Self-Control and the Management of Violence

Presented at conference on

Controlling Violence

Bielefeld University
Bielefeld, Germany
October 17-20, 2007

by

Charles R. Tittle
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
North Carolina State University
Campus Box 8107
Raleigh, NC 27695-8107

e-mail: charles_tittle@ncsu.edu
Self-Control and the Management of Violence

Abstract

Extensive empirical evidence suggests that self-control plays an important part in the production of violence and other criminal acts. Therefore, it would seem that any policies designed to control violence must pay attention to weak self-control and ways to improve it or to counter its influences. However, effective policies rest on fuller accounts than that provided by self-control theory. Several potential weaknesses in the theory make it problematic for fashioning programs to control misconduct. Six such weaknesses and their potential implications are identified, and ways of overcoming those deficiencies are offered. It is concluded that self-control theory holds promise as a beginning for policy formation but it must be elaborated and integrated with other theories before it is likely to provide effective guidance.
Self-Control and the Management of Violence

Understanding the causes and manifestations of violence is necessary for its effective control. In short, we need verified theories that explain it and permit predictions of violence in all its manifestations. This is not to say that all control is impossible without theoretical understanding. For instance, even without explaining violence, one might reduce its occurrence by making violent behavior impossible, perhaps in the case of a known violent person by incarcerating that individual, or by making violence more difficult, perhaps in the case of a social group by tight control of weapons. Nor is it necessarily the case that understanding leads to effective control. As an illustration, even if we somehow knew, without any doubt, that violence results from specific forms and degrees of strain in human relations (Agnew, 1992), we might not be able to eliminate or alleviate those strains. Finally, understanding the causes of violence and having the ability to intervene effectively may not produce greater control because certain interventions might be prohibited because they are unethical or because they violate cherished rights. Nevertheless, the likelihood of effective control of violence would be considerably enhanced were scholars able to develop and verify, through extensive empirical research, a general theory that provides explanations of violent behavior with enough accuracy to permit precise predictions.

The collected body of criminological theory holds many clues for explaining misbehavior, including violence. However, no theory provides full, verified explanation. Nevertheless, one contemporary theory has attracted much attention because of its broad possibilities and because of the degree of empirical support it has enjoyed. Gottfredson and
Hirschi’s (1990) self-control theory would have to be regarded as one of the most popular of current theories, judging by the degree of research interest and the extent to which its theoretical premises have been integrated into other contemporary explanatory schemes. Hirschi has by now altered somewhat the original concept of low self-control that he and Gottfredson made famous (Hirschi, 2004; see also Piquero and Bouffard, 2007), but the original theory, with its notion of self-control as the convergence of six specific dimensions, continues to dominate discussion and research (examples of recent work include: Burt et al., 2006; Cauffman et al., 2005; Chapple, 2005; Doherty, 2006; Felson and Staff, 2006; Ribeaud and Eisner, 2006; Wright and Beaver, 2005).

Despite various potential weaknesses in the theory of self-control that have been identified by critics and researchers, it appears to hold much promise, particularly in helping to explain and predict violence. This potential has been acknowledged by many theorists whose own theoretical schemes have been modified to accommodate ideas about self-control (examples: Agnew et al., 2002; Colvin et al., 2002; Tittle, 2004). Yet, not all theorists share this enthusiasm, with at least some (Wikström 2006; Wikström and Trieber, 2007) directly questioning the general import of self-control, offering instead the insight that morality, something largely dismissed by self-control theorists and many other contemporary criminologists as well, overshadows self-control in explaining and predicting misconduct. According to Wikström, self-control comes into play only in very limited circumstances, when an individual “perceives an action alternative that involves breaking a moral rule, and when he deliberates over whether to act upon this alternative or not” (Wikström, 2006: 101). However, until the challenges posed by Wikstrom and other critics have been verified by research, self-
control theory must be taken seriously as offering one of the more potent accounts of criminal, especially violent, behavior.

Self-Control Theory

Self-control theory aims to explain criminal behavior, defined independently of the law as “force or fraud undertaken in pursuit of self-gratification” (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 15). Beginning with the assumption that, because it is inherently gratifying, no special motivation is necessary for such criminal or analogous behavior, the theory contends that individuals are differentially vulnerable to temptations (opportunities) for misconduct. Their vulnerability depends on their degree of self-control, defined generically as the “tendency to avoid criminal acts whatever the circumstances in which they find themselves” (p. 87) but with low self-control being more specifically reflective of six inclinations. Those six include: impulsivity, insensitivity, and physicality (in contrast to intellectuality) as well as being prone toward risk taking and short sightedness, and being non-verbal (p. 90). Such personality-like characteristics are said to be mainly residue from an early childhood in which care givers did not fulfill the requirements for successful socialization. Presumably, care givers who succeed in producing children with strong self control: (1) care enough about the children to monitor and correct their behavior, (2) actually monitor them, (3) recognize misbehavior when it occurs, and (4) express disapproval or otherwise discipline the children when misbehavior occurs.

Those with low self-control, which is theorized to be more or less stable through the life course after having been set in childhood, tend to ignore potential negative consequences of criminal behavior (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 95; 190-191) that are almost always present.
As a result, they are more likely to succumb to temptations, which are omnipresent and plentiful (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 2003). Thus, individuals with weak self-control are much more likely than those with higher self-control to end up committing criminal acts. The main reason for criminal behavior, and many other outcomes such as accidents, erratic employment, risky sexual behavior, and unstable marriages, then, is low self-control. Even though the “effects of low self-control can be counteracted by situational conditions or other properties of the individual” (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 89), the theorists contend that in the long run weak self-control will likely result in considerable misbehavior, far exceeding that manifest by those with stronger self-control.

Showing their belief that counteracting conditions or properties are of minimal import, the self-control theorists go on to state that low self-control is not only a likely cause of misconduct, but is the cause (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 232). Though the theorists soften this stance later (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1995: 140), self-control is still said to supercede all other potential causes of criminal behavior and to operate largely without contingencies and without interactions with other presumed causal variables featured in competing theories (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: chaps 7 and 8). Indeed, many of the variables set forth by other theories, as well as variables traditionally identified in research as predictors of crime, are said to have a spurious relationship with criminal behavior because they are themselves products of self-control. Thus, weak social bonds, under-achievement, deviant peer group influence, poor occupational or intellectual skills, and inadequate or noxious social relationships are supposedly reflections of weak self-control, such that taking self-control into account will negate associations between those variables and criminal outcomes.
The Research Evidence

Perhaps because of its sweeping nature, self-control theory has stimulated much research and continues to do so. The body of relevant work is now so large that it is impractical to cite more than a fraction of it in any one paper. However, in a comprehensive meta-analysis of research up to the year 2000, Pratt and Cullen (2000) concluded that self-control is one of the best and most robust predictors of criminal behavior available, with almost all studies, regardless of method of measurement of self-control, the kind of crime, the nature of the sample, or the cultural context, demonstrating at least a modest association between self-control and crime. Since that time, numerous additional studies have reported confirming evidence (see as examples: Benda, 2005; Cauffman et al., 2005; Chapple, 2005; Doherty, 2006; Felson and Staff, 2006; Longshore et al., 2005; Schoepfer and Piquero, 2006; Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005a; Tittle et al., 2003; Vazsonyi and Crosswhite, 2004; Vazsonyi et al., 2001, 2004). Thus, if the current body of research evidence is indicative, those who would try to understand, predict, and manage violence must consider the part played by self-control.

