

Capacity for Self-Control: Article Review

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Abstract

Charles Tittle, David Ward, and Harold Grasmick's article "Capacity for Self-Control and Individuals' Interest in Exercising Self-Control" addresses an important conceptual problem in criminology. General theories of self-control often treat low self-control as a relatively unified tendency, but the authors distinguish the ability to regulate conduct from the desire or motivation to do so. Using survey data, they examine whether capacity and interest can be measured separately and whether each predicts criminal or deviant behavior. They report that both dimensions have independent, cumulative, and interactive relationships with misconduct. This paper reviews the article's purpose, theoretical contribution, methods, findings, strengths, and limitations. It argues that the distinction improves explanations of behavior because a person may possess regulatory ability but lack a reason to use it, or may strongly wish to avoid misconduct while facing limited regulatory capacity under stress. However, cross-sectional self-report data, measurement overlap, local sampling, and uncertainty about causal direction limit the conclusions. Later psychological research on self-regulation, motivation, executive function, habits, and situational opportunity supports a multidimensional approach while questioning simple resource models of willpower. The article remains valuable because it moves self-control theory away from a single fixed trait toward an interaction among capacity, motivation, context, and opportunity.

Introduction

Self-control is commonly described as the ability to resist immediate temptation in order to protect a longer-term goal. In criminology, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory proposes that low self-control is a major cause of crime and analogous risky behavior. People with low self-control are described as impulsive, insensitive, risk seeking, present oriented, and inclined toward simple tasks.

Tittle et al. (2004) identify a conceptual ambiguity in this tradition. A person may be capable of controlling behavior but have little desire to do so in a particular situation. Another person may strongly want to exercise control yet have difficulty because of habit, stress, intoxication, emotion, or limited skill. Combining these conditions into one score may obscure how regulation operates.

This review argues that the article makes an important theoretical contribution by separating capacity from interest. Its findings support the claim that both matter, but they should be interpreted as evidence of association rather than a final causal model. The article is best understood as an invitation to study self-control as a process involving the person and the situation.

Purpose of the Article

The authors seek to determine whether self-control capacity and the desire to exercise self-control are conceptually and empirically distinct. Their questions can be summarized as follows:

1. Can separate measures of capacity and interest be constructed?
2. Does each dimension predict criminal and deviant behavior?
3. Do the two dimensions combine cumulatively?
4. Does the effect of one dimension depend on the level of the other?

The analysis challenges the assumption that individuals refrain from misconduct simply because they possess a stable quantity of self-control. Regulation also requires a goal. If a person does not consider a rule legitimate, does not anticipate meaningful consequences, or values the immediate outcome more highly, capacity may remain unused.

Theoretical Background

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) locate the development of self-control primarily in early childhood socialization. Effective caregivers monitor behavior, recognize deviance, and apply consistent correction. Low self-control is then expected to remain relatively stable and to increase the attractiveness of immediate, easy, and risky rewards.

Tittle and colleagues do not reject the relevance of regulatory capacity. They argue that capacity should be distinguished from motivation. The distinction resembles a broader principle in behavioral science: being able to perform an action is not the same as intending to perform it.

Interest in self-control may arise from moral belief, fear of punishment, commitment to relationships, identity, long-term goals, or perception of harm. It can vary across acts and situations. An individual may exercise strong control at work but little control in recreational substance use, suggesting that regulation is not expressed uniformly.

Capacity for Self-Control

Capacity refers to the ability to inhibit an impulse, delay gratification, manage emotion, consider consequences, and maintain behavior consistent with a goal. It may involve executive functions such as attention, working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibition.

Capacity is not necessarily a fixed reservoir. Sleep, stress, intoxication, illness, development, and environmental demands affect performance. Skills can also improve through practice, planning, and changes in routine.

In criminological measurement, self-control capacity is often inferred from personality statements concerning impulsivity or risk preference. This creates a challenge: scales may mix ability, desire, behavior, and preference. If a questionnaire asks whether someone enjoys risk, the answer may indicate motivation rather than inability.

