

MicroCase exercise #9:
An exploration of low self-control theory

INTRODUCTION

In this data analysis exercise, we will use Wave VII data from the National Youth Survey to explore low self-control theory, which is presented in Part VIII.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DATASET

See the MicroCase exercise #3 for a description of the NYS dataset. Before we start our analyses, we'll need to load up the second version of our dataset, which is 'NYSCRIM2.'

EXPLORING LOW SELF-CONTROL THEORY: GETTING A HANDLE ON THE DATA AND USING CROSSTABULATION TABLES

Another relatively recently minted theory is low self-control theory. Posed by Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, low self-control theory focuses on the personality and character weaknesses within offenders. Individuals with low self-control are more likely to commit crimes due to their tendency to immediately respond to stimuli rather than reasoning things out. As described by Gottfredson and Hirschi, these individuals tend to: engage in illicit sexual intercourse, be adventuresome, find it difficult to maintain stable work and interpersonal relationships, lack perseverance, and be uninterested in long-term work and educational goals. With respect to crime, those with less self-control are more likely to resort to violence to resolve conflicts and to commit property (and other) crimes when they become a convenient means to an end. Gottfredson and Hirschi also argued that people who engage in quasi-deviant behavior such as smoking or drinking are more likely to participate in outlawed behavior as well, because smoking and drinking also reflect their low self-control.

Testing low self-control theory will require us to find suitable measures as we have done for the previous theories. Among the questions in the NYS survey were a large number that will work for our purposes. First, the respondents were asked whether they smoked and how much they drank. Smoking was used "as is," but alcohol consumption had to be recoded to make it easier to use in our crosstabulations. The new variable, ALCO13X, was coded as '0' for those who reported drinking on 12 or fewer occasions (an average of once a month) and as '1' for those who reported drinking on a more frequent basis.

Gottfredson and Hirschi argued that participation in illicit sexual activity was correlated to criminality as well. The respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their sexuality, including whether they had ever had a venereal disease (which could serve as a proxy for non-use of protection during intercourse or an inability to properly screen sexual partners), whether they had ever paid for sex, whether they had ever been paid for sex, and their number of sexual partners during the previous year. I created a new variable, SEXDEVI, that represented participation in sexual deviance. SEXDEVI was coded '1' for any respondent who had ever had a venereal disease, had ever paid or been paid for sex, or who had more than three sexual partners during the year (I chose that number because 90% of the sample had 3 or fewer partners, so those who had more partners were on the outer fringes of the sample). SEXDEVI was coded as '0' for the remaining respondents.

Finally, I created a composite factor, LIE_OKAY, that represented the average of the answers to four lie-related questions ("Sometimes you need to lie in order to get a job," "Making a good impression is more important than telling the truth to friends," "Making a good impression is more important than telling the truth to parents, and "If you want your fellow workers to like you, you may have to cover up for them"). This measure was designed to represent impulsiveness, because Gottfredson and Hirschi felt those with low self-control have a "here and now" orientation that makes them impulsive, and that such individuals are always on the lookout for the easy way out of potentially difficult situations. Because the measure represents the average of the respondents' responses to four different scenarios, a higher score means that a given respondent agrees with the statements (and thus

feels lying is acceptable).¹

To see if the ideas posed by Gottfredson and Hirschi are supported by the NYS data, we will look at the effect of our new measures on whether the respondent had ever stolen an item worth \$50 or more (THEFT50), leaving violent offenses (VIOLENCE) for you to examine in the "further explorations" questions. To see if the theory holds, run frequencies for SMOKES, ALCO13X, SEXDEVI and LIE_OKAY, then run crosstabulation tables with THEFT50 as the dependent variable and our four new measures as the independent variables.

What do you notice about the SMOKES --> THEFT50 table? Which respondents were most likely to have stolen an item worth more than \$50.00? What is the strength of the relationship shown in the table? Is it statistically significant? How can we summarize this table? Does this table support low self-control theory?

What about the ALCO13X --> THEFT50 table? Which respondents were most likely to have stolen an item worth more than \$50.00? What is the strength of the relationship shown in the table? Is it statistically significant? How can we summarize this table? Does this table support low self-control theory?

What do you notice about the SEXDEVI --> THEFT50 table? Which respondents were most likely to have stolen an item worth more than \$50.00? What is the strength of the relationship shown in the table? Is it statistically significant? How can we summarize this table? Does this table support low self-control theory?

Finally, what is going on in the LIE_OKAY --> THEFT50 table? Which respondents were most likely to have stolen an item worth more than \$50.00? What is the strength of the relationship shown in the table? Is it statistically significant? How can we summarize this table? Does this table support low self-control theory?

