Self-Control Precis (Sara Wakefield)

Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi. 1990. *A General Theory of Crime.* Stanford: Stanford University Press. Chapters 2, 5, and 6.

Summary:

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (hereafter GH) self-control theory (1990) pairs an argument about the nature of criminals with arguments about the nature of crime. GH argue that crime is like other reckless nonlegal behaviors (such as smoking, drinking, unprotected sex) in that it brings temporary instant gratification to the individual and is the result of low self-control. GH argue that low self-control is an internal condition that is primarily set by the age of 7 or 8. In keeping with their explanation of the criminal, GH describe crime as simple and seeking instant gratification – this vision of crime has several implications for other criminological theories. First, GH argue that crime is simple, does not require planning or specialized knowledge (vs. Cloward and Ohlin's Illegitimate Opportunities Theory or Blumstein's conceptual view of crime as like a career). GH also include in their theory of crime some elements of routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979) – because crime is no different than other reckless behaviors and is unplanned, people with low self-control are sufficiently motivated and crime is controlled largely by external elements such as the lack of easy targets and the presence of capable guardians. GH's argument that low self-control is largely set by age 7 or 8 also implies that the longitudinal study of crime is not needed and that age-graded theories of crime are misguided (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1983).

GH's theory also weighs in on a fundamental debate regarding age and crime raised in Sampson and Laub's life course theory of crime discussed last week. Most undergraduate courses in criminology begins with a description of the age-crime curve and until GH's arguments on age (1983; 1990; 1986), it was not questioned that the age-crime relation was in need of social explanation. In contrast, GH argue that the age-crime relation is so invariant across time, place, and culture that it is not in need of social explanation. GH also argue, in contrast to Sampson and Laub, that married offenders are as likely to "age out" of crime as unmarried offenders or that employed offenders are as likely to "age out" of crime as unemployed offenders. Overall, GH make essentially a spuriousness argument with respect to empirical research linking marriage or employment to desistance from crime. Because people with low self-control tend not to get or stay married and tend not to get or keep good jobs, self-control is primary causal mechanism predicting crime and most research in criminology does not control for this.

Chapter 2: The Nature of Crime

GH note that most theories of crime begin with theories of the offender. GH "wish to reverse that tendency" by beginning their discussion of the nature of crime. GH argue that crime is "trivial" resulting in "little loss and less gain." Crime is less predicted by the characteristics of offenders than by the temporal and spatial distributions of people and situations. Most crimes require little preparation and leave few lasting consequences. Crime tends to occur late at night or early in the morning, between strangers, in the city, and be committed by young, poor, minority males who do not specialize in any particular type of crime. The main argument underlying their theory is that crime requires little preparation, training, or skill. Crime also "doesn't pay" – most offenses yield little gain and those that do (such as auto theft) are highly likely to be unsuccessful or associated with high levels of risk (as in the case of robbery).

Using these characteristics of crime as their base, GH outline the conditions necessary for crime to occur. Drawing heavily from routine activities or opportunities theories of crime (e.g., Cohen and Felson 1979), GH show that crime is substantially predicted by features beyond the individual offender. These features apply equally to property crimes (like burglary) and violent crimes (like rape). Crime tends to occur in situations where a victim or target is present, it is unlikely to be stopped (lack of guardians), and where the rewards outweigh the risks (motivated offenders). Theories which do not attend to these features of crime tend to predict things that are inconsistent with empirical knowledge about crime. First, they predict that we need separate theories for separate crimes (we don't). Second, they predict that committing serious criminal acts require special skills or seriousness (they don't). Third, many theories imply that offenders will tend to specialize in the types of crimes commensurate with their skills or temperaments (versatility, not specialization is the norm). Finally, classic theory gives special significance to crimes that are completed versus those that are only attempted (this distinction is unimportant for GH).

Chapter 5: The Nature of Criminality: Low Self-Control

This chapter adds GH's theory of offenders into their conceptualization of crime described earlier. GH begin their discussion by noting that classical theories of crime assume no special criminal propensities among criminals (note that Hirschi's 1969 control theory made no assumptions about individual variation in "criminality", only variation in social bonds and stakes in conformity). Classic theory explains crime in terms of social location, social bonds, or subculture membership and emphasizes the deterrents for crime as the major determinant. Classic theories of crime describe criminals as asocial creatures who are weakly bonded to the rest of society (aimless drifters in Hirschi's original conceptualization). In contrast, GH's theory rests on the assumption that individuals vary in their tendency to commit crime, regardless of social location. GH place the major predictor of crime in the internal concept of self-control. Its placement in their theory is directly related to their conceptualization of crime.

Elements of Low Self-Control

- Self-control consists of the ability to delay gratification. People with low self-control have a "here and now" orientation and are unable or unwilling to delay gratification.
- Crime is a situation which represents easy or simple desire gratification. Crime requires no skill or perseverance.
- Crime is exciting and appeals to those with low levels of self-control.
- Crime has no long-term benefits, thus, is only appealing to those with low self-control.
- Crime requires no skill or planning and is especially suited for those who are unable to make long-term investments in skill development.
- Crime results in pain or discomfort for its victims which fits with the correlation between low self-control and self-centeredness.

