

## PREFACE

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A compelling conclusion has emerged in the behavioral sciences: Self-control—an individual quality we all possess in varying degrees—is a remarkably powerful predictor of how our life will unfold. This one simple attribute touches nearly all aspects of life, affecting how we approach the world and how it treats us. These dynamics first emerge in early childhood, and by adolescence and adulthood our self-control is affecting such pivotal things as whether we break the law, how we do in school, and whether we succeed in an occupation and develop rewarding interpersonal relationships. Indeed, our self-control also affects our ability to avoid life's great hassles, including addiction, bankruptcy, poor physical health, and even criminal victimization. These events and developments all rely, at least in part, on our ability to thoughtfully assess daily risks and temptations and then behave in ways that restrain impulses and advance long-term interests. For those who do this well, life often proceeds quite smoothly; for those who do not, the complications may be frequent and severe.

These conclusions follow from countless behavioral science studies spanning many decades. Our approach to that research has been from the perspective of criminology, our “home” discipline. Criminologists have studied self-control extensively since 1990, the year that saw the publication of Gottfredson and Hirschi's seminal work *A General Theory of Crime*. That book argued that self-control was *the* singular factor most responsible for explaining criminal involvement. Gottfredson and Hirschi's work triggered a seemingly limitless supply of articles, books, and chapters on self-control. This was all for good reason—just as Gottfredson and Hirschi predicted, effects of low self-control on crime turned out to be quite powerful. Moreover,

criminologists have been fascinated by its equally powerful effects on many of the family, peer, and school variables that *also* affect crime. As these impressive results piled up, the concept of self-control took on momentum, visibility, and a larger-than-life presence in criminological theory. This prompted one fellow self-control researcher to cleverly dub self-control the “*Tyrannosaurus rex* of criminology” (DeLisi, 2011, p. 103).

As we all know, however, things did not end well for the dinosaur version of *Tyrannosaurus rex*, and there were problems for its criminological counterpart also. That is where this book comes in. It first was envisioned many years ago when we recognized problems in the criminological approach to self-control—problems that undermined its future insights and usefulness. Admittedly, these were not *cataclysmic* problems—nothing like the giant asteroid that struck the Earth and triggered atmospheric shifts that left dinosaurs extinct. They were, however, problems nonetheless. Three in particular most captured our attention and inspired our search for solutions.

The first involved how the *extraordinary volume* of new self-control research had overwhelmed prevailing theory in this area. Theory is supposed to organize what is known about something and then guide future research, but in this instance, that was not happening. Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory was published 25 years ago and has not been updated since. Moreover, their theory was—by design—an unusually parsimonious and concise approach; for example, it cited only a single cause of individual self-control (exposure to high-quality parenting) and offered few details on how low self-control functions with other facets of life to affect behavior. By the late 1990s, research was zooming past the theory’s predictions to consider issues it had neglected or not envisioned. Indeed, in many instances, researchers were testing hypotheses that Gottfredson and Hirschi had flatly rejected, especially in reference to the biological basis of self-control and the idea that self-control is dynamic over the life course. Regarding these issues and others, Gottfredson and Hirschi had in some sense told future researchers “don’t go there.” Many criminologists were woefully bad at following those instructions—they *did* go *there*. When they did, new empirical findings piled up faster and faster. And yet, the theoretical framework for organizing those findings remained

unchanged and could not incorporate the new insights. In the world of science, this is a big problem.

There was a second problem (although there are terrific exceptions to it that we discuss): Criminologists often proceeded as if we were the only behavioral science studying self-control. This could not have been further from the truth. The explosion in self-control research over the past two decades knows no academic boundaries—it spans a diverse list of disciplines beyond criminology, including psychology, sociology, economics, behavioral genetics, cognitive neuroscience, and psychiatry. And importantly, just as criminologists often ignored the research in these disciplines, those disciplines ignored our research in criminology. Every school of thought—sometimes even those existing within the same discipline—seemed to proceed as if others barely existed. The end result is that too much self-control research is fragmented, narrow, and discipline-specific; the hard-earned insights emerging from any one perspective largely have not been incorporated into other perspectives.