Uncertainties

Yet, despite the strong research support described above, there are good reasons to question whether applying the principles of self-control theory, as it is currently formulated, to the management of violence would be possible or effective. First, most of the supportive evidence concerns only the main hypothesis of self-control theory—that low self-control is implicated in misbehavior. The research about other aspects of the theory, particularly how self-
control is formed (see Hay and Forrest, 2006 and Latimore et al., 2006 for reviews); Pratt et al., 2004; Turner and Piquero, 2002) and potentially changes (Arneklev et al., 1998; Burt et al., 2006; Hay and Forrest, 2006; Raffaelli et al., 2005; Turner and Piquero, 2002); whether self-control affects criminal behavior by means of the causal mechanism the theorists have set forth (Nagin and Paternoster, 1993; Piquero and Tibbetts, 1996; Higgins and Ricketts, 2004; Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005b), and whether the exercise of self-control is subject to personal agency (Nagin and Paternoster, 1993; Piqueor and Tibbetts, 1996; Tittle et al., 2004) provides much weaker and less confirming evidence. As a result, it is not clear from the theory, or the research, just how consumers might manipu late or use self-control in efforts to manage violence.

Second, though low self-control may be implicated in violence and other criminal behavior, research confirms that it is not the only relevant factor. Indeed, the predictive coefficients are generally quite modest (usually between .20 to .30) (see Pratt and Cullen, 2000), and other variables have been found to predict misconduct independently of self-control, sometimes even substantially exceeding the predictive capacity of self-control (for example: Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005b; Antonaccio and Tittle, 2007; Tittle, et al., 2007). Moreover, contrary to the confidence of the self-control theorists, much research suggests that the potential effects of self-control may be contingent on various conditions, including some of those specified by rival theories (examples: Baumeister and Exline, 2000; Di Li, 2004; Giner-Sorolla, 2001; Lynam et al., 2000). Hence, it seems that control of violence may require that other things besides self-control be taken into account. It would appear from current evidence that effective intervention depends on going beyond self-control theory in identifying the main variables that can affect violence, parceling out their effects relative to self-control, and showing how they
interrelate with self-control in accounting for and predicting violent outcomes. In other words, we do not yet have a complete and adequate general theory to account for violence or other crimes or to draw upon in fashioning effective interventions. And, as I will argue later, without the kind of understanding that comes from adequate general theory, intervention may have inadvertent, dangerous consequences.

Toward a More Adequate Theory

One step toward a more complete theory that could serve as a reservoir for potentially effective intervention to control violence may be to improve self-control theory through elaboration and perhaps integration of other theories with it (see Tittle, 1995). Toward that end, I identify some potential issues with the current formulation of self-control theory and suggest ways that possible weaknesses might be overcome or minimized. One should recognize, however, that Gottfredson and Hirschi are not likely to accept the “weaknesses” to be identified as valid, nor are they likely to take kindly to any efforts to elaborate their theory–certainly not to efforts to integrate it with other theories. The style of the self-control theorists is bold and uncompromising, leading them to “man the barricades” rather than go to the negotiating table. Indeed, the role of a theorist, according to Hirschi, is not to seek modification or accommodation but to “remain at all times blind to the weaknesses of their own position and stubborn in its defense” (Hirschi, 1989: 45). For him, at least, knowledge grows from competition among theories not from accommodation.

Obviously, not everyone, including me, shares such a defensive philosophy (Tittle, 1985; 1989, 1995, 2004). In my opinion, knowledge grows when a theory is treated as a collective
product of the community of scholars. To be sure, theories begin with somebody’s formulation but after that they are fair game for others to use, mold, expand, and refashion in response to research evidence—all in a collective effort to produce a better product to serve the ends of science more adequately. Following that more accommodating philosophy, I am suggesting some ways that self-control theory may be improved to more adequately serve as a basis for understanding and perhaps managing violence, as well as other misbehaviors.

Because I identify so many aspects of self-control theory that seem to need modification, some may conclude that I do not appreciate the theory. Nothing could be further from the truth. I believe that of all the theories in the contemporary criminological repertoire, self-control theory may hold the most promise for achieving crime control goals. Indeed, it compares very well, logically and empirically, with its competitors. Indeed, were self-control theory not relatively successful, it would not now be the focus of so much discussion, research, and efforts like this one to improve it.

Potential Weaknesses

Self-control theory has now been in the public arena for 17 years. During that time numerous commentators, critics, and researchers have raised various issues. Six of those issues seem especially relevant because without their being addressed, self-control theory appears inadequate for explanatory purposes and as a basis for effective ameliorative action. In the following pages, I will outline those potential problems and suggest ways they might be overcome.
1. Neglect of Contingencies

One major potential problem with self-control theory, and one that may well account for its failure to predict outcomes more strongly, is its neglect of contingencies that may affect the operation of self-control (see Akers, 1991; Barlow, 1991; Benson and Moore, 1992; Geis, 2000; Grasmick et al., 1993; Reed and Yeager, 1996; Tittle et al., 2004). A contingency is simply a condition under which some causal variable works with more or less force. It is unlikely that any causal variable or process works the same way, with equal degrees of effect, under all conditions. To achieve maximum effectiveness, a theory must identify its contingencies, specify how they affect the operation of the main causal variable (that is, in what direction and to what degree), and explain why the contingent variables have the effects they do (see discussion in Tittle, 1995: 35). Stated in statistical language, a theory should specify any interactions between its main causal variable and other variables that might come into play.

The self-control theorists, however, do not see much need for contingencies. They seem to believe that with one exception, low self-control works basically the same for all people under all circumstances; that is, it does not interact with other variables in generating misconduct. The one exception to the dearth of contingencies in self-control theory is opportunity. The self-control theorist imply in their original statement that criminal opportunity is necessary before crime can occur, and since crime reflects weak self-control, self-control can have no effect without criminal opportunity. In the original statement the presence of opportunity appears like an absolute precondition, much as water is a precondition for human life. However, by logical extension, one might infer that availability of opportunities is a continuous variable; that is, some
individuals may be exposed to “golden opportunities,” others to not so golden opportunities, and still others to very few opportunities at all for criminal behavior. If so, then one could conclude that self-control theory implies an interaction between criminal opportunities and self-control in the production of criminal conduct.

Unfortunately, the theorists do not define opportunity, so it is unclear how this interaction is to be assessed and various scholars have used different indicators, including such things as exposure to delinquent peers, idleness, cohabitation and time spent with potential victims, perceptions of chances of committing various acts without much chance of short term negative consequences, and possession of the tools making a given form of misconduct possible (see Higgins and Ricketts, 2004; Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005a, for reviews). In fact, in a later statement, Gottfredson and Hirschi (2003) downplay the idea of opportunities altogether, noting that there are almost always opportunities for some forms of force or fraud (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 2003). And, since low self-control opens a person up for all kinds of misconduct, not just specific ones, opportunities for any type of crime (force or fraud for self-gratification) are likely to result in offending. So, in effect, the theory of self-control is a contingent-free theory. Although the theorists acknowledge that other things may sometimes subvert the operation of self-control, they do not identify those things or show how they might interact with self-control in allowing criminal behavior.

Research, however, suggests that self-control may be quite contingent (examples: Baumeister and Exline, 2000; Burton et al., 1998, 1999; Giner-Sorolla, 2001; Keane, et al., 1993; LaGrange and Silverman, 1999; Lynam et al., 2000; Nagin and Paternoster, 1993; Nakhaie et al., 2000; Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005a; Tittle et al., 2004) see also Pratt and Cullen, 2000). For
instance, in some of my own recent work (Antonaccio and Tittle, 2007; Tittle et al., 2007), my colleagues and I have found that in Russia and Ukraine, with attractiveness of criminal acts measured and controlled, self-control apparently works about the same as is usually found, but not in Greece where self-control shows little effect on projections of criminal behavior. This cross-national variation contradicts the theorists’ position that self-control is largely impervious to cultural influences (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: Chap 8) and it converges with the larger body of research in showing that self-control does not operate without regard for other conditions. Apparently, not only do the effects of self-control sometimes vary by socio-demographic characteristics but they also seem to depend on a number of additional theoretical variables.

