



# Mediating the bullying victimization–delinquency relationship with anger and cognitive impulsivity: A test of general strain and criminal lifestyle theories



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to compare intervening mechanisms proposed by general strain theory and the control model of criminal lifestyle theory as explanations for the strain–behavior relationship.

**Methods:** In this study strain was defined as bullying victimization, behavior was operationalized as delinquency, and the two mediators were anger and cognitive impulsivity. Analyses were completed on a group of 572 early adolescent schoolchildren from the Illinois Study of Bullying and Sexual Victimization (ISBSV). A causal mediation analysis was performed with prospective data from the ISBSV, with six months between the independent and mediator variables and six months between the mediator and dependent variables.

**Results:** The outcome of the analyses indicated that cognitive impulsivity but not anger mediated the victimization–delinquency relationship, although the two pathways did not differ significantly from one another.

**Conclusions:** These findings provide preliminary support for the mediating mechanism proposed by the control model of criminal lifestyle theory (i.e., cognitive impulsivity).

## 1. Introduction

Efforts to compare and contrast different criminological theories and models have been around almost as long as the field itself. The focus of comparison, however, remains a matter of controversy and debate. Traditionally, researchers have compared theories on their independent variables, whether it be deviant peer associations, as in social learning theory (Akers, 1998), aversive treatment from others, as in general strain theory (Agnew, 1992), or low self-control, as in the general theory of crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). As Agnew (1995) notes, however, criminological theories share many of the same independent variables or are able to explain the effects of an independent variable from another theory using an independent variable from their own theory. The solution, says Agnew (1995) is to compare theories, not on their independent variables, but on their motives or intervening mechanisms. He goes on to list three such mechanisms—moral evaluation, negative affect, and freedom from constraint or control—partnering them up with social learning theory, general strain theory, and the general theory of crime, respectively. The purpose of the current investigation was to compare the intervening mechanisms proposed by two different criminological theories (general

strain theory and the control model of criminal lifestyle development) as to their ability to explain the same independent–dependent variable relationship.

## 2. Bullying victimization and delinquency

One of the more consistent findings in the fields of criminology and criminal justice is that victimization and criminality are strongly related. The victim-offender overlap, as it is commonly referred to in the literature, has been observed in a wide variety of contexts, settings, and cultures, as well as across a number of different victimization experiences (Jennings, Piquero, & Reingle, 2012). Moon and Morash (2017), for instance, determined that objective and subjective strains associated with teacher punishment, gender discrimination, and criminal victimization predicted delinquency in Korean youth, whereas Cudmore, Cuevas, and Sabina (2017) discovered that polyvictimization experiences correlated significantly with delinquency in Latina adolescents sampled from across the United States. In addition, both direct and vicarious violent victimization experiences have been found to relate to crime and delinquency (Lin, Cochran, & Mieczkowski, 2011). Although routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) and Gottfredson and

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Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime are often used to explain victim-offender overlap (see Jennings et al., 2012), the model that provides the clearest indication of a motivational or mediating influence in victim-offender overlap is Agnew's (1992) general strain theory (GST). The results from both cross-sectional (Cudmore et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2011) and longitudinal panel (Posick & Zimmerman, 2015; Turnanovic & Pratt, 2013) studies indicate that anger, as proposed in GST, is a significant mediator of the victimization-delinquency relationship.

Several different types of victimization had been found to promote victim-offender overlaps. The specific independent-dependent variable relationship examined in the current investigation entails a bullying victimization independent or strain variable and a delinquency dependent or outcome variable. Although research indicates that bullying perpetration and victimization both correlate with delinquency, the perpetration-delinquency relationship has normally been found to be stronger than the victimization-delinquency relationship (Hemphill et al., 2011; Lösel & Bender, 2011; Nansel et al., 2008; Sigfusdottir, Gudjonsson, & Sigurdsson, 2010; Sourander, Jensen, & Ronning, 2007). One question for which the current study sought answers was whether the insertion of an intervening variable could strengthen or clarify the victimization-delinquency association. Toward this end, two competing mechanisms were tested as potential mediators of the bullying victimization-delinquency nexus: namely, anger and cognitive impulsivity. Anger and frustration are not only examples of intervening mechanisms derived from negative affect, they are also the primary mediators of the strain-delinquency relationship according to GST (Agnew, 1992, 2001). Cognitive impulsivity or reactive criminal thinking, not to be confused with behavioral impulsivity or low self-control, derives from the control model of criminal lifestyle development (Walters, 2017a,b,in press) and achieves its role as a putative intervening mechanism by virtue of its ability to free an individual from control and internal constraint.

