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## T.C. Pratt's self-control/life-course theory – a proposal of evolutionary development

**Abstract:** The article presents the theory of self-control/life-course by T. C. Pratt. Its advantages were presented as a synthesis of two important theoretical trends in criminology. Important deficits in this theory have also been pointed out. Above all, however, the argument was presented that Pratt's proposal could be supplemented and developed within an evolutionary approach. The authors presented some detailed proposals in this respect and pointed to the potential directions and key assumptions of the project to further explain the relationship between the level of self-control and the evolutionary perspective on the course of an individual's life.

**Key words:** self-control, life-course, crime, evolution.

### Introduction

#### An approach based on the concepts of self-control and life story in criminology

In the criminological thought of the 2nd half of the 20th century, attempts to explain crime with regard to self-control and life story were of great importance. In 1969, Travis Hirschi published the book *Causes of Delinquency*, in which he presented the principles of social (bond) theory. In his opinion, the four aspects of social control are: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. According to the concept's author, the lack of ties with other people and lack of a feeling of

connection with the social order increase the probability of engaging in deviant behavior.

Attachment is a dimension of bonds, concerning emotional relations with the closest people. In psychological terms, a high level of attachment refers to the approval of significant persons, and at the same time the need to be accepted. Imagining, especially by a child or a teenager that by breaking norms, the most important people in their life will stop accepting and supporting them usually suffices to stop them from deviant activity.

According to Hirschi, the second element of social control is commitment. The author points out that for the majority of people who have invested a lot in following the “conformist path of life”, criminal behavior is simply unprofitable, because detecting a crime would entail the loss of the hard-earned financial and social position.

Involvement can be understood as the degree of being involved in conformist activities. People who work to support their families, nurture social relationships and develop their interests are usually not interested in prohibited activity. Their daily schedule is so packed that even if it attracted them, they would not find time and energy for it. According to Hirschi, the weakening of the three bonds indicated above may lead to the latter – belief – end up violated as well. Belief concerns the degree of faith in the fact that social norms and restrictions are justified. If the level of acceptance of social game rules is declining, the result may be easier involvement in crime.

Hirschi's reflections, and at the same time a clear emphasis on the psychological (internal) dimension of control, have been reflected in the so-called general theory of crime, developed together with Michael Gottfredson (Hirschi, Gottfredson 1990). The authors considered self-control to be the most important factor determining criminal behavior. They stressed the crucial importance of proper upbringing during early and middle childhood for the development of self-control; in particular with regard to the later ability to defer rewards. The wrong course of the socialization process is most often due to such parenting mistakes as lack of supervision over children, negative upbringing attitudes and inconsequential and inconsistent upbringing. Criminals who have been subjected to such influences aim to obtain immediate gratification and achieve selfish, short-lived goals. They are characterized by a lack of perseverance, a willingness to seek stimulation, present time orientation and lack of sensitivity to the needs of other people.

The theory formulated by Gottfredson and Hirschi has become the starting point for many other theoretical approaches and extensive empirical studies. They currently constitute an important criminological investigation area. In modern criminology, this trend is also part of the theory of ego depletion (Muraven, Pogarsky, Shumeli 2006). Another important trend in criminological studies are the concepts relating to the course of an individual's life and the developmental tasks specific to its individual stages. This approach is located in the paradigm of

social sciences, postulating the explanation of behaviors in the context of individual developmental transformations, rooted in the tradition of sociological research. In criminology, its origins are linked to publication in the 1970s of Marvin Wolfgang's and associates' paper. It shows that a small number of people, who have been identified as "chronic criminals", are responsible for most violations of the law (quoted from: Carlsson, Sarnecki 2016).

In criminology, the leading representatives of this approach are Sampson and Laub (1993), who, on the basis of analyses of extensive empirical material, came to the conclusion that crime is directly connected with undertaking important developmental tasks. As a consequence, they pointed to the variability of the probability of committing a crime in the course of life in an intra-individual dimension, which puts their attitude in opposition to the trend referring to the ability of self-control of an individual and accepting that after the end of childhood it constitutes a stable characteristic of an individual. According to the authors of the concept, the most important factors influencing the development of criminal tendencies are: individual differences, family structure, social control and the nature of relations with the criminal community.

In the context of the criminological theories of life-course, David Farrington's (1991, 2000) and Farrington and his collaborators' (1990) extremely important studies must also be mentioned. They were carried out as part of the *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development* longitudinal research project, which was launched in 1961. It covered more than 400 boys aged 8–9 years living in London. The main result of the project was to identify 23 risk factors; some of them were related to anti-social personality formation at the age of 18 and 32 years, others were related to the likelihood of being convicted by a court at the age of 21–40. According to Farrington and his collaborators (1990), the interaction of two syndromes: hyperactivity and conduct problems, is particularly important in the process of taking the path of crime.

