

Gottfredson And Hirschi's Theory Comparison

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Criminology has developed through theories that explain crime as a product of individual propensity, social learning, opportunity, control, inequality, or institutional reaction. The original essay compares Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi's general theory of crime with Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory. It correctly identifies [low self-control](#) and opportunity as central to the first theory and learned definitions and techniques as central to the second. It also recognizes that neither theory explains every offense. A stronger comparison should avoid treating self-control as the sole cause of crime or assuming that media exposure operates exactly like intimate social learning. The two theories ask different questions: why some people are more consistently attracted to immediate, risky gratification, and how people learn the meanings and practices that make law violation acceptable. (Pratt & Cullen, 2000)

Gottfredson and Hirschi's General Theory of Crime

Gottfredson and Hirschi published *A General Theory of Crime* in 1990. They define crime as force or fraud undertaken in pursuit of self-interest and argue that the same individual characteristic—low self-control—helps explain many crimes and analogous behaviors. Low self-control is associated with impulsivity, preference for simple tasks, risk seeking, physical rather than mental activity, self-centeredness, and volatile temperament. Crime occurs when a person with this propensity encounters an opportunity offering immediate reward with relatively little effort or apparent risk.

Low Self-Control

Low self-control does not mean that a person lacks every ability to regulate behavior. It refers to a broad tendency to prefer immediate and easy gratification over delayed costs and long-term commitments. The theory predicts associations not only with crime but with accidents, substance misuse, unstable work, risky sex, and other imprudent behavior. This broad claim is one source of the theory's influence and one source of criticism. If every risky outcome is defined as evidence of low self-control, the concept can become circular unless measured independently.

The Role of Opportunity

Propensity alone does not produce an offense. A person must encounter an opportunity. An unlocked vehicle, poorly supervised account, vulnerable target, or unguarded product changes the effort and

reward structure. The general theory therefore overlaps with opportunity and routine-activity perspectives even though its primary emphasis is individual self-control. Prevention can reduce opportunity through environmental design, guardianship, financial controls, secure technology, and changes in routine without claiming to transform personality immediately.

Childhood Socialization

Gottfredson and Hirschi argue that self-control develops primarily in childhood through effective parenting. Caregivers must monitor behavior, recognize deviance, and respond consistently. Poor supervision or failure to correct misconduct allows low self-control to persist. This account highlights early learning but places heavy responsibility on parents. Families operate within economic, health, housing, work, and community conditions that affect supervision. Schools, peers, trauma, neurodevelopment, and later relationships can also influence self-regulation.

Stability of Self-Control

The theory proposes that relative levels of self-control become fairly stable by late childhood. People may mature and crime generally declines with age, but those lower in self-control are expected to remain relatively lower than peers. Research finds moderate stability while also showing change through life events, treatment, employment, relationships, and development. The strong stability claim may underestimate human plasticity. Policy should not label a child permanently on the basis of early behavior.

Crime and Analogous Behavior

The general theory's ability to connect crime with noncriminal risk taking is valuable. The same preference for immediate reward may influence dangerous driving, impulsive spending, or substance use. Yet different behaviors have distinct motives, opportunities, and social meanings. Corporate fraud, domestic violence, political crime, organized crime, and spontaneous theft should not be treated as psychologically identical merely because each provides some benefit. A general theory gains breadth at the risk of losing specificity.

Planned Crime as a Challenge

The original essay uses a planned murder case to argue that not all crime is impulsive. This criticism is important. Offenses can involve preparation, concealment, coordination, delayed reward, and sustained discipline. Gottfredson and Hirschi respond that planning may still be limited and directed toward self-interest, but sophisticated offending challenges the image of crime as simple and immediate. White-collar crime, cybercrime, organized trafficking, and state violence may require skills

and long-term institutional access. Self-control alone cannot explain why those capacities are used criminally.