Researchers testing a general strain theory perspective on the bullying-delinquency association have discovered that bullying victimization correlates with delinquent behavior (Baker & Pelfry, 2016; Cullen, Unnever, Hartman, Turner, & Agnew, 2008; Sigfusdottir et al., 2010). Each of these studies was limited, however, by the fact that they relied exclusively on cross-sectional data. Even in the Sigfusdottir et al. (2010) study—where the effects of bullying victimization and bullying perpetration on delinquency were said to be partially mediated by anger—there was no evidence that the authors used longitudinal or temporally ordered data. In a study employing a half-longitudinal design, Hay and Evans (2006) discovered that community victimization at Wave 1 of the National Survey of Children (NSC) predicted delinquency at Wave 2 five years later. Anger, which was also measured at Wave 2, displayed a pattern interpreted by Hay and Evans (2006) as evidence of mediation. To refer to the correlation between anger and delinquency as mediation, however, is misleading given that mediation requires proper temporal order and direction between the independent variable, the mediator variable, and the dependent variable. In addition, the five-year span between Waves 1 and 2 of the NSC provided ample opportunity for extraneous variables to impact on the victimization-delinquency relationship.

Like GST, the control model of criminal lifestyle theory (Walters, 2017a,b,in press) proposes that general strain is a potentially important predictor of delinquency. The two theories differ, however, in their selection of mediators. Both theories contend that strain leads to delinquency, but where anger serves as the principal mediating variable in GST (see panel A of Fig. 1), cognitive impulsivity is the principal intervening mechanism in the control model of criminal lifestyle development (see panel B of Fig. 1). Cognitive impulsivity, also known as reactive criminal thinking, underscores the impetuous and reckless features of criminal cognition. Although cognitive impulsivity derives from and is related to behavioral impulsivity or low self-control, behavioral impulsivity and cognitive impulsivity represent different constructs (Walters, 2016a, 2017a). In an initial test of the control model,

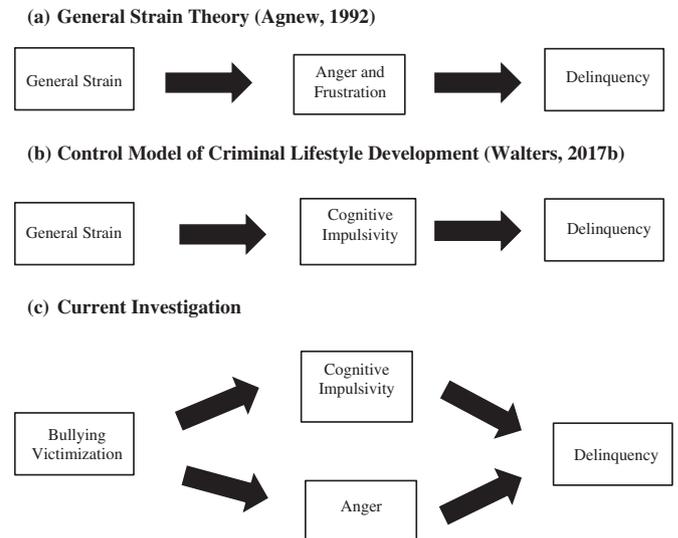


Fig. 1. Schematic diagrams of General Strain Theory, the Control Model of Criminal Lifestyle Development, and mediated relationships tested in the current investigation.

Walters (2016b) determined that cognitive impulsivity or reactive criminal thinking mediated the relationship between peer rejection (strain) and peer delinquency whereas negative affect (depression, anxiety, loneliness) did not. Additional research is required, however, to determine whether the connection between the strain produced by bullying victimization and subsequent delinquency is mediated by anger, as laid out in GST, or by cognitive impulsivity, as postulated by criminal lifestyle theory (see panel C in Fig. 1).

### 3. Causal mediation analysis

Traditionally, mediation analysis has been framed around Baron and Kenny's (1986) four causal steps. Although this approach to investigating mediating effects has been criticized for being overly conservative (Hayes, 2009), it remains one of the more popular models for testing mediation hypotheses in the social and behavioral sciences. Walters and Mandracchia (2017), for instance, determined that two-thirds of the recent "mediation" studies published in 8 leading criminological journals employed the causal steps approach or an equally flawed methodology to evaluate for mediation. The limitations of the Baron and Kenny procedure are evident at each step of the procedure. Whereas Step 1 requires that the independent (X) and dependent (Y) variables correlate before testing for mediation (M), it is now widely recognized that because of such factors as opposite sign multiple mediation and suppressor effects, mediation can occur in the absence of a significant X–Y relationship (Hayes, 2013). The second and third steps of the causal steps model require that the *a* path (running from X to M) and the *b* path (running from M to Y) of the indirect effect must both be significant. Insisting that the two individual paths be significant instead of evaluating the full indirect effect (*ab*) greatly enhances the odds of making a Type II error (Preacher, 2015). The fourth step of the causal steps approach compares full (the direct effect of X on Y is non-significant after controlling for M) and partial (the direct effect of X on Y is significant even after controlling for M) mediation based on the assumption that full mediation is the more desirable outcome. Current opinion, however, holds that nearly all mediation is partial (Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011).

In an effort to promote best practices in mediation research, Walters and Mandracchia (2017) recommend that mediation researchers incorporate five core principles or practices into their research. The first principle of effective mediation practice is establishing the causal order of variables in one's study. Consequently, X should precede M and M should precede Y in the variable sequence. Furthermore, there should

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