## Travis C. Pratt's theory

Travis C. Pratt is convinced that the two important criminological study trends mentioned above can be integrated. The integration proposal is based on his theory of self-control/life-course, presented in 2016 in the "European Journal of Criminology". Pratt's theory is based on the belief that the level of self-control changes during life, and self-control is a factor influencing important events and thus determining the undertaking of criminal behavior. This theory consists of 10 key assertions with justifications referring to research results. These assertions state that: (1) the level of self-control makes it possible to predict the occurrence of problem behavior in all important periods of life; (2) the level of control of an individual changes throughout the course of their life; (3) after the years in

which they are most likely to commit a crime (peak crime years), the level of self-control grows; (4) the level of self-control influences the selection of negative life events; (5) self-control affects the coping strategies adopted after the occurrence of negative life events; (6) self-control is a key factor in linking neuropsychological deficits with early onset offending; (7) self-control influences adolescent sensitivity and the occurrence of the maturity gap; (8) self-control influences the individual's sensitivity and their informal and formal social control in all points in the life course); (9) self-control influences the selection of social bonds and turning points in the course of life; (10) self-control influences the quality of social bonds in the course of life.

The results of empirical research provide clear support for the thesis that the level of self-control influences the probability of committing a crime. This applies to all developmental periods, including late adulthood – old age (Wolfe 2014 quoted from: Pratt 2016). However, even Hirschi (2004, quoted from: Pratt 2016), as emphasized by Pratt, has modified his theory, assuming that the level of self-control depends on the social bonds perceived as its source; and, since the social bonds of an individual change over the course of life, the level of self-control also needs to change (Pratt 2016).

Pratt finds support for this thesis, among other things, in the research conducted in connection with the verification of the concept of ego depletion). They indicate that the need to maintain self-control at a high level leads to its weakening and, in certain extreme cases, even to a breakdown of the ability to maintain self-control. They also show that the propensity to deplete the ego is differentiated individually (Pratt 2016). The author argues that stressful events can weaken an individual's ability of self-control at any time in life. He therefore considers the changes in self-control levels to be the missing link of the life-course theory.

Pratt's proposal (2016) is consistent with the results of research demonstrating the existence of a curvilinear relationship between age and committing crimes, which is referred to in literature as the age-crime curve). The author writes "that it is possible that changes in self-control (including changes in its intra-individual variance related to aging) may provide a better explanation of the age-crime curve than those hitherto suggested by criminologists (2016, p. 133).

Pratt also believes that the theory of life-course is focused on the consequences of negative life events, but does not pay sufficient attention to their causes. As a result, these events are perceived as almost random. In his explanatory model, he thus suggests linking their occurrence with the level of self-control of an individual, because the results of research clearly prove that it is correlated with negative events, which have consequences in the form of criminal behavior. He also emphasizes the influence of an individual, determined by their ability of self-control, on negative life events, which means that, within his theory, it ceases to be perceived as passive subjection to fate, which – in his opinion – takes place in the theories of the life-cycle (Pratt 2016).

According to Pratt (2006), this active nature of an individual resulting from their ability of self-control is also reflected, according to Pratt, in the remedial strategies that are undertaken as a response to negative life events. The low level of self-control is linked to the tendency to look for solutions that will provide immediate gratification, and the high level of control is linked to the use of those that do not require an easy and immediate reinforcement. As a result – as the author argues – people with a high level of self-control will be more likely to undertake pro-social activities, and those with a low level of control are likely to undertake destructive actions (e. g. excessive consumption of alcohol) or anti-social actions (e. g. aggressive behaviors), which may aggravate their health and social situation and which will constitute a violation of the law or increase the probability of crime.

With regard to the issues of self-control and life-cycle, Pratt refers to an influential concept by Terrie E. Moffitt (1993), which distinguished two groups of criminals: (1) life-course persistent offenders) and (2) adolescence-limited offenders). Moffitt has shown that the first group of criminals has neuropsychological deficits. Pratt stresses that these deficits are reflected in the ability to perform executive functions essential for effective self-control.

However, a well established fact is that criminal behavior is more common in adolescence than in other periods of life, and it also applies to people with no neuropsychological deficits. Moffitt (1993) explains this phenomenon with the maturity gap, manifested in young people, wishing to demonstrate adulthood, imitating the behaviors that they consider characteristic of adults. Pratt, referring to empirical data, shows that there is a differentiation in this respect due to whether the subject of imitation is socially accepted behaviors or behaviors that are characterized as crimes. At the same time, he argues that it is precisely the low level of self-control that is correlated with adolescents' undertaking of prohibited behaviors.

