

Socioeconomic Status, Control Process and Violent Delinquency (A Study of Male High School Students of Ahvaz City)

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Abstract

In spite of vast empirical research concerning violent delinquency, researchers have not paid enough attention to the relationship between structural and control theories. This paper focuses on the structural and control theories and tries to combine these approaches to explain the aforesaid issues. Accordingly, self-report questionnaires were used in a sample of 400 male students in Ahvaz, which were chosen via multistage cluster method of sampling. The results showed that supervision, attachment and self-control mediate between socioeconomic status (SES) and violent delinquency. Supervision and attachment, in their own accord, had direct and indirect effect, via self-control, on violent delinquency.

Keywords: Socioeconomic status (SES), parental supervision, attachment to parents, self-control, violent delinquency.

Introduction

One of the important issues in criminology is violent delinquency. This phenomenon is a great social problem in all countries, both developed

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and developing. Social scientists have long sought the predictors of violent and antisocial behavior. Early adolescence marks a time when the rates of delinquent behavior sharply increase (Diamantopoulou et al, 2011)

A glance at newspapers, news sites, and the rate of criminal complaint may well reveal that violent crimes have increased rapidly during the last three decades (Iran Newspaper 2006/1384). Regarding the increase of violence in the society, domestic experts of Iran assert that the spread of violence and aggression in Iranian society is one of the most serious social problems in the recent years (Tavassoli & Fazel, 2002/1381). We have to notice that most cases of aggression and violence have been observed among 15 to 25 year old adolescents (Iran Newspaper 2006/1384). Yet, domestic researches in Iran have not paid precise attention to violent delinquency. One of the purposes of the present paper is to fill this void. Moreover, the present study attempts to explain violent delinquency through the combination of two different perspectives, i.e. structural and control theories.

Structural strain theories (e.g. Merton, 1968; Cohen, 1955) and social control theories (e.g. Hirschi, 1969; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) give different explanations for the incidence of crime and delinquency. Structural theories emphasize on the SES role as a key determinant of the incidence of violent delinquency. According to this perspective, the ability to achieve personal goals is stratified by socioeconomic status (Siegel, 1997:174). In other words, structural theorists believe that "the frequency of deviant behavior varies within different social structures" (Merton, 1968:185) because social structure exerts different amounts of strain on members of various social positions (Merton, 1968). On the other hand, control theorists assume that human beings are naturally hedonists and all people have the potential to violate the law. They believe that deviance is a consequence of inefficient control (Nabavi, 1995). The main characteristic of this perspective is informal control. Control theory posits a signal conventional moral order in society and assumes the motivation for delinquency is invariant across persons. The question is not, "why do some people violate the law" since we are all equally motivated to do so, but rather, "why do most people refrain from law violation?" Hirschi's answer is that they are dissuaded by strong bonds to conventional society: attachment, commitment, involvement,

and belief” (Matsueda&Heimer, 1987:827-8 ;Matsueda, 1982, Hirschi, 1969).

In control theory, as opposed to Sutherland’s social learning theory, breaking from the conventional moral order means committing a delinquency. In other words, breaking the social bonds directly leads to deviance (Matsueda 1982, and Haimer&Matsueda, 1987). Considering the aspects of crime, the question control theorist question is “why do people obey the rules of society?” The control theorist argues that people obey the law because behavior and passions are being controlled by internal and external forces (Siegel, 1997). Hirschi (1969) also emphasized on the social bonds and ties and stated: “control theories assume that delinquent acts result when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken” (p. 16). In the absence of such "internal and external forces", "links" and “ties”, individuals are free to commit crime. A great deal of these bonds and ties are experienced within the family system. In this view, parental control plays an important role in children socialization process.

Control theory as well as Sutherland’s social learning theory is a “process theory” (Sigel, 1997). There are important steps for combining structural and process approaches (e.g., Heimer, 1997, combined structural approach by focusing on SES, and on social learning theory). But, in general, control theorists did not pay enough attention to the role that SES plays in producing violent delinquency. Although Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory did not emphasize SES as centrally as the other major theories did, he made it clear that he expected the usual SES-delinquency association to hold within his theory (Larzelere & Paterson 1990:302).