Although self-control does appear to be unusually general in its effects, performing reasonably well in many kinds of circumstances, even cross-culturally (see Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005a for a review of the evidence), the theory would probably be a lot more effective, especially in guiding crime management programs, if it paid more attention to contingencies. Any theory is better when the conditions under which its causal variables are most likely to operate with maximum effect are explicit. For instance, if it turns out that people can decide whether to exercise self-control or not (Tittle et al., 2004), instead of it simply being an automatic response to opportunity, then the factors that go into generating that desire to exercise self-control will be crucial. Similarly, if the exercise of self-control is sensitive to whether others in a social context are exercising it, as may be implied by the work of Lynam et al. (2000) about community context, by the work of scholars noting variations by peer relations (Nakhaie et al., 2000), or by other reasoning (Tittle and McCall, 2006), then the focus of
management efforts will necessarily have to be different than if self-control is a simple
expression of personal tendencies. This is especially true if degree of “criminal opportunity” is
a contingency for self-control to affect misconduct, which it may be if, as Baumeister and his
associates claim (Baumeister and Exline, 2000; Muraven et al., 1998; Schmeichel and
Baumeister, 2004), the effectiveness of self-control varies with the frequency with which it is
exercised. According to research by the Baumeister group, overuse of self-control in the short
run may lead to fatigue, like a muscle, although regular exercise of self-restraint over a longer
time span may strengthen the capacity for self-control. Therefore, the general degree of criminal
opportunity, and consequently the likelihood of self-control being exercised, may be relevant.
And, criminal opportunities may have little to do with the individual, being instead a reflection
of community structure and organization (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Felson, 1998; Wilcox et al.,
2003). If so, self-control rooted ameliorative programs that ignore the larger social context may
be limited in what they can accomplish.

2. Limited Hegemony

A second potential problem in trying to use knowledge of self-control to manage violence
is the interconnection of self-control with other theoretical variables. As already noted, the
predictive coefficients for self-control, though persistent, are not high. In every study, most of
the variance in the measures of criminal behavior is left unexplained by self-control. And, as
important as the research suggests self-control to be, it has not been shown to supercede other
variables such as social bonds, moral beliefs, peer influences, and criminal attraction. Research
suggests that all of those variables may have independent influences on criminal behavior, at
least under some conditions, and it also suggests that some other variables may have more effect than does low self-control.

Morality, for instance, has consistently proven itself to be a strong predictor of criminal behavior (examples: Evans et al., 1997; Longshore et al., 2004, 2005; Piquero and Tibbetts, 1996; see review of evidence in Tittle et al., 2007), and recent research suggests that it is largely independent of self-control in ability to predict measures of crime (Antonaccio and Tittle, 2007; Schoepfer and Piquero, 2006; Tittle et al., 2007). Moreover, even making allowances for potential tendencies toward cognitive consistency in measuring morality and criminality in surveys, predictive coefficients for measures of morality still appear to be superior to those of self-control—even controlling factors like criminal attraction that may overlap and absorb much of the effect of morality (Schoepfer and Piquero, 2006; Tittle et al., 2007). Similarly, in the few studies that have included it, criminal attraction itself, which some might call criminal motivation, shows stronger predictive strength than self-control, often even reducing substantially the magnitude of self-control’s effects (Nagin and Paternoster, 1993; Piquero and Tibbetts, 1996; Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005b; Tittle et al., 2007).

Along these same lines, but to a lesser extent, social bonds, at least under some conditions, appears to exercise some influence on crime that is independent of self-control (see review in Welch et al., 2007; as well as De Li, 2004). Moreover, peer influence, which is often taken as a proxy for the effects of social learning, remains an independent and strong predictor even with self-control in the equations (see, for example: Akers, 2000: Chap 4; Chapple, 2005; Hwang and Akers, 2003; Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005a).
Therefore, research strongly implies that effectively employing ideas about self-control to control violence will depend on developing a more comprehensive theory that integrates self-control with other causal elements. It will not be enough for such an integrated theory to note simply that other things besides self-control are relevant. Really useful integrated theories must show how and why various causal streams come into play as well as the conditions under which one or another causal stream is likely to be predominant. And, of course, such a theory must show how those causal streams interlink in producing violent (and other) outcomes. The current version of self-control theory is a start, but it is not a finish.

3. Sources of Self-Control May be Incomplete or Mistaken

An aspect of self-control theory that is of particular importance if the theory is to guide efforts to control violence is its specification of the sources of self-control and its argument with respect to potential changes in self-control after childhood. Gottfredson and Hirschi do not think much manipulation is possible after individuals’ basic levels of self-control are set. They do grant that some modification or enhancement may occur in the schools but in general they contend that self-control is stable throughout the life cycle—at least in a relative sense (see Burt et al., 2005). That is, those whose self-control is low relative to others soon after leaving childhood will always have low self-control relative to others, even though everybody’s self-control may increase or decrease somewhat over the life-course.

On one hand, the idea that whole cohorts can experience changes in self-control over the life course implies that self-control can go up, as it currently seems to when people move from
adolescence to adulthood, and it also implies that those with low self-control can experience some absolute improvement in their ability to restrain themselves. If absolute levels of self-control are key to control of violence, then organized programs to improve levels of self-control after childhood may hope for some success.

While self-control theory seems to focus on absolute self-control, the relativity notion ironically implies that whatever brings about changes in overall levels of self-control for whole cohorts, be it planned or not, may result in reductions in crime. Unfortunately, one can also imagine that relative deficiencies in self-control may portend unusually high levels of offending, even beyond the amount expected given an individual’s absolute level of self-control. This seems particularly likely if the exercise of self-control is somewhat volitional or if strong expectations by others for the exercise of self-control are perceived as straining by the individual with lesser self-control. Thus, for example, an individual with a score of 60 on a 100 point scale of self-control surrounded by others with an average score of 85 may find opportunities for self-gratification especially plentiful because others are not availing themselves. In addition, such an individual may find the self-control expectations implied by the behavior of those with higher self-control to be straining in a way that may provoke unconventional coping (Agnew, 1992). Therefore, the 60-score individual in context with others of higher self-control may be more likely to offend even than an individual with a self-control score of 30 but who faces fewer opportunities for crime and fewer expectations for self-restraint that he/she cannot fulfill. If it turns out that relative levels of self-control, rather than absolute degrees, are most predictive of violence, then amelioration through changes in child care protocols will not matter much.

However, to my knowledge no research has yet been conducted to ascertain if relative or
absolute self-control is more important. Research to date has tried to determine if variations in absolute levels of self-control among individuals predict criminality under various conditions. But, overall levels of self-control within social contexts where individuals are embedded has not been explicitly studied as a potential condition for the operation of individual levels of self-control. In addition, even research about the conditions supposedly producing self-control has been limited, with much of it lacking the stronger longitudinal data necessary for drawing firm conclusions. The evidence that has been reported suggests that self-control may not stem from the care-giving actions the theory lays out and that other influences may intervene at various points in the life cycle to change an individual’s level of self-control, including learning from experience to anticipate negative consequences from unmindful behavior (Arneklev et al., 1998; Burt et al., 2006; Cochran et al., 1998; Feldman and Weinberger, 1994; Gibbs et al., 1998, 2003; Hay, 2001; Hay and Forrest, 2006; Hope et al., 2003; Perone et al., 2004; Polakowski, 1994; Pratt et al., 2004; Raffaelli et al., 2005; Turner and Piquero, 2002). Thus, the child-rearing regimen set forth in self-control theory may neglect some important elements, such as gradually granting autonomy to children and involving them in decision making, and the specified regimen may include some elements that are unimportant or irrelevant.

Moreover, constant punishment or correction of misconduct theorized by Gottfredson and Hirschi to produce people with strong self-control may actually produce people with expedient rather than moral orientations toward conformity. If the only reason for self-control is the fear of being caught and punished, the person is likely to offend when those possibilities are absent or perceived to be absent. Hence, self-control may be of little import relative to morality, as Wikström contends. So, one interested in controlling violence might well wonder whether
high self-control without morality is better than weak self-control with morality and whether the Gottfredson/Hirschi specified child rearing regimen is especially conducive to the high self-control, weak morality combination.