EXPLORING LOW SELF-CONTROL THEORY: USING CONTROL VARIABLES

You might be wondering if low self-control theory applies equally to various groupings of respondents, for example, whether the criminality of males and females are differently affected by sexual deviance. Let's find out by running a crosstabulation table with THEFT50 as the dependent variable, SEXDEVI as the independent variable, and MALE as the control variable (just pop it into the first control variable box, see MicroCase assignment #7 for more on control variables). Look within the rows for MALE. You'll see that the relationship between participation in atypical sex activities stealing something worth \$50.00 or more is statistically significant for both males and females, and shows increased percentages of thefts among those who participated in atypical sex activities. In the end, the relationship we found cannot be "explained away" as due to the effects of gender rather than participation in atypical sexual activities. Among both genders, increased levels of sexual deviance meant increased chances of participating in a theft.

POINTS TO PONDER: Can we say that smoking (or participation in deviant sexual behaviors or any other measure of low self-control) "causes" criminality, or should we argue that the factors co-exist (i.e., that they are related to one another)?

FURTHER EXPLORATION OF LOW SELF-CONTROL THEORY

We have now explored the relationship of four variables relevant to low self-control theory as they apply to thefts of property worth \$50.00 or more. To see if the theory applies to violent offenses, you will apply it to VIOLENCE for the "further exploration" questions.

LOW SELF-CONTROL THEORY ON YOUR OWN

Now that we have briefly examined low self-control theory and added a control variable, you

¹ Due to the small number of individuals who scored '4' on the scale, I recoded those individuals into the '3' category.

could include other control variables. By now, you should have ideas of important variables you would like to include (e.g., the relationship between atypical sexual behavior and participation in crime may vary within income categories due to the increased freedom accounted to those in the higher classes, an idea posed under power-control theory). You could also look at the effects of the other "low self-control" measures developed for these exercises, adding in control variables you feel are important. While you are choosing control variables, make sure you write down why you think they are important before trying them out, tying them to the articles you've read. Although this concludes our last exercise together, I invite you to obtain and work with different datasets to further explore the theories we examined in the exercises or to expand your understanding of the other theories in the book. You could start by downloading the full NYS dataset from the ICPSR webpage (or getting it from me) or by obtaining the full version of the GSS for whatever years you want to use. Watch out, though, because data analysis is just as addictive as Tetris or other computer games. Maybe someday I'll read a research article written by you (if you think that idea is ludicrous, just remember that the professors who taught the authors in our textbook probably wondered the same thing about them)...

[PLEASE DO NOT TURN IN THESE PRECEDING SHEETS WITH YOUR ASSIGNMENT- THEY ARE FOR YOU TO KEEP]

Homework for MicroCase #9: General questions
(low self-control theory)

Name: _____

Date: _____

Directions: Answer the following questions by filling in the blanks or circling the appropriate responses. A couple of answers have been filled in for you to make sure you're on the right track.

Exploring low self-control theory:

Getting a handle on the data and using crosstabulation tables:

1. In Wave VII of the NYS dataset, 642 (____%) of the sample smoked cigarettes. ____ (____%) consumed alcohol more than 12 times a year. ____ (____%) participated in what could be labelled deviant sexual activities. ____ (____%) scored 3 on the LIE_OKAY scale (meaning that they felt it was acceptable to lie in the four scenarios), while ____ (____%) scored 2 on the LIE_OKAY scale and ____ (____%) scored 1 (the lowest score).

2. In the SMOKES --> THEFT50 crosstabulation, ____ (____%) of the respondents who smoked had stolen property worth \$50 or more, compared to 46 (____%) of those who did not smoke. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*. This relationship *is / is not* statistically significant.

 The SMOKES --> THEFT50 table *does / does not* show that respondents who smoked are more likely to steal property worth \$50.00 or more. The relationship between smoking and thefts found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to / differs greatly from* the findings expected under low self-control theory.

3. In the ALCO13X --> THEFT50 crosstabulation, ____ (____%) of the respondents who drank on 13 or more occasions during the previous year had stolen property worth \$50 or more, compared to ____ (____%) of those who did not drink as much alcohol. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*. This relationship *is / is not* statistically significant.

The ALCO13X --> THEFT50 table *does / does not* show that respondents who consumed alcohol 12 or more times are more likely to steal property worth \$50.00 or more. The relationship between alcohol consumption and thefts found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to / differs greatly from* the findings expected under low self-control theory.

4. In the SEXDEVI --> THEFT50 crosstabulation, _____ (____%) of the respondents who participated in what could be labelled deviant sexual activities smoked had stolen property worth \$50 or more, compared to _____ (____%) of those whose sexual activities were less atypical. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*. This relationship *is / is not* statistically significant.

The SEXDEVI --> THEFT50 table *does / does not* show that respondents who engaged in deviant sexual activities are more likely to steal property worth \$50.00 or more. The relationship between deviant sexual activities and thefts found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to / differs greatly from* the findings expected under low self-control theory.

5. In the LIE_OKAY --> THEFT50 crosstabulation, _____ (____%) of the respondents who scored highest on the lying scale had stolen property worth \$50 or more, compared to _____ (____%) of those who scored 2 on the lying scale, and _____ (____%) of those who scored the lowest on the lying scale. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*. This relationship *is / is not* statistically significant.