Cernkovich (1979) combined control theory and strain theory. He linked perception of limited opportunity (as a strain variable) and conventional value orientation (as a control variable) with SES and concluded that both theories have significant contribution in explaining violent delinquency, but control theory presents more contribution. His main work proposed control variables to the SES context. On the other hand, Hagan’s Power-Control theory (1989), which is a combination of SES and control theory, emphasizes on patriarchy, instrumental control, and relational control.

In summary, the review of literature suggests that criminology researchers did not pay enough attention to combined approaches about the relationship between structural theories and control theories.

What we pursue in the present study is whether SES's role in producing violent delinquency can be explained via important control variables (supervision, attachment, and self-control); in other words, whether control process has mediation role between SES and violent delinquency.

SES and violent delinquency

Early theories about crime and delinquency have focused on characteristics of social environment. These theories have been concerned with the role of social structure in production of crimes.

Social structure theorists challenge those who would suggest that crime is an expression of psychological imbalance, biological trait, insensitivity to social controls, personal choice, or any other individual-level factor. According to Merton (1968) aberrant behavior may be regarded sociologically as a symptom of dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realizing these aspirations.

The structural approach to crime emphasizes the role of SES as a main characteristic of social structure, and looks for its relationship with crime and violent delinquency. In general, it seems that studies around the relationship between SES, violent crimes, and violent delinquency have two main levels.

Aggregate-level studies show an association between poverty and violent crime rates among different societies (Box, 1987; Blau & Blau, 1982; Parker, 1989; Pratt & Godsey, 2003), while individual-level studies concern with the relationships between socioeconomic status and violent delinquency (Heimer, 1997; Heimer&De Coster, 1999; Brezina et al., 2004; Klerkus& Hewitt, 2007).

In general, it seems that there is a relationship between SES and violent delinquency, but it is not direct; in other words, there are some mediate variables between SES and violent delinquency (Matsueda, 1982; Matsueda&Heimer, 1987; Cernkovich, 1978; Larzelere&Petterson, 1990; Heimer, 1997; Heimerand De Coster, 1999; Brezinaet al., 2004, Wright et al., 1999).

SES, forms of parental control, and violent delinquency

Many researchers have been concerned with the impact of SES on child-rearing values and patterns of parenting within the family system (Kohn, 1963; Kohn&Schooler, 1969; Kohn, 1989; Kohn et al, 2002; Slomczynski et al 1982; Wright&Wright, 1976; Xiao, 2000). Melvin Kohn studies are the forerunner of researches around the relation between SES and parental values such as self-direction and conformity that Kohn called parent's "value orientations." The importance of Kohn's thesis in the present study is twofold. First, parenting strategies and disciplines differ in different socio-economic statuses. For instance, upper class parents are more focused on "moral reasoning" and lower class parents use more "coercive behavior" (Heimer, 1997). Second, the values, discipline and control strategies, or parent's "value orientations" within the family system are mediate variables in the relationships between SES and violent delinquency (Heimer, 1997; Heimer & De Coster, 1999; Brezinha et al, 2004). In fact, these values and disciplines are control styles in the family system. With regard to these arguments, we can say that SES, via control mechanisms in the family system, can produce violent delinquency.

SES will condition individual's daily experience; through mechanisms that SES has an impact on personality and ultimately on behavior. Discipline, supervision and attachment are all aspect of the parent-child relationships that have been shown to have influence (Jarjouria and Triplett 1997). Sampson and Laub (1994) have shown that these aspects of parent-child interaction mediate the effect of SES on participation in delinquency.

However, family experiences have been defined in different ways. Some researchers used measures such as parental control, discipline, or supervision (i.e. monitoring), whereas other researchers focused on the affective nature of parent-child relationship (i.e. attachment, acceptance, and rejection (Vitaro et al., 2000).

Parent's practices such as supervision and attachment are indeed two forms of control or monitoring mechanisms. For example, Heimer and De Coster (1999) focused on two forms of controls including "direct control" (such as supervision) and "indirect control" or emotional bond (such as attachment). Bates et al (2003) also measured instrumental control and relational control differently. These two styles constitute the

forms of parental control. In the present study we follow Heimer and De Coster's (1999) classification.