Finally, there is reason to imagine that some genetic and biological forces unattended in self-control theory, may set the parameters and limits within which child rearing can produce strong self-control (Moffitt and Caspi, 2006). At least for a few individuals, who in the end may account for a good proportion of violence, various neuropsychological deficits may make the development of self-control extremely difficult (Moffitt, 1993), no matter the child rearing regimen.

Even if the self-control theorists turn out to be correct about the influences of particular kinds of child rearing in forming self-control, it is difficult to assess the implications that such care giving might have for potential modification of self-control later in the life course. For one thing, it is unclear just how much absolute stability the self-control theorists envision. On the one hand, they maintain that little change occurs after childhood (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 107-108), yet by presenting the relativity notion (that is, that even if change occurs, people will retain their self-control positions relative to others) (see Burt et al., 2006) they concede that some overall change may occur. Research confirms this ambiguity. Some data have shown substantial stability but other research indicates change. Overall, it seems likely that there are variations in self-control over the life-cycle and that they reflect differential “maturity” (or learning) as well as dependence on contextual variables like peer group example and expectation, collectively shared ideas about the exercise of self-control, role models, or institutions encouraging self-control (see Tittle et al., 2004).
Therefore, using self-control theory to fashion effective programs for management of violence must wait on further theorizing and research to establish exactly how self-control comes about and how it may change. Interventions based on the statements of the original self-control theory may well fail, and they might even exacerbate the situation. For instance, if constant monitoring of children with subsequent punishment of misconduct actually leads to expedient, external orientations, that is, conformity out of fear of punishment, widespread encouragement of such parenting may in the long run produce more people who avoid violence only when they are being watched by rule enforcers or disapprovers. Since surveillance of adults is skimpy at best, an absence of moral orientation (internal guidance) might actually lead to greater overall levels of violence. In addition, if the social support theorists (Colvin et al., 2002) are correct, consistent coercion implied by the self-control regimen might well produce self-controlled, conforming adults but at a high cost in mental health.

4. Causal Mechanism May Be Incorrect

When people employ remedies for problems without understanding the causes of the malady or how the remedy supposedly works, they are simply shooting in the dark, as likely to miss as to hit and as likely to hit the wrong thing as the right thing. That is why simply identifying and manipulating “risk” factors is insufficient (Farrington, 2000; Loeber et al., 2006). Low self-control definitely seems to be a “risk factor” that predicts criminal behavior to some degree in the general case, but to try to use that “risk factor” knowledge per se for management of violence is not promising. If a risk factor is to be effectively employed, it must be derived
from a theory that explains why and how it produces the outcomes of interest. Self-control theory attempts to do that by asserting that low self-control leads to crime because it renders individuals unable or unlikely to contemplate and react to the long range negative consequences of their misbehavior. As the theorists put it: “So, the dimensions of self-control are, in our view, factors affecting calculation of the consequences of one’s acts. The impulsive or short sighted person fails to consider the negative or painful consequences of his acts” (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 95).

Relatively speaking, little research has tried to determine whether failure of deterrence is the connecting link between low self-control and criminal behavior (see Higgins and Ricketts, 2004; Nagin and Paternoster, 1993; Piquero and Tibbetts, 1996; Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005b; Wright et al., 2004). The limited research that has been conducted, however, seriously challenges the idea (see Tittle and Botchkovar, 2005b for a review and presentation of original data). From a policy standpoint, that is really bad news. If it were as Gottfredson and Hirschi suggest, then an obvious intervention technique might involve efforts to enhance awareness and fear of negative sanctions among those with low self-control, perhaps to create a generalized sense of danger. But if the research on self-control and deterrence is correct in failing to find lack of deterrence to be the causal mechanism for self-control to affect criminal behavior, a program that tries to enhance awareness and fear of sanctions may not work. And, it may be unnecessarily costly as well as potentially dangerous.

So, if self-control theory is to be used to help control violence, its specified causal mechanism linking low self-control with criminal manifestations may have to be altered. But, this raises the obvious question of what the actual causal mechanism might be that links low self-
control with criminal behavior, if it is not failure to anticipate and take into account potential bad consequences? To my knowledge, theorists have offered no guidelines. Nevertheless, one alternative possibility may be that low self-control implies a tendency toward gratifying oneself \textit{despite} potential costs. As such, some people with low self-control may actively seek out temptations in the hopes of gratification and in full knowledge that the behavior at issue may be costly. Many of those with low self-control, rather than failing to think about sanctions and costs or being insensitive to them, may deliberately put themselves at risk. They may provoke fights, go to places known to be dangerous, keep weapons, and the like, all in the hopes of gratifying themselves in the face of potential costs. Indeed, for some, the risk of cost itself may provide part of the gratification. In describing characteristics of low self-control, the theorists identify risk taking as one dimension that presumably helps define low self-control, which then leads to behaviors (crime) that can produce gratification, but research suggests it may be one of the more important dimensions (see, for example Grasmick et al., 1993; Arneklev, et al., 1993). However, risk taking itself may be gratifying, regardless of whether force or fraud is involved. Therefore, the connecting link between low self-control and crime may be the strength of ones desire for gratification and the thrill of risk taking—which I will dub the “risky thrill syndrome” (cf. Katz, 1988).

The risky thrill syndrome may be different from attraction to crime itself. In some research (including some of my own) scholars have tried to measure inherent criminal attraction by questions about the degree to which commission of various acts is perceived as “appealing” or “useful.” Yet, people can perceive that a criminal act might have strong inherent potential to gratify them if gratification were needed, while at the same time recognizing their own low
personal need for gratification as well as low personal tolerance for risk. The risky thrill syndrome being proposed as the intervening link between low self-control and crime involves individual variations in need, or desire, for gratification, or “thrills,” along with a tendency to find risk taking fun or pleasing. Corresponding somewhat to Ellis's (1987) notion of arousal capacity, some people are easily satisfied, with minimal need for gratification—almost anything will pacify them. Others are hardly ever satisfied; they have such a high need for gratification that ordinary things do not fill the bill. Correspondingly some people are highly gratified by taking risks—the greater the potential loss or danger, the more fun it is. Others are terrified by risk; to them it is not fun and is, in fact, distressing or painful. Thus, the individual with low self-control needs gratification (thrills) more than others and finds gratification especially in risk taking. As a result low self-control is likely to produce crime regardless of cost; not because the individual with weak self-control is insensitive to it, but because he does not care or actually seeks to defy those threats.

This proposed alternative causal mechanism for self-control theory may prove to be completely wrong, or it may lack enough logical power to inspire researchers. It is offered as one possibility to encourage other thinkers to propose and test additional ones. Hopefully, the real causal mechanism will turn out to be something else—because the risky thrill possibility has an especially onerous implication for using self-control in combating violence. “Needing” gratification and experiencing risk taking as thrilling may not be learned phenomena. To the extent that they are genetically or biologically linked, it will be very difficult to change them. For example, how would one go about molding someone’s inherent craving for thrills or perceptions that risk taking is a thrilling activity? Inhibiting gambling among the addicted has
never been easy.

5. Perhaps Too Individualistically Oriented

A fifth potential deficiency of self-control theory, and one that is particularly pertinent to efforts to use the theory in trying to control violence, is its narrow focus on individual-level variations in criminal behavior. Generations of sociological criminologists have argued that there is a reality *sui generis*. Community, or group level phenomena, are thought not only to influence behaviors of individuals within them, but they are assumed to generate and reflect collective outcomes that go beyond simple aggregation of individual characteristics. Attempts to control violence will have to look beyond individuals to that larger ecological level if it is to be successful. After all, if some attempted intervention, particularly an effort or program to improve self-control, is effective, its success will be registered mainly in falling crime rates–a collective marker. If self-control is, as the theorists seem to maintain, largely set in childhood with little possibility of modification later in the life course, the notion of interventions to improve individual’s capacities for self-control is unrealistic. Even if self-control could be changed, successful interventions for individuals are much less likely to matter as much as successful changes in community organization that bear on overall levels of self-control and misbehavior.