The third problem inspiring this book relates to the issue of public policy. The overwhelming majority of self-control research—across all the disciplines—approached self-control as a variable that could explain individual differences in criminal, deviant, and harmful behaviors. Very rarely did researchers take the next step of asking (and empirically verifying) how we could use this information to inform policy efforts to reduce these behaviors. And yet, fruitful opportunities clearly are possible on this issue. Given the powerful way in which self-control shapes behavior, along with society's obvious interest in reducing the suffering from harmful manifestations of low self-control, we can reach but one conclusion: Self-control theory and research *can* attend to key issues of public policy, and this should be done with depth and precision.

There certainly were other problems, but these are the three that stood out to us: Empirical research was zooming ahead of prevailing theory, researchers were using narrow discipline-specific perspectives, and along the way, nobody was talking much about policy. With these limitations clear in our minds, we embarked on the writing of this book. Our goal was to use its chapters to answer questions that are fundamental to understanding the connection between self-control and behavior. These are the questions we sought to answer:

- Over the life course and across different arenas of life, what behaviors are significantly affected by self-control?
- What causes a person to have high or low self-control to begin with?
- Once a child or adolescent develops a certain level of self-control, does that level of self-control remain fixed or does it fluctuate over the life course? And if self-control fluctuates over time, what specific events and experiences drive this?
- When self-control affects crime, *why* does it do so—what exactly is the causal sequence by which low self-control is translated into actual criminal acts?
- Are the effects of self-control uniform across different individuals and environments, or, alternatively, do the harmful effects of low self-control depend on other factors?

We knew that extensive rigorous research had been conducted on each of these questions, but there was no mechanism or framework for bringing it all together. Our goal therefore was to write the book that would do so. And true to our beliefs about the scholarly limitations we described above, our approach would be built on three major priorities: (a) to incorporate the new insights and innovations that have accumulated in recent research, (b) to build an integrated perspective that truly captures the multidisciplinary nature of modern-day self-control research, and (c) to place public policy issues at the forefront. Regarding the last, a key principle guided us: Self-control research is much more than fanciful ideas that are interesting to college professors and their students; instead, it can be the basis for refined policy efforts that combat pressing problems faced by individuals, communities, and governments.

The chapters that follow are the end product of these efforts. The book is designed to provide an engaging and entertaining view on the science of self-control. Most important, we wanted it to be accessible and informative to a wide swath of readers, ranging from students taking their first course in the behavioral sciences to graduate students and scholars conducting their own self-control research. Writing for such a broad audience was a novel experience in that we have spent our careers writing dense, technical journal articles read mostly by

professional researchers. Reversing course and writing for a broad audience that includes nonspecialists, however, was a refreshing, enlightening, and elevating experience. It prompted us to keep an eye on the big picture, rise above the minutiae of conflicting arguments and findings, and ask ourselves (a) what the important things that we suspect or know are, (b) why these things are important, and (c) how they connect to people's real lives. True enough, we will cover rigorous issues of research and theory throughout, but this is done with a clear, conversational approach to writing that emphasizes the interesting aspects of the material.

Ultimately, we think readers will discover the same thing we did: When it comes to self-control and behavior, there is much out there to learn, and it is often fascinating. The range of topics we cover is remarkable: There are the small children in a lab trying their hardest *not* to eat a marshmallow (and the researchers who followed up decades later to see how they fared in life); there is the Russian explorer on an Antarctic expedition who, in a weakened state, mustered the self-control to cut open his own abdomen and perform a life-saving appendectomy on himself; there is Phineas Gage, the 1800s-era railroad worker whose brain was pierced by an expelled railroad spike (he survived but was plagued by self-control lapses that have modern-day neuroscientists still studying his brain injuries); there are stories of self-control transformations, where individuals previously marked by major self-control deficits turned around their lives and pursued a new course. And then there is the possibility that collective advances in self-control have fueled the advancement of human civilizations. That argument comes from Steven Pinker, an acclaimed Harvard psychologist. He provides a scrupulously researched narrative on a multiple-centuries-long "civilizing process" in which human societies became attentive to how a collective sense of self-control could shape their futures, allowing them to more efficiently and peacefully navigate the inherent challenges of life. One thing is for certain: In studying these topics and others, we learned an extraordinary amount ourselves. We look forward to sharing that knowledge with readers.