One of the most important strategies in child-rearing is parental supervision. Parent's failure in controlling and monitoring children paves the way of delinquent behavior for children (Patterson et al., 1984). Furthermore, some researchers showed that upper-class parents have more supervision over their children (Lazelere and Petterson, 1990; Heimer, 1997; Heimer & De Coster, 1999; Brezina et. al, 2004), and this supervision and control reduces the incidence of violent delinquency (Hagan, 1989; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986, Sampson & Laub, 1993; Nicholas et al 2009). Hence, parent's supervision is a crucial aspect of the family system which plays an important role in the relationship between SES and violent delinquency.

Another important form of control is attachment to parents. This construct is one of the key constructs in Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory. "Attachment refers to a person's sensitivity to and interest in others" (Siegel, 1997: 209). Hirschi (1969) argues that parent-child affectional bond is an important source of indirect social control that leads to internal control. Hirschi (1969) believes that parents, friends and school play an important role in the individual's attachment to society. "Attachment to others dissuades persons from delinquency through a moral process: those with warm relation with their parents or friends are likely to consider their reactions to unlawful act. Because only a single moral order exists, that reaction will always be negative" (Matsueda & Heimer, 1987: 828; Matsueda, 1982). According to Hirschi, attachment can be assumed as "indirect control" (p.19). Some researchers have shown the impact of attachment on delinquency (Meshkani and Meshkani, 2002/1381; Ozbay, 2006; Vowell, 2007; Cheung & Cheung, 2007; Knoester & Haynie, 2005; Mack et al 2007; Suzanne et al 2009).

Both effective relationship and supervision has been consistently related to delinquency (Cernkovich and Giordano, 1987; Patterson and Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Wells and Rankin, 1988). Furthermore, the impact of affection and supervision, especially during the early adolescent life stage, is also supported in longitudinal studies (Farrington, 1987; McCord 1979; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Thus, it seems that there is a significant relationship between SES and forms of

parental control. Parental control, in turn, shapes children's self-control which will be thoroughly discussed in the next section.

Parental control, self control, and violent delinquency

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), in their book *General Theory of Crime*, introduced self-control as an important construct for control theory. This theory is now known as self-control theory (Higgins & Ricketts, 2004:77). This concept helps them to develop a social-control theory about crime and deviation. Self-control theory is based on underlying assumption of social control theory such as "natural hedonism of human behavior" and "rational choice" (Higgins & Ricketts, 2004). It assumes that those with high self-control can resist immediate gratification associated with criminal and deviant acts. Conversely, those with low self-control result in crime and deviance (Cheung & Cheung, 2007).

In fact, according to self-control theory, individuals with low self-control are more likely to commit crime (Higgins & Ricketts, 2004; Vowell, 2007; Cheung and Cheung, 2007; Gibbs et. al, 1998). Low self-control develops early in life and is the result of ineffective or inadequate socialization. Ineffective socialization includes weak or poor attachment, supervision, and discipline from parents before the child is eight years old. After the age of eight, the individual's self-control level will remain stable into and throughout adulthood. Thus, self-control is a product of child-rearing practices (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Gibbs et.al, 1998, Higgins & Ricketts, 2004; Vowell, 2007; Cheung & Cheung, 2007; Hope and et. al, 2003). According to Gottfredson and Hirschi(1990) "Individuals with low self-control tend to be impulsive and lack patience, prefer easy/simple tasks over complex ones that demand persistence, have a self-centered or insensitive orientation to interests of others, prefer physical activities over mental/cognitive ones that require skill and planning, have a propensity for risk taking, and lose their tempers easily because of their lower tolerance for frustration" (Cheung & Cheung, 2007:413).

According to previous arguments, it is also obvious that supervision and attachment have a direct effect on self control (Gibbs et.al, 1998, Higgins & Ricketts, 2004; Vowell, 2007). Also empirical researches suggested that low self-control has direct effect on deviance behavior (Gibbs et.al, 1998; Higgins & Ricketts, 2004; Vowell, 2007; Cheung & Cheung, 2007;

Hope and et. al, 2003; Bucker, 2011; Ezinga et al, 2008; Chapple, 2005). There has been less research specifically linking self control to violent delinquency (Vowell, 2007). With regard to previous arguments, following hypotheses can be proposed.

Hypotheses

SES has a positive relationship with parental supervision.

SES has a positive relationship with attachment to parent.

Parental supervision has a positive relationship with children's self-control.

Attachment to parent has a positive relationship with children's self-control.