White-Collar Crime

Sutherland introduced the concept of white-collar crime partly to challenge theories associating crime primarily with poverty or individual defect. Executives and professionals may commit fraud through organizations that reward aggressive performance and normalize rule violation. Some offenders display patience, education, and occupational success rather than generalized impulsivity. General-theory researchers argue that workplace opportunity and self-interest remain relevant, but organizational culture and learned definitions are often more direct explanations. (Sutherland et al., 1992)

Measurement Criticism

Studies frequently measure self-control through personality scales or past behavior. If crime or risky behavior is included in the measure used to predict crime, the evidence becomes tautological. Better research measures traits independently and follows people across time. Self-report creates additional issues involving honesty, interpretation, and common-method bias. The theory remains empirically influential, but the strength of support depends on measurement and research design.

Policy Implications of the General Theory

The theory supports early family assistance, nonviolent discipline, school-based self-regulation, and opportunity reduction. It should not justify intrusive prediction or punitive intervention against children considered high risk. Effective programs can teach planning, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and delay of gratification while improving caregiver resources. Situational controls may produce quicker effects, but they should not create excessive surveillance or simply move offending elsewhere.

Sutherland's Differential Association Theory

Edwin H. Sutherland developed differential association to explain criminal behavior as learned through communication with other people, especially intimate personal groups. His mature formulation contains nine propositions. People learn the techniques of committing crime, motives and rationalizations, and definitions favorable or unfavorable to law violation. A person becomes delinquent when definitions favorable to violation exceed definitions unfavorable to violation. Associations vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.

Crime Is Learned

The theory rejects the idea that offenders are fundamentally a separate biological type. Criminal behavior is learned through the same general processes as lawful behavior. A young person may learn shoplifting techniques, justifications, and group loyalty, while an employee may learn how an organization conceals fraud. Learning includes practical skill and moral interpretation. Knowing how to commit an act is insufficient if the person defines it as unacceptable; favorable definitions make the behavior meaningful or justifiable.

Intimate Personal Groups

Sutherland emphasizes family, friends, peers, and close colleagues. The original essay uses media romanticization as an example, but classical differential association gives less weight to impersonal media because intimate interaction is more influential. Media can supply images and scripts, yet its effects depend on how viewers discuss and interpret them within relationships. Later social-learning theories expanded the framework to include observation, imitation, reinforcement, and wider symbolic environments.

Frequency, Duration, Priority, and Intensity

Not every association has equal influence. Frequent and long-lasting contact may matter more, early relationships can have priority, and prestigious or emotionally important people may have greater intensity. These dimensions make the theory more flexible but difficult to measure. Researchers cannot simply count criminal friends; they must examine the content and quality of communication, which may change over time. People also select peers, so association can be both a cause and result of behavior.

Definitions Favorable to Law Violation

A favorable definition does not always express enthusiasm for crime. It may neutralize guilt through statements such as “everyone does it,” “the company owes me,” “no one gets hurt,” or “the law is unfair.” The same technique can appear in street crime, tax evasion, doping, corporate misconduct, and political corruption. This is one of differential association’s strongest contributions: crime requires cultural meanings that permit action, not just opportunity or desire.

Techniques

Offenses differ in technical complexity. Some require little learning, while others involve financial systems, computer code, weapons, organizational procedures, or manipulation. Differential association explains how expertise travels through networks. A person may possess general motivation but lack the skill or trusted contacts needed. This insight is especially useful for professional and organized crime.

Individual Differences

The original essay criticizes Sutherland for neglecting personality and rebellion by people raised in conventional environments. Differential association does give limited attention to temperament, cognition, or biology. Two people can encounter the same definitions and respond differently. Later social-learning theories add reinforcement and imitation, while control and developmental theories examine individual variation. The limitation does not invalidate learning; it shows that exposure is not destiny. (Akers, 1998)

Origin of Criminal Associations

The theory explains what happens within associations better than why a person enters a particular network. Neighborhood, school exclusion, family relationships, work, prison, online platforms, and personal choice shape access. Structural theories explain why criminal opportunities and definitions are concentrated in some settings. An integrated account therefore connects differential association with social organization and inequality.