The author also argues that a low level of self-control is linked to the adoption of a specific temporal perspective: assigning a greater importance to factors that are close in time. Due to the fact that the crime is able to provide immediate gratification and that the punishment is generally distant and uncertain, people with low self-control are more likely to commit crimes. They are also less sensitive to informal social impacts, including a lower tendency to feel shame and regret due to the fact that the crime they committed will bring negative experiences to their loved ones. People with low levels of self-control are more likely to join anti-social groups. Pratt believes that it is the level of self-control that determines this important factor from the point of view of the theory of life-course, i. e. the influence of other people and the nature of social bonds created at different stages of life (2016).

The level of control is also indicated by him as a factor determining the quality of social relations. There is empirical evidence that it can affect them both

directly and indirectly, as low self-control increases the likelihood of behaviors (such as alcohol consumption) that destroy social bonds.

## **Problems of Pratt's theory from the perspective of evolutionary approach – proposal for development**

Pratt (2016), citing the results of neuropsychological research (Kray et al. 2014), points out that young people in particular are vulnerable to weakening self-control. However, he makes no attempt to explain this quite enigmatic phenomenon.

Pratt's proposal is therefore also unable to explain the "age-crime curve" well. It is also a problem with the theory of self-control and life-course that the author tries to integrate. Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) even considered that this curvilinear dependency could not be explained as a function of any psychological or sociological variables. This position is defined by Sweeten and his colleagues (2013, quoted from: Pratt 2016) as the "inexplicability thesis".

Matza (2009) believes that moving away from crime by the majority (60–85%) of young people who have committed crimes involves undertaking certain life tasks, such as: marriage, bringing up children and taking up military service. At the same time, Matza notes that it should be explained why some are subject to this change and others remain criminals (Matza 2009).

We believe that both Pratt and Matza, for unknown reasons, completely ignore the evolutionary explanations of this phenomenon, described by evolutionary psychologists Margo Wilson and Martin Daly (1985), as a "young man's syndrome". These authors argue that taking up risky behaviors during adolescence is the result of mental mechanisms responsible for particularly fierce rivalry between men, which is a means of gaining an appropriate social position and access to sexual partners.

The explanation of the increase in crime during adolescence through the mechanisms of sexual selection can therefore be considered as a solution to a riddle that classical criminological theories cannot cope with.

This explanation is particularly valuable also because it refers not only to the increase in criminal behaviors during adolescence, but also to the sex differentiation in these behaviors. This is reflected in the name of this phenomenon, adopted in the evolutionary approach.

The classic theories of crime pay little attention to sex differences. However, the rapid increase in the number of criminal behaviors during the adolescence period is particularly true for men. Moreover, they commit crimes in their youth not only more frequently than women, but also the crimes committed by them belong to the category of particularly dangerous ones – threatening life and health. Important criminological theories: self-control theory (Gottfredson, Hirschi 1990), control balance theory (Tittle 1995), or the theory of differentiated relationships

(Sutherland 1947) explain this phenomenon by greater social consent to expressing aggression in the case of boys as opposed to girls (cf. Thompson 2015); they do not, however, explain the origins of this phenomenon, which, due to its cultural universality, requires a biological explanation (Pinker 2005). Pratt's proposal does not bring anything new in this respect. As a result, its explanatory power with regard to the sex differences in crime is incomparably less pronounced than that of evolutionary criminology.

The possibilities of Pratt's evolutionary development of synthesis also concern other aspects of his theory. He believes (Pratt 2016, p. 132) that "it is reasonable to conclude that social and biological factors (and both can be understood as providing explanations for the transformations typical of adolescence) contribute to changes in self-control in the course of life". Rocque, Posick and Felix (2015) linked the stress caused by environmental factors such as: poverty, discrimination, emotional abuse with changes occurring in the brain. We believe that these results can be complementary to the data on developmental disorders of the central nervous system.

The increased risk of criminal behaviors during adolescence may be the result of feedback between the natural developmental changes in brain function and the actions taken by young people. Developmental changes may lead to risky behaviors in certain situations and, as a result, to further brain disorders caused by stress related to the consequences of these actions.

At the same time, it seems that a distant reason for the ineffectiveness of adolescents' brain function is that paradoxically, such dysfunctions connected with the level of control in the evolutionary past may have been an adaptation that enabled risky behaviors to be taken, which in the case of success have led to a reputation of a brave and efficient individual, and ultimately to reproductive success. In some situations, these behaviors can also be adaptive at present (cf. Florek 2011; Florek, Piotrowski 2013). An example could be the participation in a fight, which can result in the loss of freedom, health or even life, but in some cases it can also bring about recognition and improvement of the status of an individual in a peer group.