Interest in Exercising Self-Control

Interest refers to the willingness or motivation to restrain behavior. The individual must see some reason to prioritize control. A person may possess the cognitive ability to refrain but decide that the immediate reward is worth the consequence.

Interest can be affected by social bonds, legitimacy, moral emotion, perceived detection, and future orientation. It can also be specific. Someone may be highly motivated to control spending but uninterested in controlling aggressive speech.

The article's conceptual contribution is strongest here. It explains why two people with similar regulatory skill may behave differently and why the same person behaves differently across settings. It also creates a place for social context within self-control theory.

Research Design and Measurement

Tittle et al. (2004) use data from a city survey to create separate scales for capacity and interest and compare them with several measures of criminal or deviant behavior. Survey research allows analysis of behavior that may never appear in official records and provides information about attitudes and self-perception.

The authors report that the two scales are related but not identical. Both predict misconduct, and combinations of low capacity and low interest are particularly associated with higher levels of deviance. For some outcomes, capacity matters most when interest in exercising control is weak; when interest is strong, the effect of capacity is reduced.

This interaction is theoretically plausible. Strong motivation may lead people to avoid tempting settings, create plans, seek support, or rely on rules that reduce the demand for moment-to-moment inhibition. In this way, interest can compensate partly for limited spontaneous control.

Major Findings

The article presents four important findings. First, capacity and interest can be measured as separable dimensions, although they remain connected. Second, each contributes independently to the prediction of deviant behavior. Third, their effects can accumulate: individuals low on both

dimensions report more misconduct. Fourth, the dimensions interact.

The interactive finding challenges a simple additive model. If capacity always had the same effect, its relationship with behavior would remain constant across motivational conditions. Instead, the results suggest that regulatory ability becomes behaviorally relevant in relation to goals.

The authors do not establish that desire completely substitutes for capacity. Rather, the strength and form of the relationship vary across outcomes. Different deviant acts may demand different types and levels of control.

Strengths of the Article

The primary strength is conceptual precision. By asking what self-control actually contains, the article exposes a tendency to treat a broad label as an explanation. Separating ability and motivation creates testable propositions.

A second strength is the analysis of interaction. Many studies examine whether one variable predicts another while assuming a constant effect. Interaction models better reflect the idea that behavior emerges from combinations of conditions.

A third strength is practical relevance. Intervention differs depending on the problem. If an individual lacks skill, training in planning, emotional regulation, or delay may help. If the individual lacks motivation, consequences, values, relationships, and perceived legitimacy may be more relevant. Treating both cases as identical “low self-control” can lead to ineffective policy.

Limitations of the Study

The study relies on self-report. Participants may forget, minimize, exaggerate, or interpret questions differently. Self-report is not inherently invalid, but the same response style may affect both predictor and outcome measures.

The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Low interest may contribute to deviance, but repeated deviance may also lead people to justify behavior and report less interest in control. Longitudinal data are needed to establish sequence.

The city sample may not represent other populations, cultures, or age groups. Social meaning and opportunity differ across communities. Replication is necessary.

Measurement remains challenging. Items intended to measure capacity may contain motivation, and items measuring interest may reflect moral belief or perceived sanction. Statistical distinction does not guarantee complete psychological separation.

Finally, opportunity receives limited attention. A person low in capacity and interest cannot commit a particular offense without access, circumstances, and a suitable target. Situational factors should be included in a complete explanation.

Relation to General Theory of Crime

The general theory of crime emphasizes low self-control and opportunity. Tittle et al. retain the insight that regulation matters but make the concept less unitary. Their approach suggests that self-control should not be treated as a single stable trait that explains every risky act.

This modification can strengthen rather than simply reject the theory. A theory becomes more useful when its concepts distinguish mechanisms accurately. However, adding motivation raises questions about other criminological theories concerning morality, social bonds, deterrence, strain, and learning. Interest in control may partly reflect these processes.

Psychological Research on Self-Regulation

Psychological theories commonly distinguish goal commitment from regulatory processes. Carver and Scheier (1998) describe self-regulation as a feedback system in which individuals compare current behavior with a standard and adjust action. Without a valued standard, discrepancy produces little regulation.