Parental supervision has a negative relationship with children's violent delinquency.

Attachment to parent has a negative relationship with children's violent delinquency.

Children's self-control has a negative relationship with their violent delinquency.

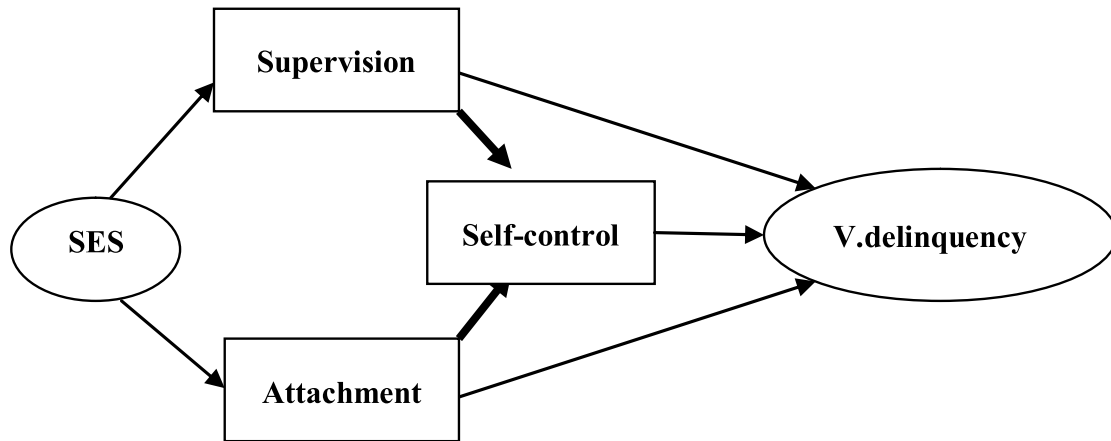
These hypotheses can be summarized as follows:

Low self-control has a direct impact on violent delinquency and mediates the effects of supervision and attachment on violent delinquency as well.

Parents in lower SES have lower level of supervision which has direct impact, and indirect effect via self-control, on violent delinquency.

Lower SES children have lower level of attachment to their parents which has direct impact, and indirect effect via self-control, on violent delinquency.

Figure1.Theoretical Model



Data and Method

The methodology of the current research is survey, and self-report questionnaires were used to collect the data. Multistage clustering method of sampling was used because using all the sample elements in all the selected clusters might be prohibitively expensive or unnecessary. Under these circumstances, multistage cluster sampling becomes useful. Instead of using all the elements contained in the selected clusters, the researcher randomly selects elements from each cluster, constructing the clusters is the first stage. Deciding what elements to use within the cluster is dealt with in the second stage. The technique is used frequently when a complete list of all members of the population does not exist and is inappropriate among all the Ahvaz male high schools; we randomly selected 15 of them. Out of (the students of) these 15 high schools, 425 students were randomly selected from the name lists. Excluding incomplete questionnaires, we had 400 questionnaires for study. The age of the subjects ranged from 14 to 19 with the mean age of 16.43 and Standard deviation of 1.12.

We used face validity in which the criminology experts confirmed the validity of the scales. Through a pilot study, appropriate Cronbach Alpha coefficients were obtained, showing the good reliability of the scales. Our sample in pilot studies was 50 male students. The alpha coefficients for pilot study have been shown in table1.

Table1. Alpha Coefficient for Pilot Study.

perceived SES	supervision	attachment	Self control	Violent delinquency
.66	.71	.79	.66	.93

Instruments

Objective SES: In the objective way of measurement, or routine measurement, income, education and occupation were taken into account. But, 15.5 And 12.6 percent of the respondents did not answer to income and occupation questions respectively, which were considerably higher than the percent of missing values on other questions in the survey (see Hope et al, 2004). Simply, the subjective way of measuring SES was used in data analysis.

Perceived SES: In the perceived SES way of measurement, participants, based on their perception about their situation in the social class, rank themselves and evaluate their income, occupational prestige, educational level, and the monetary value of their household subjectively.

In adolescence sample respondents evaluate their parent’s SES indexes.

We used six items to measure the subjective socioeconomic status. This form of operationalization was used by Nabavi et al (2009). Alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.64 (See Appendix).