We also believe that Pratt's reference to Moffitt's concept is an accurate but incomplete explanation of the diversity of the criminal population. Reaching for the findings of evolutionary psychology makes it possible to grasp the sources of this differentiation, which makes it possible to better understand the biological mechanisms that cause them. Computer simulations of the evolution of mutual altruism (cf. Mealey 1995; Ridley 2000) show that in the course of evolution, two main strategies of action were developed – a "pro-social" strategy of the "pigeon", consisting in reciprocating cooperation and forgiving "betrayal", and an anti-social strategy of the "hawk", based on – to put it out of necessity in a simplified way – rivalry and exploitation of the "goodness" of individuals using a pro-social strategy. These strategies are implemented through the specific characteristics of brain

function, which are to some extent genetically determined (cf. Mealey 1995). In a population in which altruistic individuals gain significant dominance, the profitability of an egoistic strategy is increased (cf. Ridley 2000). This state of affairs results from the so-called turnout selection (cf. Buss 2008).

Linda Mealey (1995) argues that in every human population a constant percentage of individuals (from 1 to 4%) applies an anti-social strategy and is characterized by specific features in the construction and functioning of the central nervous system, which is an adaptation to this type of behavior. At the psychological level, this adaptation manifests itself as the inability to feel empathy and higher order feelings, including shame and guilt, as well as problems related to the control of behavior. There are many indications that, at least to some extent, this group can be identified with the group of life-course persistent offenders, recognized by Moffitt, and people suffering from the so-called anti-social personality disorder.

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the possible evolutionary additions that we have indicated, which can be proposed for Pratt's deliberations by far more, do not require the formulation of new theoretical proposals, because they refer to a concept commonly known in the circle of psychologists and evolutionary criminologists. The biologically and evolutionarily oriented explanations of aggression and crime now constitute a coherent, scientific approach to these phenomena (cf. Durrant, Ward 2015; Florek, Piotrowski 2013; Piotrowski, Florek 2013; Florek 2015).

## Final thoughts and conclusion

It is impossible not to notice the integrative value of Pratt's theory. It links two important research trends in modern criminology. However, one may ponder the nature of this connection, and in particular whether it actually is a theory. The answer to this question depends, of course, on our understanding of the theory.

However, there is no doubt that the fully cognitively satisfactory synthesis of two different theoretical approaches consists in increasing their exploratory potential. In the case of the synthesis of the theory of self-control and the theory of the course of life, it would be so if Pratt were to show how the synthesis of both approaches translates into the ability to explain those phenomena related to crime, which had previously been difficult to understand. However, it seems that in the case of Pratt's proposal we are dealing rather with a reduction of the theory of life-course to the theory of self-control. This manifests itself in the explanation of phenomena accentuated on the basis of life story theory by changes in the level of self-control of individuals, observed in ontogenesis. In fact, Pratt tries to demonstrate that some – though not all – phenomena, evoked by the proponents of the life-cycle theory, are co-determined by the level of self-control of the



individual, which may change with age. The only exception to this exploration strategy is the thesis that the level of self-control changing during the course of life. However, it appears in a certain form – as Pratt points out – also in Hirschi's publication (2004, quoted from: Pratt 2016). It is therefore not a novelty in the theory of self-control. Moreover, an attempt to explain the complex phenomenon of crime in relation to a single factor, which, by the way, cannot be considered as fundamental in terms of behavioral determinants, to some extent can be regarded as an excessive simplification a priori. This is due to the fact that many factors completely unrelated to self-control are known to have an impact on criminal behavior (Krahe 2006; Błachut et al. 2007). As a result, Pratt's proposal cannot be regarded as a “full-value” theory of criminal behaviors. It is rather a “single-factor” concept that explains some of the manifestations of these behaviors.

The key problem with Pratt's theory, however, is that it does not clearly indicate whether there is a mechanism responsible for changes in the level of self-control and therefore it does not attempt to describe it. As a consequence, it is not clear why the level of self-control changes in the course of life. The answer to this fundamental question, and many other questions directly related to it, can be provided by the reference of Pratt's proposals and other “classical” criminological theories to the findings of contemporary evolutionary psychology (cf. Florek, Piotrowski 2013; Piotrowski, Florek 2013; Florek 2015) and the criminology based on it (Durrant, Ward 2015). These fields have already responded to many of the questions raised by psychosocially oriented researchers.

Criminology is an interdisciplinary field of science. This fact is increasingly highlighted in the debates of scientists dealing with crime-related issues. However, if, according to motto of the 15th Conference of the European Criminological Association (which took place in 2015 in Porto), we want to treat this field of knowledge as a *unitas multiplex*, we should strive for a more intense exchange of experience and ideas between representatives of different criminology trends than we do now. We think that T.C. Pratt's theory is a step in the right direction. At the same time, in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of crime, it is necessary to seek agreement and “build bridges” especially between researchers with psychological and sociological orientation and those who refer to biological explanations.

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