that are strikingly similar. Typically, the authors apologize for the shortcomings of their measurement items (e.g. Arneklev et al., 1993), and include a caveat about their results: (my research ‘should in no way be regarded as a complete and definitive test’ (Brownfield and Sorenson, 1993: 259)), and then point out that, just because they found the theory wanting, the reader should not conclude that it truly lacks scientific strength. They then offer a

boilerplate observation that more and better research is essential before the truth of the matter can be ascertained.

Gottfredson and Hirschi offer one of many hypotheses that might be tested: 'Holding propensity constant,' they write, 'communities in which schools enforce attendance rules would be expected to have lower crime rates than communities in which such rules were ignored' (1990: 252). It is not clear how one goes about 'holding propensity constant.' There also are many alternative plausible hypotheses that might well explain why one school and not another enforces its truancy rules. Many of these other explanations could provide an understanding of what we can presume will be slight variations in crime rates, if all other matters are similar, the last a most unlikely condition. Apparently no one, including Gottfredson and Hirschi, has seized upon this research suggestion.

The body of research about self-control theory can be summarized rather readily by noting that researchers typically find that there is a better-than-average chance that persons who commit traditional kinds of criminal acts lack self-control, however defined. They also find that there are many persons who do not fit the criteria that have been used to determine low self-control but who violate the law, and smoke, gamble, and have illicit sex as well as having children out of wedlock (see, for example, Burton, Jr et al., 1999). The published articles lustily debate the adequacy of diverse measures of self-control and other inquiry tactics, but nobody bothers to examine the theory in terms of logic and commonsense before launching upon the operationalization of the concepts and the testing. What we see going on in regard to self-control theory today meshes with the title of an article bearing on an altogether different subject: 'Ours is Not to Question Why, Ours is to Quantify' (Heiman, 1997).

Gottfredson and Hirschi's main reservation about studies that seek empirical data on their theory seems to involve the manner in which the investigators define self-control. Their preference, they observe, would be for behavioral measures, such as whether persons fasten their seat belts (Keane et al., 1993), rather than responses to personality and attitudinal surveys. But Evans et al. (1997: 495) note of such measures that it would not be clear 'whether self-control is predicting crime or whether behaviors similar in nature (analogous and criminal) are merely predicting each other.'

'Fads and fashions of research design in criminology come and go,' Gottfredson and Hirschi point out in their critique of longitudinal methods (1990: 252). The same observation can be made in regard to theoretical statements. Typically, the deteriorating fate of a theory once regnant is not the product of falsification by research: that the theory falls far short of its grandiose claims is usually evident from the beginning. In time, there develops an element of weariness, a kind of ennui, that begins to descend upon the threshers in the subdisciplinary field, often accompanied by the appearance of another theoretical contender. Attention then turns to the newcomer, an entrant that traditionally either seeks to amalgamate

earlier views or to set off on a totally different path. Cumulative refinement of earlier positions has been markedly absent from criminological theorizing.

Ideological issues in self-control theory

Notice also might be taken of elements in the Gottfredson–Hirschi presentation that seem to sacrifice logic at the altar of ideology. All theories, of course, carry with them implicit or explicit ideological offspring, but it is essential that the ideological and the policy recommendations be tied in a reasonable fashion to the theory. So unanchored at times is its ideological element that adherents to the full sweep of the Gottfredson and Hirschi presentation might well be positioned in that cadre demarcated by Justice Holmes: ‘Proper geese following their propaganda’ (Howe, 1957: 25).

Note, for instance, the following statement:

We see little hope for important reductions in crime through modification of the criminal justice system. We see considerable hope in policies that would reduce the role of the state and return responsibility for crime control to ordinary citizens.

(Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: xvi)

First, let us attend to the phrase ‘important reductions.’ How ‘important’ are the decreases that now keep showing up in UCR-reported offenses. While they may not altogether represent the efforts of the criminal justice system, they are inordinately unlikely to be the product of the inculcation of additional self-control in their children by parents. The ‘ordinary’ in ‘ordinary citizens’ (who exactly are the extraordinary citizens?) in the quotation is, of course, an ideological buzzword (see Geis, 1994). How such ordinary citizens would exercise their crime control responsibility, considered in terms of public opinion today regarding issues such as the death penalty, Megan’s law, and three-strikes, would seem to suggest at least some deeper soul-searching before such uninflected pronouncements are placed into a scientific treatise. Equally ideological and disturbing is the ‘theoretically derived’ insistence that ‘policies that seek to reduce crime by the satisfaction of theoretically derived wants (e.g. equality, adequate housing, good jobs, self-esteem) are likely to be unsuccessful’ (1990: 256). Even if self-control were at the root of criminal acts, it would seem much more sensible to view such things as a lousy job and inadequate housing as conditions that would bear upon frustration and absence of self-control.