Yet, self-control theory almost completely ignores the possibility of larger collective structures. I think this is a mistake. For one thing, despite the impact the theory has had, self-control thinking has not pervaded the full scholarly community, especially the sociological segment, because of this neglect of macro-level phenomena. Many criminologists define their objectives as explaining aggregate levels of crime or deviance (crime/deviance rates) in larger
social units (see Akers, 2000: 4-5; Akers and Jensen, 2003; Sampson, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2003). They tend to view individual-level theories like self-control as of little consequence for their work (Felson, 1998; Messner and Rosenfeld, 2001). Instead, macro-level social analysts are drawn to collective properties as both independent and dependent variables, and the sociological literature bearing on crime has spawned a number of such properties that are thought to be *sui generis* but to affect both individual behaviors and collective expressions. They include “collective efficacy” (Sampson et al., 1997), “social disorganization” (Bursik, 1988; Sampson and Groves, 1989; Shaw and McKay, 1942), “interdependency” (Braithwaite, 1989), “effective guardianship” (Cohen and Felson, 1979), or “capacity for self-regulation” (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993, 1995). Aggregate outcomes that are presumably explained and predicted by those collective properties include such things as overall health, economic well-being, or crime rates. But, sociologists generally contend that supra-individual properties also affect individual behaviors (Durkheim, 1933 [1893]; Sampson, 2006). Hence, collective outcomes are expressions of simple aggregated individual phenomena but they also reflect something additional.

A goodly proportion of scholars prefer theories with multi-level applicability (See, for example: Jensen and Akers, 2003: 16; Sampson, 2006: 32; Short, 1998; Wilcox et al., 2003). And, in recognition of the advantages of multi-level explanations, some individualistically oriented theorists have tried to make their theories applicable to larger social units as well as to individuals (examples: Akers, 1998; Agnew, 1999; Tittle, 1995). Self-control theory would be far more useful in trying to fashion programs for reducing violence if it had an ecological-level analog.
My colleague, Patty McCall, and I have been developing ideas about supra-individual aspects of self-control that may be manifest in community or contextual properties (Tittle and McCall, 2006). If our arguments prove to be correct, and the results of our analyses of cause of death data over four decades in U.S. cities suggest they should be taken seriously, then the prospects for managing violence through application of self-control ideas is much brighter than otherwise.

We contend that levels of self-control among individuals may be linked to community or ecological-level phenomena in two separate ways, both of which bear on potential intervention. First, there are simple aggregation effects, which, even though they do not represent an emergent phenomenon, may nevertheless point toward interventionist avenues. Second, community analogs for self-control may involve emergent contextual characteristics and processes that Sampson (2006: 32), drawing on the work of Sorenson (1998), calls social mechanisms. In addition, both aggregation effects and emergent community processes concerning self-control may interact or interlink to produce what I and McCall refer to as “collective discipline,” which we theorize to have potent effects on individuals’ levels and exercise of self-control as well as on shared community expressions of self-control. We define collective discipline as “the capacity and tendency of a social unit to promote reflective (mindful, or contemplative) behavior among participants (either residents or temporary sojourners).” It is our contention that a social unit’s degree of collective discipline strongly affects its crime rate as well as rates of such things as unemployment and family dissolution.
If we are correct in our thinking, then efforts to combat violence will most likely be successful when they focus on ways to strengthen collective discipline. Consider, first, the “aggregation” aspects of collective discipline.

Aggregated Self-Control of Individuals

Research suggests that the bulk of crime is typically committed by recidivists who constitute a relatively small portion of any given population (Thornberry et. al., 2003; Wolfgang et al., 1972). According to self-control theory, those high crime prone individuals are most likely characterized by especially weak self-control. Moreover, the proportion of the population that are high-rate, low self-controlled offenders is probably different in different social contexts. Therefore, one can surmise that the rate of violence or other kinds of crime varies with the proportion of the population with low self-control. In this case “population” refers to long term residents as well as migrants who might be temporarily in the locale. Therefore, one implication is that rates of violence can be reduced by altering the proportion of a population with poor self-control. If people with low self-control are more likely to commit violence and the proportion of such people declines, then rates of violence should go down. One way to reduce the proportion of low self-control individuals in a context is by selective incapacitation; another is to restrict movement into a community to those with demonstrated strong self-control. These, of course, are theoretical examples. Both raise specters of authoritarianism that may be unacceptable.

There is another way that the relative size of the poorly self-controlled population is
relevant to rates of violence or other crime. Evidence suggests that degree of crime reflects opportunities for its occurrence, with opportunities at least partly reflecting careless guardianship (Felson, 1998). Careless guardianship, in turn, to some extent probably indicates weak self-control (Schreck et al., 2006). The doors of the residences of those with weak self-control are more likely to be left unlocked, and the weakly self controlled are liable to leave keys in automobiles, to show cash unnecessarily, and to respond to fraudulent schemes, and they are also more likely to visit dangerous locales where they might be assaulted, to utter imprudent or provocative remarks that might cause others to become angry, or to keep unconventional hours when ordinary protections against possible violence are not in place. In a less obvious way than the poorly self-controlled simply committing crimes to elevate the crime rates, where numerous people with low self-control reside, the crime rates should be greater because those with low self-control help create temptations for others to engage in criminal behavior. Therefore, even if the prevalence of people with low self-control does not increase the chances of criminal behavior directly through the misbehavior of the less self-controlled, general levels of weak self-control may nevertheless affect rates of crime, especially violence.

Emergent Structures and Processes

Aggregation effects, however, are closely linked with actual individual levels of self-control. Of more potential importance are emergent community structures and processes. Sampson and his associates (see Sampson, 2006; Sampson et al., 1997), have hypothesized and demonstrated that neighborhoods and communities often vary in the extent to which residents share notions about intervening in potential problems (what they call “collective efficacy)” and
that such processes operate at a “meta-individual” level. In a similar way, I and McCall suggest that residents of a social grouping may develop shared expectations for the exercise of self-control as well as shared processes for generating stronger self-control in the population.

“Collective self-control consciousness,” as we dub it, includes (1) cultural (that is, learned and widely shared) feelings and attitudes concerning the cultivation and practice of reflective or contemplative behavior by people in a given social context and (2) social institutions and structures that enhance the growth, practice, and appreciation of self-control.

We further theorize that there are three elements involved in cultural attitudes and feelings about mindful action. First, a “self-control culture” is one in which most people value personal self-control, admire efforts to develop and exercise it, and regard as a good thing, attempts to help other people develop such self-control. Second, the kind of culture implied here involves collectively shared expectations that individuals will want to practice reflective behavior. Finally, a culture of self-control encompasses a pattern of social reaction in which residents of a community or social collectivity: (a) socially reward, through informal recognition, granting of prestige, and bestowing of honor, individuals who in fact exercise non-impulsive behavior, and (b) formally and informally impose negative sanctions on those who fail to contemplate the potential consequences of their actions before acting. Further, we suggest that in any social context institutional infrastructures arise that have to do with the development of self-control and with cultivating shared values about the worth and importance of people desiring to exercise self-control. Such infrastructures incorporate ways of reinforcing actual exhibition of strong self-control. Moreover, such “self-control related” institutional infrastructures may be broad and interlinked.
While we are not aware of any data actually demonstrating differences in the collective value placed on self-control among communities or other social units, it seems likely that such variations are there to be measured and studied. Drawing on qualitative impressions, we can see that some cities are known for hedonism while others have reputations as beacons of self-discipline. Las Vegas is widely thought of as a place where hedonism is not only tolerated but is encouraged. Most people think of it as a city of “fun” where the usual restraints on behavior are loosened. Indeed, advertisements brag that “whatever happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas,” implying that it is acceptable for people to drink too much, gamble, engage in sexual indiscretions, keep odd hours, get married or divorced in short order, and spend money freely on frivolous things without folks back home (outside Las Vegas) finding out. This shared notion of acceptable hedonism may not, of course, apply to regular residents of Las Vegas who staff the business establishments, run the schools, build houses, and engage in other ordinary activities. Still, many residents of Las Vegas probably moved there to participate in a culture of hedonism and some may have remained there after having first visited to have fun. Moreover, being exposed to a social climate in which hedonism is encouraged, at least for some people, and finding it necessary to tolerate it, may lead a substantial proportion of Las Vegas residents to share the larger idea that relaxation of self-constraint is an acceptable if not desirable occurrence. Moreover, it may lead to much imitation, or alternatively, it may lead some who cherish self-control to leave the city. Therefore, the population of Las Vegas, compared with populations of some other cities, probably have a weaker sense that self-control is a good thing for people to
have and to want to exercise, and in that city, relative to some others, there are probably fewer social rewards for those who actually demonstrate reflective action. In other words, at least on the surface and relatively speaking, it appears that Las Vegas has a weak culture of reflective behavior, which is one element of a larger, emergent community property of “collective self-control consciousness” (weak, in this case).

