



Gender, social bonds, and delinquency: a comparison of boys' and girls' models[☆]

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Available online 25 May 2004

Abstract

Past research has assessed gender differences in delinquency due to differential social controls, yet important questions remain regarding gender and social bonding. As much of this work was premised on Hirschi's measurement of the social bond, we examine whether gender moderates two parts of the social bond: the measurement of the social bond and structural differences between the social bond and delinquency. Using multiple-group structural equation modeling, we find that neither the measures of the social bond nor their relationships with property crime are gender-specific. The structural relationship between the elements of the social bond and violent delinquency differs slightly for boys and girls. We discuss implications of this research for social control theory, measuring the social bond and for gender-specific theories of social bonding and control.

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1. Introduction

Feminist criminologists have suggested that the causal process of criminal offending differs by gender and, as such, the field of criminology has seen a growth of gender-specific theories of criminal offending (Hagan et al., 1987; Heimer and DeCoster,

[☆] Data for this paper are supported by NSF Grant #367560; Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, Principal Investigators. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2001 American Society of Criminology Meetings.

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1999; McCarthy et al., 1999; Ogle et al., 1995; Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996). In particular, several authors have suggested a gendered process of social control stemming from differences in familial bonds and control (Hagan et al., 1987; McCarthy et al., 1999; Heimer and DeCoster, 1999; Ogle et al., 1995). It was suggested that girls and boys experienced different familial processes, developed different types of social bonds or were differentially controlled. Such theoretical developments are based on two lines of theory and research: feminist research on gender as structure (Risman, 1998; West and Zimmerman, 1987) and Hirschi's social bonding theory (Hirschi, 1969). Researchers are increasingly suggesting that gender as structure is created, maintained, and differentially experienced within families leading to gender differences in boys' and girls' delinquency.

Underscoring this line of theoretical development is the assumption that social controls operate differently or have differential importance for boys and girls, thus necessitating gender-specific theories of social control. For example, Hagan et al.'s power-control theory suggests that Marxist-patriarchal arrangements within the family translate into differential control and social bonds for boys and girls. Whereas, Heimer and DeCoster's (1999) gendered theory of violent delinquency suggests that girls' relational socialization and gendered social bonds impact their involvement in violence (see also, Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996). Much of the argument concerning gender differences in relational control rests squarely in a gendered "ethic of care" (Gilligan, 1982; Mears et al., 1998; Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996), which implies a gendered process of affective bonding. The assumption of gendered social bonding is not entirely in keeping with Hirschi's version of the social bond in which he suggests that social controls are gender neutral. Yet his proposition that boys and girls bond similarly to conventional others has never been tested.

If gender moderates how the social bond is measured, then models using a "general" social control model for male and female offending would be mis-specified. More importantly, previous findings of gender differences in social bonding may have incorrectly attributed differences in bonding to structural, rather than measurement, differences. Two critical measurement and modeling questions remain concerning gender, social control, and social bonding. First, does gender moderate the measurement of social bonds? Second, does gender moderate the structural relationship between the social bond and delinquency for boys and girls? Before we address these two research questions, we review the relevant literature on gender, social bonds, and social control.

2. Literature review

2.1. Hirschi's social control theory

Hirschi, in *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), suggests that youths' bonds to conventional society deter their involvement in deviant activities. According to Hirschi, the more strongly bonded an individual is to conventional society, the more

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