Dual-process models distinguish rapid automatic responses from slower reflective control. Habits reduce the need for deliberate inhibition because cues trigger established behavior. This suggests that successful self-control is often achieved through environment and routine rather than repeated heroic resistance.

Research on implementation intentions shows that specific if-then plans can connect a situation to a goal-directed response (Gollwitzer, 1999). Such planning illustrates how motivation can recruit capacity more effectively.

The Ego-Depletion Debate

One influential psychological account proposed that self-control functions like a limited resource that becomes depleted after use. Early experiments appeared to support the effect, but later large-scale replications and meta-analytic debates produced mixed results.

Hagger et al. (2016) reported a preregistered multi-laboratory replication that did not find the expected effect using the selected procedure. The debate demonstrates why capacity should not be imagined too simply as a fixed quantity that is consumed.

Alternative accounts emphasize motivation, beliefs, attention, task interpretation, and opportunity cost. These approaches align with Tittle et al.'s insistence that interest matters. A person may disengage because the goal no longer seems worth the effort rather than because a literal resource has been exhausted.

Development and Social Context

Self-control develops through neurological maturation, caregiving, education, and experience. Adolescents may show strong reasoning in calm conditions but greater risk-taking in emotionally intense peer contexts. Poverty and chronic stress can impose cognitive demands that affect planning without reflecting a permanent moral defect.

Institutions also shape motivation. People are more likely to comply with rules they view as legitimate and fairly applied. A narrow trait model can place responsibility entirely within individuals while ignoring environments that reward misconduct or create repeated temptation.

A balanced model recognizes personal agency without separating it from social structure.

Implications for Crime Prevention

Prevention based on the article would include both capacity-building and motivational strategies. Capacity-building may involve emotional-regulation skills, problem-solving, substance-use treatment, educational support, and planning. Motivational strategies may strengthen commitment to noncriminal identities, meaningful relationships, procedural justice, and future goals.

Environmental design can reduce the demand for self-control. Secure systems, supervision, default rules, and reduced access to high-risk situations may prevent misconduct without assuming perfect individual regulation.

Punishment alone may not build capacity and may weaken legitimate social bonds. Effective intervention should identify the mechanism relevant to the individual and behavior.

A Multidimensional Model

Capacity	Interest	Likely regulatory pattern	Potential response
High	High	Individual can regulate and values doing so	Maintain supportive goals and low-risk routines

Capacity	Interest	Likely regulatory pattern	Potential response
High	Low	Ability exists but immediate reward or values oppose restraint	Address motivation, consequences, legitimacy, and identity
Low	High	Individual wants control but struggles to implement it	Build skills, plans, treatment, and environmental support
Low	Low	Few internal barriers to misconduct	Combine motivation, capacity building, opportunity reduction, and supervision

Overall Evaluation

The article succeeds as a theoretical clarification supported by empirical evidence. It does not provide a definitive model of self-control, but it demonstrates that separating ability and desire can improve explanation.

Its conclusions should remain modest. The study cannot establish stable causal mechanisms from one survey, and later research should use longitudinal, experimental, behavioral, and cross-cultural methods. Measures should distinguish self-perception from observed performance.

Despite these limits, the paper remains relevant because contemporary self-regulation research increasingly emphasizes goals, context, habits, and beliefs. Its central question—whether people can control themselves and whether they want to—continues to organize productive research.

Conclusion

Tittle, Ward, and Grasmick challenge the treatment of self-control as one undifferentiated trait. Their evidence indicates that capacity and interest each relate to misconduct and that their combination can predict behavior better than either alone.

The distinction has theoretical and practical importance. A person who lacks regulatory skill requires a different response from a person who possesses the skill but rejects the goal. Situational opportunity, stress, habit, social relationships, and legitimacy further shape whether capacity is used.

The article should therefore be viewed as a bridge between criminological trait models and broader theories of self-regulation. Self-control is neither pure willpower nor simple motivation. It is a process through which abilities are organized around valued goals within particular environments. Research and policy become more precise when they identify which part of that process has failed.

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