Whereas Las Vegas prides itself for embracing hedonism, Salt Lake City, by contrast, is known for self-discipline and self-restraint. Having been established for religious purposes by Mormons, and still heavily influenced by their presence and actions, Salt Lake City is much different from Las Vegas. Pursuit of hedonism is featured in Las Vegas, but people in Salt Lake City are encouraged to follow the precepts of the Mormon Church, which involve hard work, family responsibility, thrift, and personal integrity while discouraging pleasure seeking through alcohol, tobacco, frivolous activities, and artificial stimulants like caffeine. Again, although not everyone in Salt Lake City shares those notions, most probably do. Certainly few non-Mormons would be attracted to Salt Lake City if they were interested in hedonistic pursuits, and visitors can easily sense its cultural climate. Therefore, it is likely that residents of Salt Lake City reflect a culture where self-control is valued, where people are expected to want to exercise it, and where there are abundant social rewards for doing so. Hence, at least on the surface, this city seems to score highly on at least one of the components of an overall emergent property of “collective self-control consciousness.”

Las Vegas and Salt Lake City are, perhaps, polar cases on a continuum from low to high “collective self-control consciousness” where most social units fall somewhere in between. With appropriate measurements, one might be able to array a large number of communities or
collectivities on such a continuum with respect to their “collective self-control consciousness.” If so, we might anticipate that position on the continuum would then reflect or help predict a number of aggregate consequences corresponding to individual behavioral outcomes that Gottfredson and Hirschi hypothesize are products of low self-control. Such consequences might include: crime rates, rates of unmarried births, unemployment, marriage and divorce rates, and even such things as community neatness.

Institutional Infrastructures

Not only may collectivities differ with respect to their shared values concerning reflective behavior, but they may also differ with respect to their institutional arrangements that bear on self-control and its exercise or reinforcement. Some structural arrangements promote the development of reflective action, foster the notion that self-control is a good thing that people ought to want to have and exercise, and reward those who, in fact, show restraint in the face of temptation (see Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985: chap 15). As noted previously, Gottfredson and Hirschi maintain that individuals mainly acquire self-control early in life, due to practices of their caregivers, although the research does not necessarily confirm that view. However, even if they are correct about self-control being largely set in childhood, it may still be possible for people to learn, at all points in the life cycle, to appreciate the value of self-control, even if they do not themselves possess it. Moreover, people may be able to learn, even late in life, to want to reflect before they act, as well as to expect others to want to do the same, and they may be able to learn to anticipate social rewards that might accrue to those who show self-restraint. Therefore, some types of community arrangements and institutional processes may converge in
helping to produce self-control in youth and in developing a climate of social desirability for the appreciation and exercise of reflective action among who spend time there.

With respect to the development of self-control, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990: 102-105) suggest that social arrangements and conditions such as single parenthood or parental illness, the extent to which a specific set of caregivers works outside the home or are otherwise away from the children, the number of children relative to the number of caregivers, and the stability of the marriage may bear on the effectiveness of child rearing. Such factors, however, are not entirely individualistic because their prevalence in a community or social context may be affected by larger social conditions or social organization. Some of those conditions, such as the economic necessity for parents to work, may to some extent reflect the individual family’s position in the social structure. Economic necessity, and other relevant conditions, however, may also have something of an emergent quality. For example, the strength and stability of families and the value placed on effective parenthood may to some extent reflect both cultural notions and mutual reinforcement among members of a community about parental responsibility. Family structure and functioning, as well as the shared values people may hold about reflective action can also be an expression of the community-wide influence of institutions like religion. Consequently, functioning of families and effects on the self-control of children may be, in part, indirect products of larger community structures, as are culturally shared notions of the value of reflective behavior. Consequently, it could be expected that some social units will, in the aggregate, produce larger numbers of members with high self-control and/or with appreciation for the value of reflective behavior while other communities may spawn larger proportions
having weak self-control and/or less esteem for the virtue of self-control.

In a similar way, institutions like education, law enforcement, or even community-based recreation may have differential impacts on the development of self-control in children as well as on the shared values concerning the importance of people wanting to and actually exercising the maximum self-control of which they are capable. In social contexts where there are cultural expectations for teachers, police officers, and recreational supervisors to act as surrogate parents, it might be expected that children will be more closely monitored when outside the range of familial care givers (cf. Sampson et al., 1999). And, it might be expected that such community-designated surrogate parents could be instrumental in correcting misbehavior in a way that supplements the work of regular caregivers. Furthermore, just as helping to shame others may lead to stronger consciences and fear of being shamed by those who participate in a shaming process (Braithwaite, 1989), the more actively people promote reflective behavior, especially in trying to nourish its growth in others, the more likely are they themselves to value it, to expect others to exercise it, and to reward those who do.

Furthermore, social units may vary in simple characteristics that negatively influence the effectiveness of community socialization of the young or general reinforcement of shared values for reflective behavior. For example, the student-teacher ratio; the number of police officers available for, or assigned to, “peace-keeping” duties where they can engage citizens in situations other than strict law enforcement; and whether social units contain organized and supervised recreational programs may all have indirect consequences for the development of self-control among young people and for the social support for a culture of “self-control consciousness.”

Finally, various community conditions, some structural and some cultural, may indirectly

34
affect the extent to which people in a given context actually exercise the self-control they possess. As described earlier, Baumeister and his associates (Muraven et al., 1998; Schmeichel and Baumeister, 2004) contend, and offer considerable experimental evidence in support, that self-control is more or less effectively exercised, depending on the frequency and intensity with which the person is called upon to employ it. They portray self-control as being like a muscle that becomes fatigued with concentrated use. Thus, people who face many temptations requiring them constantly to exercise their self-control will likely wane in their ability to do so. By contrast, those with good self-control who are infrequently called upon to restrain themselves should be able to do so more effectively in those relatively rare circumstances where they are faced with temptation. Applying this insight at the community or collective level, one would expect communities with equal levels of aggregated self-control nevertheless to vary in rates of behavior that presumably stem from weak self-control, such as theft, violence, risky sex, or erratic work patterns. Such variations may flow from differences in aggregate temptations to misbehave, or from another point of view, particular “routine activities” (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Wilcox et al., 2003). In some social contexts, there are more consumer goods, greater availability of illegal drugs, more people vulnerable to assault, rape, or homicide, and more lethal weapons (Felson, 1998). In addition, communities or collectivities vary in the extent to which there are “capable guardians” to protect property and discourage physical attacks on people. Both “opportunities” and “guardianship” are linked to cultural notions and structural arrangements. Variations in those characteristics imply that some communities will more frequently challenge individuals’ self-control and as a result produce a weakening of its exercise and a corresponding increase in misbehavior.
Interlinkages

The proportion of a population that actually possesses strong self-control, the extent to which the population as a whole shares a culture of reflection, and the nature of institutional arrangements in the social context that bear on self-control or on the culture of reflection all appear to be intertwined and mutually reinforcing. As a result, collective self-control consciousness may feed on itself, thereby sustaining its strength or helping to create an upward or downward spiral in intensity as change begins to occur (see LeBlanc, 2006). When collective self-control consciousness is weak, all the parts going into its make-up described above may work together to keep it weak or lead to further weakening, and when it is strong, all the parts may tend to converge in keeping it strong or lead to its strengthening.