In addition, scholars seeking explanations for variations in racial differences in rates of crime, Gottfredson and Hirschi maintain, should not pursue ‘fruitless’ paths that ascribe such differences to culture or strain but should focus on ‘differential child-rearing practices’ (1990: 153). It is not poverty, not discrimination, not absence of equal opportunity, but poor parenting that must bear the blame for the striking distinction in levels of criminal behavior when looked at in terms of the perpetrators’ race. To test

the theory, they suggest, efforts need to be made to relate such behaviors as 'whining, pushing, and shoving (as a child)' to later criminal acts, a strange task at best and a curious one given the authors' intellectual antagonism to longitudinal inquiries (1990: 220–40).

Child-rearing and self-control

For Gottfredson and Hirschi '[t]he major cause of low self-control . . . appears to be ineffective child-rearing' (1990: 97), though an escape hatch is opened thereafter: 'family child-rearing practices are not the only causes of crime' (1990: 101).

The cure for crime involves training adults, though 'not . . . in one or another of the various academic treatment disciplines' (an odd aside). The adults 'need only learn the requirements of early childhood socialization, namely to watch for and recognize signs of low self-control and to punish them' (1990: 269). To produce 'enduring consequences' the focus of crime control must be on 'parents or adults with responsibilities for child-rearing' (1990: 269).

We learn that some parents of children with low self-control are 'lucky,' that their children will not turn into criminals, though it is likely that such children will do something else indicative of low self-control. 'Put another way,' the authors observe sagely, 'low self-control predicts low self-control better than it predicts any of its specific manifestations' (1990: 102). There will be few who will argue with this statement, though they might regard it as somewhat less than altogether profound.

Conclusion

A famous scientist once observed that nothing is more tragic than the murder of a grand theory by a little fact. But he hastened to add that nothing is more surprising than the way in which a theory will continue to survive long after its brains have been knocked out (Thomas, 1960). Palumbo (1992: 538), writing about the considerable number of studies seeking to examine self-control theory, notes that their authors often feel pressed 'to perform wondrous mental gymnastics' (or, in Tittle's (1991: 1610) phrase, 'intellectual contortions') to reconcile theory and reality, 'to explain away much of the research that is incompatible with their theory.' Tittle (1991: 1611), in fact, quite correctly maintains that 'with a little modification, the self-control theory could readily accommodate the idea that strong, as well as weak, self-control can lead to force and fraud in the service of self-interest.' Gibbons (1994: 194) believes that self-control is 'a general theory of some instances of some forms of crime,' a view shared by Polk (1991: 576) who concluded that 'too much of crime falls outside the boundaries of their definition for this theory to be of much use' and that there is a 'general tendency that is true throughout the book for the authors

to shape the facts of crime so that these fit conveniently into the patterns consistent with the theory' (Polk, 1991: 577). Perhaps this is why the eminent physical anthropologist Mary Leakey preferred field work in the hot African sun to theorizing in the shade. 'Theories come and go,' she maintained, 'but fundamental data always remain the same' (Golden, 1996: 33).

General theorizing, as represented by the social control concept, faces a basic question: How much variance can the theory explain? Longshore (1998: 102) observes, for instance, that research testing self-control theory shows the variance explained to be 'modest'—between 3 and 11 percent.

We would endorse Gibbs' (1987: 830) observation that '[e]ach theory should be limited to one type of crime if only because it is unlikely that any etiological or reactive variable is relevant for all crimes'. Gibbons (1994: 196–7) echoes this observation: 'If we take seriously the claim that criminology deals with lawbreaking in all of its forms, we may well discover that the more modest goal of developing a "family of theories" makes the greatest sense for the criminological enterprise.'

Some shrewd observers of social behavior have concluded that a general theory is possible neither in regard to human acts nor to so broad a category as criminal behavior. 'The wish to establish a natural science of society, which would possess the same sort of logical structure and pursue the same achievements as the science of nature probably remains, in the English-speaking world at least, the dominant standpoint today,' Giddens (1976: 13) has observed. 'But those who are waiting for a [social science] Newton are not only waiting for a train that won't arrive; they're in the wrong station altogether' (1976: 13).

I presume that self-control theory in due time will join the now-crowded cohort of vainglorious efforts in whatever place is reserved for such endeavors. Let it be noted, in conclusion, that while Gottfredson and Hirschi adhere admirably to Einstein's dictum that 'the supreme goal of all theory is to make the irreducible basic elements as simple and as few as possible,' they fail to come anywhere near meeting the second element of Einstein's blueprint for a satisfactory theory: the simple and few elements of the theoretical construct, he observed, must be enunciated 'without having to surrender the adequate representation of a single datum of experience' (Einstein, 1933: 10–11).

Notes

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1. Complementing Feynman's view is that of Charles Darwin who noted how quickly he tended to forget any fact that seemed to contradict his theories. Darwin therefore made it a 'golden rule' to write down such information so that he would not later overlook it (Darwin, 1958/1856: 123).
2. Swift was not alone in addressing this issue satirically. The Frenchman Alfred Jarry (1923), an 'extremely odd character' (Tomkins, 1996: 70), in a posthumously published book, has a Dr Faustroll invent 'pataphysics,' a new science dealing with the laws that govern exceptions. Science's so-called laws, Jarry proclaimed, are simply exceptions that occur more frequently than others.

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