GH's low self-control argument rests on the idea that crime is like any other reckless act. Those with low self-control are as likely to commit other reckless acts; in addition, because low self-control is associated with all types of crime, offenders will tend not to specialize in particular kind of crime.

Determinants of Low Self-Control:

Low self-control is not produced by socialization. In contrast, it is produced in the absence of socialization, discipline, and training. Self-control, then, must be actively pursued. GH

locate the major cause of low self-control in the family – ineffective parents tend to produce children with low self-control. Low self-control is produced in families where there is little attachment between parent and child, in families where parents fail to recognize deviant behavior (for example, in cases where parents are also deviant), or when parents recognize deviant behavior and fail to correct it. Self-control that is not attainment in childhood is unlikely to be produced in adulthood.

Pratt, Travis C. and Francis T. Cullen. "The Empirical Status of Gottfredson and Hirschi's General Theory of Crime: A Meta-Analysis." ***Criminology*** **38:931-964.**

This article is a meta-analysis of Gottfredson and Hirschi's self-control theory and results of empirical research based on it. The authors pay special attention to the effect size of self-control variables, the influence of opportunity on the self-control/crime relationship (recall that GH differentiate between the elements of crime and the elements of the criminal, therefore low self-control does not automatically produce crime), operationalization of self-control across studies, the influence of varying research designs and sample characteristics, and the role of social learning variables. The authors review all published empirical tests of a general theory of crime, including those that did not explicitly name the theory but included self-control measures (21 empirical studies using 17 datasets and 50,000 individual cases).

Results:

Self-control is a strong predictor of crime across most studies. Its mean effect size is above .20, with behavioral indicators of self-control having larger mean effect sizes than attitudinal measures. This makes sense given that behavioral measures of self-control may be tautological ("crime causes crime"). In other words, behavioral measures of self-control are not theoretically distinct from the dependent variable (crime). Attitudinal measures of self-control therefore represent a more reasonable test of self-control theory and the effect of these measures have only slightly smaller mean effects on crime than behavioral measures. The interaction between self-control and criminal opportunity is also strongly related to crime (mean effect size = .50). The usefulness of self-control theory is not undermined by using an attitudinal measure or by the inclusion of social learning or opportunity variables. Self-control variables are also not significantly influences by sample characteristics – it is an effective explanatory variable across race, age, and crime type. Overall, self-control theory has performed well in empirical tests of its propositions with one major exception. Contrary to GH's argument, self-control is less strongly related to crime in longitudinal analyses relative to cross-sectional tests.

Wright, Bradley R. et al. 1999. "Low Self Control, Social Bonds, and Crime: Social Causation, Social Selection, or Both?" ***Criminology*** **37:479-514.**

This article presents a test of three competing criminological theories: social causation, social selection, and a mixed model. Social causation theories emphasize the relationships between crime and social relationships to school, work, family, peers, etc. In these theories, social relationships truly do cause crime (through bonds, learning, or imitation). In contrast, social selection models explain these links in terms of childhood characteristics and view them mainly as selection effects (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Thus, the link between work and crime is spurious due to levels of self-control – "self-control determined not only criminal behavior but the development of social bonds." Mixed theories imply that both processes are at work. The authors point to Sampson and Laub's age-graded informal

social control theory as an example of this. This theory links childhood antisocial behavior to adult crime through both a social causation and a social selection process. Criminal propensities are developed in childhood and operate in adulthood (social selection) *but* adult social bonds are not wholly determined by childhood characteristics and do predict crime (social causation).

The authors model these competing theories and offer a more direct test of their utility by observing characteristics such as low self-control in childhood. It then links these observations to antisocial behavior and social bonds in adolescence and adulthood. In order to accomplish this, the authors analyze data from birth to age 21. Self-control is measured as a construct that includes impulsivity, persistence, activity level, risk taking, and responding to conflict physically. Social bonds are measured by relationships with delinquent peers, work, marriage, and family. The dependent variables for the analysis are self-reported delinquency at age 15 and self-reported crime at age 21.

The author's first model social selection processes, finding that low self-control is strongly correlated with weak social bonds. With respect to social causation, social bonds are strongly correlated with crime. The authors then test the extent to which social selection variables attenuate social causation effects. Social causation variables remain significant even when childhood self-control measures are included in the model (though they do reduce the effect of social causation variables by an average of 5.5%). The authors then relax the assumption that self-control remains fixed after childhood and allow it to change (recall that GH argue that self-control is a largely static internal condition). In this case, social selection has a much stronger effect on social causation variables (reducing the effect of these variables by an average of 25%), but social causation remains statistically significant. Lastly, the authors show that the correlation between delinquency at age 15 and crime at age 21 is not significantly reduced when childhood self-control is included in the model. Alternatively, social bonds significantly mediate the relationship between childhood self-control and adult crime.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why must self-control remain [mostly] fixed after childhood?
2. Are GH's arguments about self-control and its relationship to crime tautological?
3. Are longitudinal studies of crime no longer needed?
4. What are the major connections between Hirschi's (1969) control theory and Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) control theory?
5. If self-control is produced mostly in the family at an early age and can't be changed later on, what are the policy implications of this theory?