For example, a culture of reflective behavior may owe much to simple imitation (see Akers, 1998). In social contexts containing large numbers of people with weak self-control, who may frequently engage in self-gratifying acts, even those individuals with stronger self-control may find it hard to promote and maintain values for reflective behavior, and they may be influenced to act irresponsibly. In the same way that some otherwise conforming youth may be influenced to imitate the ways of “life-course persistent offenders” who appear to be enjoying the fruits of irresponsible behavior (Moffitt, 1993; see also Akers’ social learning theory, 1998 and 2000, for arguments about the force of imitation), the moderately or even the well self-controlled may be tempted to emulate self-gratifying behavior of the less controlled (see Tittle et al., 2004 for an argument that those with high self-control sometimes choose not to exercise it) when the less responsible are numerous and obvious in their actions. And, as the actual display
of reflective behavior goes down, the cultural and institutional system that might otherwise stimulate and sustain collective self-control consciousness may also deteriorate.

In short, there is reason to imagine that the development and exercise of self-control has deep roots in surrounding social contexts where individuals are embedded. As such, it may be appropriate to think of communities or other social entities as possessing varying degrees of “collective discipline,” defined as the capacity and tendency of a social unit to promote reflective behavior. I and McCall have theorized that variation in such “collective discipline” is expressed in both aggregate and emergent forms so that collective discipline represents a combination of elements relevant to self-control. Aggregate forms include direct expression of self-control by individuals as well as individual vulnerabilities to victimization. Emergent forms include the degree to which there is a shared culture of reflective behavior as well as the extent to which there are institutional arrangements favorable to the development of self-control and the promotion and sustenance of a collective self-control consciousness. If our arguments are sound, we should find that just as low self-control by individuals presumably increases their chances of engaging in criminal or deviant behavior, variation in collective discipline should be operative in the production of rates of violence and other analogous community characteristics.

Therefore, an expanded theory in which self-control is positioned as crucial to individual conduct while social structural features centered around self-control are portrayed as essential for patterns, or rates, of behavior in social groups, or collectivities, may be justified. Such a theory would enhance the power of self-control thinking, satisfy the demand of scholars for multi-level theories, reaffirm the import of sociological processes for individual behaviors, and provide an
additional tool for understanding ecological phenomena such as crime rates. Such a theory might also go well beyond the idea that collectivities simply vary in collective discipline. In particular, it might provide explanations for why and how collectivities show such variations. No doubt such a theory would draw on prior work concerning communities and neighborhoods, particularly that focusing on collective efficacy (see Sampson, 2006). The extant ecological/community literature implies that emergent collective or community features are influenced by socio-economic characteristics; racial composition; demographic features, such as age and gender; residential stability; more or less random historical events, including political decisions and activism by some residents; and spatial arrangements, including location relative to various economic activities as well as proximity to other kinds of collectivities. Moreover, many of those influences on emergent community properties may bear a reciprocal relationship with the properties themselves. Thus, if the notion of collective discipline proves viable enough to invite further theorizing, such theory will necessarily be somewhat complicated.

More comprehensive theorizing might also attempt to work out potential connections among and between other collective properties that have been identified and collective discipline. No doubt, some aspects of collective discipline, as we have conceptualized it, overlap with modern notions of social disorganization, particularly the idea of collective efficacy. The same processes that allow some communities to share the idea that they can and should intervene in potentially disruptive activities in an area may be operative in helping people develop shared values about self-control and its exercise as well as to activate systems of reward and punishment for displays of strong or weak self-control. Moreover, just as collective efficacy seems to require a basic degree of community bonding or cohesion to emerge and operate, so might collective
discipline. But, it is likely that as with collective efficacy, cohesive bonding is probably necessary but is not a sufficient condition for effect collective influence on crime or other outcomes.

Regardless of the specifics of a theory about self-control as it interfaces with community structures and processes, it seems likely that self-control and its exercise is strongly intertwined with large ecological phenomena. If so, then policy initiatives using self-control to try to reduce violence need not focus on individualistic solutions such as training caregivers for more effective parenting, psycho-therapy to try to alter individuals’ levels of control, or long term incarceration of those with weak self-control. This, of course, is probably a good thing because those individualistic solutions do not seem very practical.

6. Assumptions on Which Self-Control Theory is Based May be Misleading

The final potential deficiency in self-control theory that may make for difficulty in using it for effective management of violence involves its assumptions. All theories inevitably contain notions that are not to be treated as problematic but instead are taken for granted. Indeed, one of the reasons they are called assumptions is because they either cannot be tested or they are not intended for test. Such “taken for granted” principles set the parameters within which the causal processes set forth by a theorist supposedly operate. Such assumptions, however, may be wrong, and when they are, the theoretical processes depending on them may be wrong as well. Moreover, basing an amelioration program on a theory with false assumptions may be doomed from the start.

In considering theoretical assumptions, it is important to recognize a distinction between
what I call “assumptions of necessity” and “assumptions of convenience.” An assumption of necessity is one that is inherent to an argument such that it must be true for the theoretical premises to unfold as specified by the theory. In other words, in such a case, the theory has no validity or worth unless the assumption is true; it is simply impossible to change the assumption while retaining the causal processes of the theory. Assumptions of convenience, on the other hand, are principles that the theorist declares. They are not inherent in the theorizing but are simply notions the theorist wishes to treat as non problematic in order to spell out various theoretical implications. Such assumptions of convenience are equivalent to a theorist saying: “lets imagine that such and such is true (assumption ), then, given that ‘truth’ and the causal mechanisms central to the theory, what would we expect concerning the interconnection of variables x, y, and z? An assumption of convenience is a creature of the theorist that potentially can be changed. For instance, having worked out the interconnection of x, y, and z under a given assumption, a theorist might then say, but what “what would be the implications for the interrelationship of x, y, and z if the assumption where changed to something else?”

Unfortunately, consumers of theories (and sometimes theorists themselves) confuse the two kinds of assumptions. Assumptions that are not at all inherent to a given line of theorizing are nevertheless often taken as if they were necessary, simply because the theorist declared them to be assumptions. For example, it is often said that theoretical integration cannot occur because various theories to be integrated contain “incompatible” assumptions (Hirschi, 1989). Such conclusions are usually reached without careful consideration of whether the alleged incompatible assumptions are in fact fundamental to the respective theories or whether those theories’ assumptions actually make the theories incompatible.
The classic example is the allegation that control theories, such as Hirschi’s social bond (which he calls social control) theory, cannot be integrated with motivation theories like general strain theory. The argument goes something like this: Theories, like Hirschi’s social bonds theory, emphasizing control (usually referred to simply as control theories) assume that all people are motivated toward criminal behavior (because it is gratifying), so the explanations put forth to explain criminal behavior focus on constraints that may prevent those more or less invariant motivations from being expressed. Theories, like general strain theory, that try to account for criminal behavior by explaining levels of criminal motivation (usually simply called motivation theories), on the other hand, assume that attraction to criminal behavior is variable and that the strength of such motivation is central to whether an individual offends or not. Since people cannot be constantly attracted to criminal behavior while at the same time experiencing different degrees of attraction to criminal behavior, it is said that the two kinds of theories cannot be integrated because their assumptions are incompatible.