Parental supervision: We used Heimer’s(1997) supervision scale, and with regard to other supervision scales (e.gMatsueda, 1982; Matsueda&Heimer, 1987; Bates et. al 2003; Vowell, 2007), another item was added to the scale which is “How many of your friends do your parents know?” The answers were in Likert format ranging from 1 to 5. Alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.77 (See Appendix).

Parental attachment: Ozbay & Ozcan's (2006) attachment scale was used to measure parental attachment. The answers range from "completely agree" to "completely disagree". The Cronbach alpha of the scale in the present study was 0.70, and in Ozbay & Ozcan's (2006) study was 0.83 (See Appendix).

Self-control: Chung and Chung’s (2007) self- control scale was used which consists of 10 items. The range of responses is from "completely agree=1" to "completely disagree=5". Alpha coefficient in the original

study was 0.61 and in the present study is 0.63 (See Appendix).

Violent delinquency: For measuring violent delinquency, we reviewed some of the famous scales and ultimately we selected Heimer’s (1997) violent delinquency measurement and modified some of its items to harmonize it with the cultural context of the Iranian society. The final format of the scale includes 9 items. The range of the answers is as follows: “1=never”, “2=once”, “3=twice” and “4=three times” to “5=more than three times”. The Alpha coefficient of this scale was 0.90 (See, Appendix).

Results

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. In the former, that is, Std. deviation, Skewness and Kurtosis were used. In the latter, for testing the hypotheses, Pearson correlations, and for testing the theoretical model, Standardized Regression Equations (or Path Analysis) were used. Descriptive statistics of the variables are shown in table2.

According to Table 3, the relationship between perceived SES and parental supervision is significant ($r=.16, p<.01$). Perceived SES also has a significant relationship with attachment ($r=.25, p<.01$).

Parental supervision and attachment – as forms of parental control – are negatively associated with violent delinquency ($r= -.32$ & $r= -.33, p< .01$ respectively). The results also reveal significant relationship between parental supervision and attachment to self control ($r=.220, r= .254, p<.01, respectively$). On the other hand, self-control has a significant negative correlation with violent delinquency ($r= -.333, p<.01$). Finally, there is a significant association between perceived SES and violent delinquency ($r= -.11, p< .05$). But this relation was not significant in regression equations. In other words, perceived SES does not have direct effect on dependent variable.

Table2. The Means and Standard Deviations of Research Variables

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Perceived SES	13.14	2.88	-.30	-.12
Supervision	11.49	2.63	-.86	.57
Attachment	27.14	7.52	.33	.54
Self-Control	25.67	5.90	.52	.66
Violent Del.	14.36	7.53	.87	.49

Table3. Correlation between Independent Variables and Violent Delinquency

	Perceived SES	Supervision	Attachment	Self-Control	V. Delinquency
Perceived SES	-	.16**	.25**	.06	-.11*
Supervision		-	.34**	.22**	-.32**
Attachment			-	.25**	-.33**
Self-Control				-	-.33**

* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$

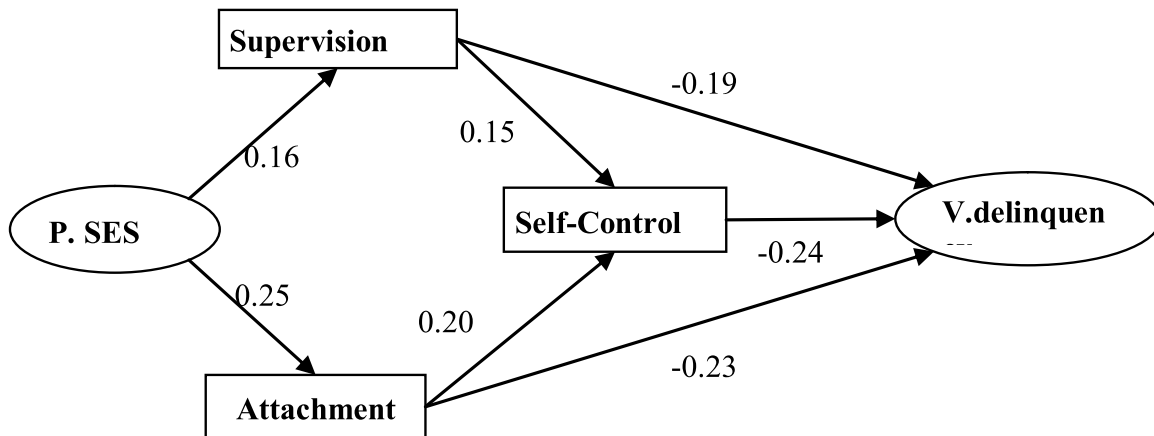
Path Analysis: To determine the causal relationships among the variables and testing theoretical model (Figure 1), Standardized Regression Coefficients were used. To do so, four equations were applied. In the first equation, supervision was regressed on perceived socioeconomic status (Table 3). The effect of perceived socioeconomic status on supervision was 0.16 ($p < .01$). In the second equation, attachment was regressed on perceived SES and the effect of perceived socioeconomic on attachment was 0.25 ($p < .01$). In the third equation, self control was regressed on supervision and attachment and results showed that the effect of supervision and attachment on self control were significant ($\beta = 0.15$ and $\beta = 0.20$ respectively). And in the final equation, violent delinquency was regressed on supervision, attachment and self-control. The model was significant ($R^2 = 0.22$), in which supervision, attachment and self control predicted 22 percent of the variance of violent delinquency. Each variable has significant impact on violent delinquency ($\beta = 0.19$, $\beta = 0.23$, and $\beta = 0.24$ respectively) (Table 3 and Figure 2).