Policy Implications of Differential Association

Prevention can change group norms, provide prosocial mentors, disrupt criminal networks, and strengthen lawful opportunities. Programs should avoid assuming that every friendship with a justice-involved person is harmful. Relationships can also support desistance. Workplace compliance requires more than written rules; leaders must ensure that informal norms do not reward misconduct. In prisons, concentrating inexperienced offenders with entrenched criminal networks can increase learning, which supports careful classification and rehabilitative culture.

Similarities Between the Theories

Both theories reject the claim that poverty alone explains crime. Both acknowledge early socialization, opportunity, and the pursuit of reward. Each can be applied to a wide range of behavior

and encourages prevention before severe offending develops. Parenting appears in both: it can build self-control and communicate definitions. Neither theory requires that every offender be irrational or mentally ill.

Differences in the Main Cause

The general theory places a stable individual propensity at the center. Differential association places the balance of learned definitions and techniques within relationships at the center. Gottfredson and Hirschi expect the same low-self-control person to engage in varied risky behavior across settings. Sutherland expects behavior to vary with association and learned meaning. One theory emphasizes continuity within the person; the other emphasizes change across social networks.

Differences in Development

Gottfredson and Hirschi give early childhood a decisive role and expect relative stability. Differential association allows learning throughout life as relationships change. A person can enter an occupation where corruption is normalized or leave a group and adopt new definitions. Desistance research supports the importance of adult bonds and identity change, challenging a fully fixed account while remaining compatible with the idea that early self-regulation matters.

Differences in Planned Offending

Differential association can explain planned crime through learned techniques, trust, rationalizations, and organizational norms. The general theory explains it less easily when planning requires patience and restraint. However, some planned offenses still involve short-term self-interest and risk taking. The theories may explain different parts: self-control affects willingness to exploit opportunity, while association supplies method and justification.

Gender and Crime

Neither classical formulation fully explains gender differences. Gottfredson and Hirschi may point to supervision and opportunity, while differential association points to gendered networks and definitions. Feminist criminology adds power, victimization, caregiving, labor markets, and justice-system treatment. A general comparison should recognize that theories developed largely from male offending may not transfer automatically to women or gender-diverse people.

Race and Class

Recorded crime reflects enforcement as well as behavior. Racialized policing, neighborhood surveillance, legal representation, and sentencing influence who becomes labeled an offender. Differential association can examine group learning but should not convert racial groups into criminal cultures. Self-control measures can also reflect school or institutional bias. Structural inequality and state power are necessary parts of interpretation.

Cybercrime

Cybercrime demonstrates the relevance of both theories. Online forums can teach techniques, provide scripts, normalize misconduct, and connect collaborators, supporting differential association. An offender may also pursue immediate reward and underestimate future consequences, supporting self-control theory. Some cybercrime is highly organized and disciplined, revealing the limits of a purely impulsive account. Digital opportunity and platform governance complete the explanation.

Desistance

People stop offending for many reasons, including maturation, work, relationships, parenthood, treatment, identity change, and reduced opportunity. A theory of stable self-control may interpret desistance mainly through declining opportunity or the general age-crime curve. Learning theory can explain new associations and definitions. Evidence that people change does not mean childhood is irrelevant; it means prevention and rehabilitation remain worthwhile after childhood.

Integrated Interpretation

A person may have difficulty delaying gratification, enter a peer group that teaches criminal definitions, encounter an opportunity, and act within a neighborhood or organization where guardianship is weak. No single step must be the sole cause. Integrating theories should not create an untestable list of everything. Researchers can specify which mechanism operates at which stage and compare predictions. The theories are most useful when they guide distinct questions rather than compete for total ownership of crime.

Conclusion

Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory explains crime through low self-control interacting with opportunity, while Sutherland explains it through learned techniques and definitions in social relationships. The general theory is strong in connecting crime with broader risk taking and

emphasizing early development, but it struggles with planned, organizational, and changing behavior and can become circular when self-control is measured through misconduct. Differential association explains cultural meanings, technical learning, and group influence, but it is difficult to measure and gives limited attention to individual differences and network selection. Both theories contribute to prevention. A comprehensive account recognizes that self-regulation, relationships, opportunity, institutions, and structural conditions interact without treating any person's future as predetermined. (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990)

References

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