The LIE_OKAY --> THEFT50 table *does / does not* show that respondents who feel lying is acceptable (which is an indicator of impulsiveness) are more likely to steal property worth \$50.00 or more. The relationship between attitudes toward lying and thefts found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to / differs greatly from* the findings expected under low self-control theory.

6. In the SEXDEVI --> THEFT50 crosstabulation with MALE as a control variable, _____ (____%) of the males who participated in atypical sexual activities committed thefts of property worth \$50.00 or more, compared to _____ (____%) of the males who did not participate in atypical sexual activities. For males, it appears that those who participate in deviant sexual activities are *more / less* likely to commit theft. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*, and *is / is not* statistically significant. When we turn our attention to the female rows, we see that _____ (____%) females of who participated in atypical sexual activities committed thefts of property worth \$50.00 or more, compared to _____ (____%) of those who did not participate in atypical sexual activities. For females, it appears that those who participate in deviant sexual activities are *more / less* likely to commit theft. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*, and *is / is not* statistically significant. Overall, we *can / cannot* say that controlling for gender in our model substantially changes the relationship we found between participation in deviant sexual activities and likelihood of committing theft.
7. Overall, it appears that our findings using the Wave VII of the NYS *support / do not support* low self-control theory.
8. What does all of this mean? Please answer in essay form, summarizing what you have learned about low self-control theory from this part of the MicroCase.

Homework for MicroCase #9: "Further exploration" questions
(low self-control theory)

Name: _____

Date: _____

TASK: See if the two measures we developed for low self-control theory help us predict involvement in violent offenses (VIOLENCE).

Answer the following questions by filling in the blanks or circling the appropriate responses. A couple of answers have been filled in for you to make sure you're on the right track.

1. In the SMOKES --> VIOLENCE crosstabulation, _____ (____%) of the respondents who smoked had committed a violent offense, compared to _____ (____%) of those who did not smoke. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*. This relationship *is / is not* statistically significant.

The SMOKES --> VIOLENCE table *does / does not* show that respondents who smoked are more likely to engage in violence. The relationship between smoking and violence found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to / differs greatly from* the findings expected under low self-control theory.

3. In the ALCO13X --> VIOLENCE crosstabulation, _____ (____%) of the respondents who drank on 13 or more occasions during the previous year had committed a violent offense, compared to _____ (____%) of those who did not consume as much alcohol. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*. This relationship *is / is not* statistically significant.

The ALCO13X --> VIOLENCE table *does / does not* show that respondents who consumed alcohol 13 or more times are more likely to engage in violence. The relationship between alcohol consumption and violence found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to / differs greatly from* the findings expected under low self-control theory.

4. In the SEXDEVI --> VIOLENCE crosstabulation, _____ (____%) of the respondents who participated in what could be labelled deviant sexual activities smoked had committed a violent offense, compared to _____ (____%) of those whose sexual activities were less atypical. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*. This relationship *is / is not* statistically significant.

The SEXDEVI --> VIOLENCE table *does / does not* show that respondents who engaged in deviant sexual activities are more likely to engage in violence. The relationship between deviant sexual activities and violence found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to / differs greatly from* the findings expected under low self-control theory.

5. In the LIE_OKAY --> VIOLENCE crosstabulation, _____ (____%) of the respondents who scored highest on the lying scale had committed a violent offense, compared to _____ (____%) of those who scored 2 on the lying scale, and _____ (____%) of those who scored the lowest on the lying scale. This relationship is *weak / moderate / strong*. This relationship *is / is not* statistically significant.

The LIE_OKAY --> VIOLENCE table *does / does not* show that respondents who feel lying is acceptable (which is an indicator of impulsiveness) are more likely to engage in violence. The relationship between attitudes toward lying and violence found using Wave VII of the NYS data *is similar to / differs greatly from* the findings expected under low self-control theory.

6. Overall, it appears that our findings using the Wave VII of the NYS *support / do not support* low self-control theory.

7. What does all of this mean? Please answer in essay form, summarizing what you have learned about low self-control theory from this part of the MicroCase.

Affirmation of Independent Work

Submission of this assignment constitutes a statement on your part that apart from technical help, you completed this assignment on your own. Plagiarism will be reported to University authorities and can result in expulsion from the University.

Your Name: _____ Signature: _____

Homework for MicroCase #9: "On your own" questions
(low self-control theory)

Name: _____

Date: _____

TASK: Include some control variables of your own in your test of low self-control theory. For example, does the relationship between atypical sexual behavior vary within income categories?

Directions: Answer the following questions.

EXPLORING LOW SELF-CONTROL THEORY ON YOUR OWN:

1. Which control variable did you choose and why did you choose to control that factor?
2. What was the relationship between the independent and dependent variables before the addition of the control variable?
3. Did the control variable include change the relationship between the independent and dependent variables; that is, did the relationship between the two variables vary by control variable subcategory?
4. Based on your findings, what modifications or additions would you make to the low self-control theory?
5. Can you say your testing supports low self-control theory? Why/why not?

If you included more than one control variable, you may summarize the findings on the back of this sheet for future reference.