Table4. Path Analysis Using Standardized Regression Coefficient with 4 Equations

Equations	Equation 1	Equation 2	Equation 3	Equation 4
Variables	Supervision	Attachment	Self control	V. delinquency
Perceived SES	$\beta = .16^*$ SE = .04	$\beta = .25^*$ SE = .13		
Supervision			$\beta = .15^*$ SE = .12	$\beta = -.19^*$ SE = .15
Attachment			$B = .20^*$ SE = .04	$\beta = -.23^*$ SE = .05
Self control				$\beta = -.24^*$ SE = .06
R^2	.02	.06	.08	.22

* $p < .01$

Figure2. Path analysis Linking Independent Variables and Violent Delinquency



Conclusion

Generally, researches in the field of crime and delinquency are scarce in Iran (Nabavi, 2006/1385). The present study attempted to fill this gap existing in domestic studies, and tried to examine the influential factors in violent delinquency by focusing on structural and control theories in a single model. Thus, a basic question to be addressed is how control mechanisms (parental supervision, attachment, and self-control) in the structural context (SES) have impacts on violent delinquency. In other words, “how do socioeconomic status and cultural contexts [such as, control process] combine to produce violent adolescent behavior?” (Heimer, 1997: 800).

Consistent with other empirical studies, the findings of the current study suggested that perceived SES has positive relationship with parent’s supervision; this finding suggests that parents of lower SES, compared with higher SES parents, have lower supervision on their children (Larzelere and Petterson, 1990; Heimer, 1997; Heimer& De Coster, 1999; Brezina et. al, 2004). Also findings showed that perceived SES has positive relationships with children’s attachment to parents; this finding suggested that children of lower social classes, compared with higher social classes, have lower attachment to their parents (Heimer& De Coster, 1999). In addition, our study showed that lower levels of parental supervision directly led to violent delinquency. This finding is consistent with other empirical studies (Hagan, 1989, Loeber & Stouthamer-Lleober 1986; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Results also confirm that low attachment

to parent is related to high violent delinquency, which is consistent with other researches as well (Ozbay & Ozcan, 2006; Vowell, 2007; Cheung and Cheung, 2007; Knoester & Haynie, 2005; Van IJzendoorn, 1997).

Furthermore, according to other studies, higher supervision and attachment to parents lead to higher self-control (Gibbs et.al, 1998; Higgins & Ricketts, 2004; Vowell, 2007). And ultimately, low self-control can produce violent delinquency (Vowell, 2007; Gibbs et.al, 1998; Higgins & Ricketts, 2004; Cheung & Cheung, 2007; Hope and et. al, 2003).

Overall, the present study showed how control process variables, such as parental supervision, and attachment to parents mediate the impact of SES on violent delinquency. Also self-control mediates the effect of supervision and attachment on violent delinquency. In summary, it seems that control approach has to be introduced in structural contexts. Control theory did not pay attention to structural effects of SES on parenting. The present study suggests that control mechanisms should be proposed in their structural context.

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