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Investigating the personality construct of self-control
as defined in the General Theory of Crime.

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“He is gregarious and affectionate, but has a recurrent pattern of risk-taking behaviours. Look, for example, at his impulsive sampling of unknown substances (honey, haycorns and even thistles) with no knowledge of the potential outcome of his experimentation. We find him climbing tall trees and acting in a way that can only be described as socially intrusive.”

- An analysis of Tigger ¹

¹ Shea, S., Gordon, K., Hawkins, A., Kawchuk, J., & Smith, D. (2000). Pathology in the Hundred Acre Wood: a Neurodevelopmental Perspective on A.A. Milne. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 163, 1557 – 1559.

Abstract

Over the decades, “self-control” has generated much theoretical debate and research across the disciplines of human science. Although intuitively understood, the concept of self-control remains slippery as it can be viewed from various perspectives. As a consequence, it has been defined and measured in different ways which are not all consistent with one another. Self-control, or the lack thereof, has been implicated in criminality, psychopathology and various deviant behaviours. The General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) has attracted much interest and continues to be a major influence in understanding crime and deviance. At the core of this theory is the construct of self-control. Although the authors argue that their theory denies the existence of “an enduring criminal disposition”, their definition of self-control appears fully compatible with the concept of “trait” as used in personality psychology. However, there have been few attempts to establish explicit connections between personality traits and the self-control construct as defined in the General Theory of Crime.

This research investigated the personality construct of self-control as defined in The General Theory of Crime. The sample consisted of 63 faculty staff members and 126 young students located at the Albany, Palmerston North and Wellington campuses of Massey University. Quantitative data were collected via a postal survey questionnaire comprising scales measuring individual differences relating to (a) personality (Francis, Brown & Philipchalk (1992) Abbreviated form of the Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire), (b) self-control (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik & Arneklev (1993) Self-Control Scale), (c) imprudent behaviours (an adaptation of Marcus (2003) Retrospective Behavioural Scale), and (d) impulsivity (Dickman (1990) Functional and Dysfunctional Impulsivity Inventory). Results from the present study indicated that incorporating personality variables into a model of self-control explained more of the variance, strengthened the prediction of imprudent behaviours and indicated better goodness –of-fit statistics. Furthermore, the components of self-control, as defined in the general theory of crime, were better explained by the conceptually distinct latent constructs of Dysfunctional and Functional impulsivity. Limitations of this research and recommendations for further research are considered.

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Introduction

Since its formulation over a decade ago, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime (GTC) continues to stimulate theoretical debate and research. In particular, re-focussing attention on understanding why some individuals engage in criminal and analogous acts whilst others, in similar situations, do not. The core concept of GTC is "self-control", postulated to be the essential barrier between an individual engaging in criminal, or analogous, behaviour or refraining from such. According to GTC, ineffective parenting practices result in low self-control, which, in interaction with situational opportunities, results in criminal or deviant acts. As such, levels of self-control are determined at a young age and remain relatively stable throughout life. Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that, the identification of individuals low in self-control is possible by studying other non-criminal, analogous, behaviours with long-term adverse consequences, however the measurement of self-control remains contentious.

Gottfredson and Hirschi argue that their theory denies the existence of "an enduring criminal disposition", yet their definition of self-control appears fully compatible with the concept of "trait" as used in personality psychology. In psychology, personality trait is defined as a predisposition to respond in a particular way to certain situations, objects or persons (Aiken, 1999). Controlling these responses entails a consideration of the long-term personal and social consequences of behaviour for oneself and others, the self-control of immediate reactions and impulses. Furthermore, GTC and trait theory both conceptualise self-control as being stable over time and generalised across situations.

Self-control is an important facet of personality. Although various psychological theories implicate self-control, or the lack thereof, in criminality, psychopathology and deviant behaviours, there is little consensus regarding the exact definition and measurement of the concept. However, most omnibus or multi-trait personality inventories include a measure of self-control in one form or another. For example, the California Psychology Inventory (Gough, 1975); the Eysenck Personality Questionnaires (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975); the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality

Inventory (Hathaway, & McKinley, 1940); the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (Tellegen, 1982); the NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992); and the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (Cattell & Eber, 1962).

Support for self-control as an important variable in the prediction of crime has come from investigations of GTC. However, to date there have been few attempts to establish explicit connections between the self-control construct as defined in GTC and personality traits. The hypothesis that the meaning of self-control could better be reconceptualised as a composite of personality traits guides the present investigation. These understandings from a personality psychology paradigm would modestly contribute to the growing literature on Gottfredson and Hirschi's influential theory.

Linking criminal and analogous behaviours to a validated and established personality structure could help to organise and interpret research findings about the development of such behaviours. Furthermore, the integration of knowledge from different disciplines may contribute to the clarification of self-control, its nomological net, measurement and aetiology. Crime and imprudent behaviours lead to ever increasing social and personal distress, thus theoretical integration may contribute to prevention and rehabilitation through improved measurement and assessment. In particular, emergent patterns of personality dimensions in relation to levels of self-control may reveal better understandings of why some people are more vulnerable than others are to engaging in behaviour with long-term aversive consequences.

To summarise, Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory continues to influence criminological theory and research. At the core of GTC is self-control, posited as the essential element to explain all crime, and analogous behaviours, in all societies. Although Gottfredson and Hirschi deny that self-control is a personality trait as understood in personality psychology, GTC describes characteristics, or traits, that account for differences in criminality at the individual level. Furthermore, self-control is conceptualised as general across situations and stable over time, a latent construct that underlies criminal and analogous behaviour. Thus, it appears that well-established psychological concepts and understandings from personality trait theory would complement GTC, clarifying the conceptualisation and measurement of self-control.

In the following chapter, “Issues in the conceptualisation of self-control”, various differing schools of thought and relevant issues in conceptualising self-control are overviewed. These issues are then developed and explored through a review of the literature and research in chapter three, “Literature and research review”. First, there is an exploration and discussion of the elements of self-control as defined in GTC. Secondly, the problems of conceptualisation and measurement of self-control are unfolded. Thirdly, self-control is identified as an important characteristic of personality and relevant psychological theories are reviewed. Additionally, impulsivity is explored as a specific personality trait that appears to have a well-established relationship with criminal and imprudent behaviours. Finally, elements from both GTC and personality theory are woven together as an attempt clarify conceptualisation and measurement of self-control. This conceptual clarification guides the research and informs the discussion of obtained results and the conclusion in the final chapters, “Aim and general hypothesis, Method, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion.”