

Travis Hirschi, assert that every single act of crime and deviance is caused by this same factor: low self-control¹¹—everything from speeding, smoking tobacco, not wearing a seat belt while driving, and having numerous sex partners to serious crimes such as murder and armed robbery are caused by low self-control.

Although this theory has been disputed by much of the subsequent research on this model, it remains one of the most popular and accepted models of the modern era.¹² Furthermore, despite the criticisms of this theory, many notable criminologists still believe that this is the best single model of offending that has been presented to date. In addition, there is little doubt that this model has become the most researched theoretical model over the last two decades.¹³

Perhaps the most important reason why so much attention has been given to this theory is its simplicity, putting all of the focus on a single factor. Virtually all other theoretical models have proposed multiple factors that may play major parts in determining why individuals commit crime. After all, how can low self-control explain white-collar crime? Some self-control is required to obtain a white-collar position of employment. It is true that a simple theory is better than a more complex one, as long as other characteristics are equivalent. However, given a complex behavior like criminal behavior, it is unlikely that a simple explanation, such as naming one factor to account for everything, will prove adequate.

Scope, the next characteristic of a theory, indicates how much of a given phenomenon the theory seeks to explain. This is somewhat related to parsimony in the sense that some theories, like the theory of low self-control, seek to explain all crimes and all deviant acts as well. Thus, the theory of low self-control has a very wide scope. Other theories of crime, such as some versions of strain theory, may seek to explain only property crime or drug use. However, the wider the scope of what a theory can explain, the better the theory, assuming other characteristics are equal.

Logical consistency is the extent to which a theory makes sense in terms of its concepts and propositions. It is easier to show what we mean by logical consistency if we give examples of what does not fit this criterion. Some theories simply don't make sense because of the face value of their propositions. For example, Cesare Lombroso, called the father of criminology, claimed that the most serious offenders are "born criminals," biological throwbacks to an earlier stage of evolutionary development who can be identified by their physical features.¹⁴ Lombroso, who is discussed at more length later in this book, claimed that tattoos were one of the physical features that identified these born criminals. This doesn't make sense, however, because tattoos are not biological physical features—no baby has ever been born with a tattoo. This criticism will make even more sense when we discuss the criteria for determining causality later in this section.

Another prominent example of theories that lack logical consistency is the work of early feminist theorists, such as Freda Adler, who argued that, as females gain educational and employment opportunities, their rates of crime will be more likely to converge with those of males.¹⁵ Such hypotheses were logically inconsistent with the data available at the time they were presented and are even more inconsistent with the data available today; the facts show that females who are given the most opportunities commit the fewest crimes, while females who have not been given these benefits commit the most crimes.

These are just two examples of how past theories were logically inconsistent with the data available at the time they were created, not to mention inconsistent with future research findings, which have completely dismissed their hypotheses.

¹¹Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, *A General Theory of Crime* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹²Ellis and Walsh, "Criminologists' Opinions," 3–4.

¹³Anthony Walsh and Lee Ellis, "Political Ideology and American Criminologists' Explanations for Criminal Behavior," *The Criminologist* 24 (1999): 1, 14.

¹⁴Cesare Lombroso, *The Criminal Man* (Milan: Hoepli, 1876).

¹⁵Freda Adler, *Sisters in Crime* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).