However, in reality, it is perfectly reasonable to imagine that attraction to criminal behavior (motivation) may vary and that degree of constraint on expressing motivation in actual criminal behavior may also vary. Hence, an integrated theory could be developed to specify the conditions under which motivation is weak or strong as well as the conditions under which constraint is weak or strong. Such a theory could specify various combinations of those conditions that might signify different probabilities of actual criminal conduct. In other words, the two types of theories are not incompatible. They only appear so if one accepts that control theories that feature the operation of behavioral constraints (or their absence) necessarily, or
inherently, require that motivation be constant across individuals. It is not control theories that inherently require constant motivation (it is not an assumption of necessity); rather, it is control theorists, who for whatever reason find it convenient to pretend that criminal attraction is constant (that is, it is an assumption of convenience).

In thinking about self-control theory as a possible base for managing violence, we must consider its assumptions: first to determine if they are fundamental or convenient, and second, to contemplate whether they are likely to be true or false. This is important because it bears directly on the kinds of ameliorative actions that might be appropriate. My reading of self-control theory suggests that it embraces three assumptions, none of which are fundamental or likely to be true. The first assumption is presumably shared with all “control” type theories. That is, all (or at least the vast majority of) individuals are supposedly attracted to criminal behavior in more or less equal amounts. Given that assumption, it follows that variations in actual criminal behavior must be due to constraints, either those inside the person or those in the external environment. In the case of self-control theory, the inside and outside constraints are closely linked. Those who would normally be constrained by anticipating bad consequences of misbehavior (outside constraints) are usually not constrained because their personalities and habits (low self-control) make it difficult for them to anticipate the possibility of bad consequences. Thus, by implication, little can be done about people’s attraction to violence because such motivation is inherent, so basically not very manipulable. The only hope of controlling violence, if this assumption is true and fundamental, is to strengthen self-control so that people can more readily recognize and anticipate external consequences (or alternatively to incapacitate those with low self-control). And since self-control is theoretically shaped mainly in
childhood, managing violence implies some focus on child rearing practices.

The second assumption of the theory is that misbehavior (in our present discussion, violence) always, or almost always, has bad consequences, some by the very nature of the misbehavior (such as provoking a counter attack, jeopardizing friendships, or losing status among those who do not endorse violence) and some because of specific sanctions deliberately put in place to try to control misconduct (such as police surveillance or legal penalties). If such an assumption is true and fundamental, it again points toward either improving self-control so that tempted people can recognize those inherent costs or toward incapacitating them so they cannot hurt others. It does not necessarily imply that efforts should be devoted to increasing the costs of violence (such as by making it socially unacceptable, as apparently happened for domestic assault as a result of efforts by women’s groups or by helping all people, even those with low self-control to better recognize the costs attached to violent behavior, perhaps by increasing police presence or response time or by advertising the potential negative outcomes). After all, if misbehavior carries inherent negative consequences, that aspect of the issue takes care of itself.

The third assumption of self-control theory is that individuals have little personal agency in matters of constraint. Those with low self-control presumably cannot avoid criminal actions through deliberate choice most of the time. The image projected in self-control theory of the typical individual is similar to an automaton: the person is inherently motivated toward misconduct because it is gratifying, opportunities for force or fraud sometimes present themselves (not because the individual seeks them out, but because chances to gratify oneself through force or fraud are omnipresent), and if the individual has low self-control, he/she will
see mainly the gratification and not the potential costs of misconduct and as a result will usually go for the gratification. In self-control theory the person is largely incapable of deciding to behave outside the basic limits set by his or her degree of self-control. Those with low self-control have little ability to exceed their limitations and those with high self-control are too rational to overcome those constraints by choice. For instance, the poorly self-controlled person is highly unlikely to conclude that suppression of violence is the right and moral thing to do and then act on that conclusion, and the highly self-controlled person is highly unlikely to decide that violence is advantageous and then use it to accomplish personal goals. In both cases, though the theory is presented as non-deterministic in character, the actors seem to be basically bound by their control structures. This is all the more remarkable because self-control theory is supposedly rooted in the rational choice, classical perspective in which the individual is supreme as a decision maker who weighs the costs and benefits and then acts to maximize benefits. Yet, in reality the theory appears to embrace the idea that individuals lack agency. If they actually are not free agents, then policy based on the theory points again to management policies aimed at changing levels of self-control when it is being formed in childhood or toward incapacitation. It points away from things like moral education, enhancement of potential costs, or elevating awareness of damage or costs from violence–because those things presumably be futile.

In my judgment, these assumptions are not fundamental and they may well not be correct. Personal experience tells us that attraction to criminal behavior is not invariant among people. What some people find gratifying (such as beating someone up), others find abhorrent. Moreover, we know that criminal behavior does not always, and maybe not even most of the time, have bad consequences for the perpetrator. The idea that crime does not pay is a childhood
parable used to inspire conformity. It only takes a brief look at the statistics on probabilities of arrest and conviction for various known criminal acts to conclude that most of the time perpetrators of crime, including those who commit acts of violence, escape legal penalties. And ethnographies tell us that many people benefit enormously from their willingness to use violence for their own purposes (Anderson, 1999; McCall, 1994). In addition, as noted before, some systematic data confirm that people are differentially attracted to criminal behavior. Finally, it does seem at all obvious that people with low self-control cannot overcome that limitation if they have strong motivation to do so, as is suggested by recovered alcoholics and gamblers, or that those with high self-control are bound toward conformity (cf. Tittle et al., 2004). As many have observed, white collar or corporate criminals may be prime examples of highly self-controlled people who use that self-control in illegal ways to promote their own ends.

Therefore, effective use of self-control in managing violence may require that the assumptions of self-control theory, which appear to be assumptions of convenience in any case, be ignored.

**Conclusion**

Much research indicates that self-control is a key variable in explaining and predicting criminal behavior, including violence. However, recognizing that self-control is important is not sufficient for creating effective policies to reduce or control violence. To be successful, policies must flow from well developed and confirmed theory that correctly specifies the contingencies under which causal processes work with greater or less force, shows interconnections of different causal mechanisms suggested by various theories in the field, correctly identifies the causes of
the important independent variables, specifies how effects associated with different variables come about, spells out multi-level propositions, showing their inter-linkages, and identifies essential assumptions that must be taken into account. Self-control theory does not yet qualify on these grounds but it holds promise of becoming that kind of theory through elaboration of its own premises, based on logic and empirical feedback, and through integration with other extant theories. When fully elaborated and integrated, a theory with self-control as a key central concept may well provide the guidelines needed to design interventionist programs that can significantly reduce violence.

Endnotes

1. The accumulated research has become so voluminous that it is impractical to cite all of it in a single paper. I refer the reader to the meta-analysis of research reported by Pratt and Cullen (2000) as well as to more recent works that summarize the empirical literature (examples: Tittle and Botchkovar.2005a,b; Tittle et al., 2004; Jones and Quizenberry, 2004).

2. They do, however, leave a little room for schools and other social institutions to add to or substitute for the work of caregivers (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 105-107)
References


Westview.


Colvin, Mark, Francis T. Cullen, and Thomas Vander Ven. 2002. Coercion, social support, and


Geis, Gilbert. 2000. On the absence of self-control as the basis for a general theory of crime: A


Hay, Carter and Walter Forrest. 2006 The development of self-control: Examining self-control


166: 54-75.


Vazsonyi, Alexander T. and Jennifer M. Crosswhite. 2004. A test of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s
general theory of crime in African American adolescents. *Journal of Research in Crime and
Delinquency* 41: 407-432.

Vazsonyi, Alexander T., Lloyd E. Pickering, Marianne Junger, and Dick Hessing. 2001. An
empirical test of a general theory of crime: A four-nation comparative study of self-control

Vazsonyi, Alexander T., Janice C. Clifford Wittekind, Lara M. Belliston, and Timothy D. Van

Welch, Michael R., Charles R. Tittle, Jennifer Yonkeski, Nicole Meidinger, and Harold G.
Grasmick. 2007. Social integration, self-control, and conformity. Forthcoming in *Journal of
Quantitative Criminology*.

Wikström, Per-Olof H. 2006. Linking individual, setting, and acts of crime: Situational
mechanisms and the explanation of crime. In *The Explanation of Crime: Contexts,
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.


Simon and Schuster
