



Parental Attachment, Self-Worth and Delinquency: A Focus on African American Adolescent Males



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BACKGROUND

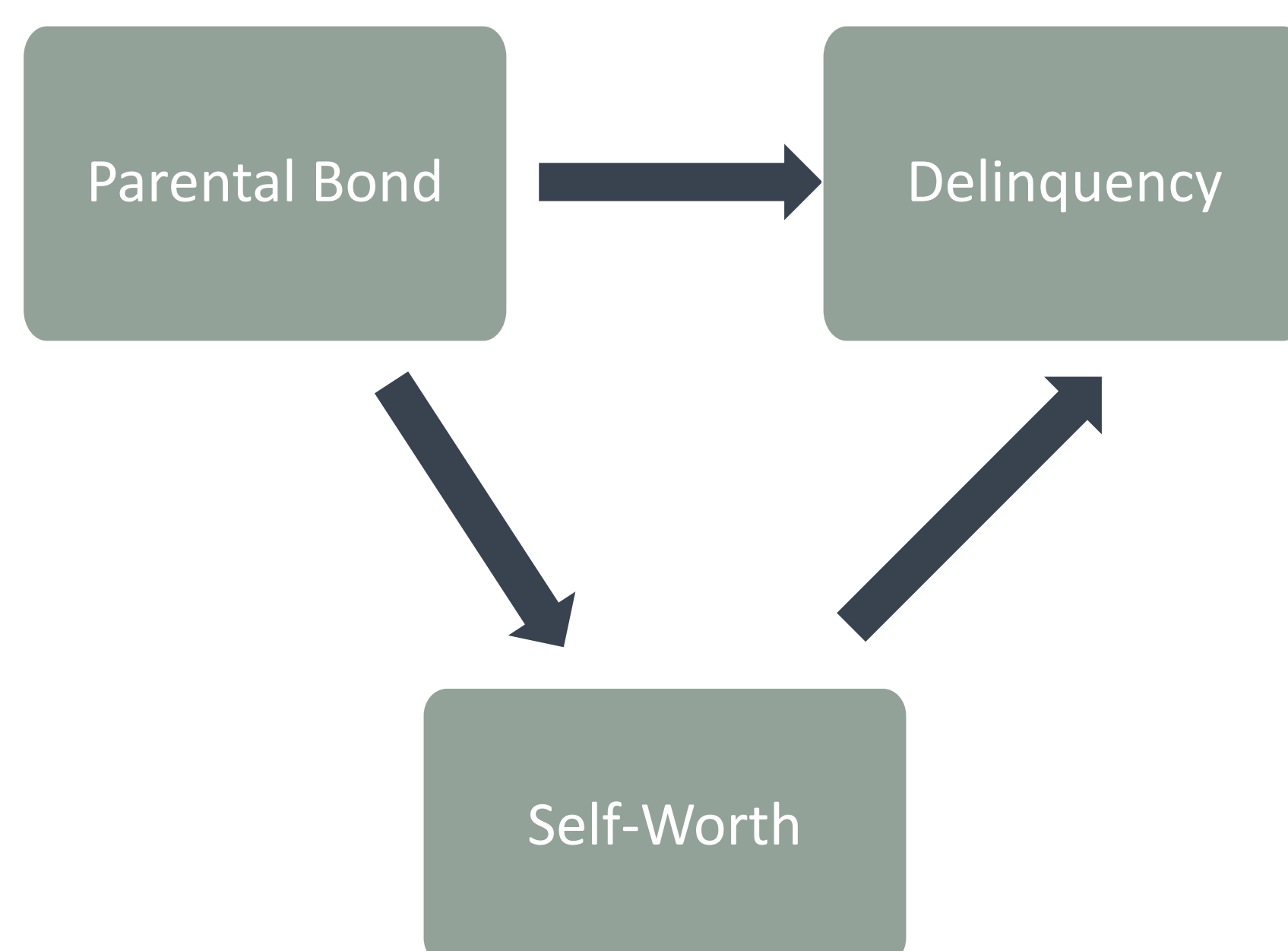
Two years ago, President Obama established a program entitled *My Brother's Keeper*, which has the goal of addressing the challenges faced by young minority men. While introducing the program he stated, "I could see myself in these young men. And the only difference is...I had people who encouraged me – not just my mom and grandparents, but wonderful teachers and community leaders...they never gave up on me, and so I didn't give up on myself." (Remarks by the President on "My Brother's Keeper" Initiative). This statement underscores President Obama's belief that social attachments and self-worth are crucial for overcoming obstacles and achieving prosocial outcomes.

One of the primary obstacles faced by young African American men is that they are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. For example, African American men are significantly more likely to be arrested than are White men (Brame et al., 2014) and they make up nearly 40% of the male prison population in the United States (Carson and Sabol, 2012). Interestingly, criminological theory also highlights the potential importance of both social attachments and self-worth when studying the causes of delinquency, suggesting that these factors may indeed help protect young African American men against detrimental outcomes, including involvement in criminal activity.

For nearly 50 years, criminological scholars have used Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory to structure inquiries into the causes of crime. According to Hirschi, parental attachment is crucial for prosocial development and youth with strong trust in and affection for their parents are less likely to be delinquent. Further, another social control theorist, Reckless (1961), argues that internal factors can also protect youth from delinquency. Specifically, he suggested that internal containment, which includes a strong self-concept, can stop someone from exhibiting delinquent behavior. Unfortunately, the research investigating these premises has not specifically focused on young African American men, which leaves the question about the role of parental attachment and self-worth in avoiding the delinquency "obstacle" unanswered. The current study seeks to address this gap by considering the empirical relationship among these factors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Does attachment to parents predict delinquency among African American adolescent males?
2. Does self-worth predict delinquency among African American adolescent males?
3. Does self-worth mediate any emergent relationship between parental attachment and delinquency?



DATA AND MEASURES

Data for this study were drawn from the evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education Training (GREAT) program (Esbensen, 2002). Subjects were middle school students who participated in the GREAT program across several cities. The current study focuses on the 657 male African American youth in the dataset.

Dependent Variable

- A sum of items that capture whether or not subjects participated in the following delinquent acts: not paid for things, carried weapon, stole more/less than \$50, entered building to steal, hit someone, attacked someone with a weapon, armed robbery, sold marijuana, and sold illegal drugs.

Independent Variables

- Parental Bond – sum of several items assessing attachment to mother and father
- Self-Worth – sum of the following measures: I'm a person of worth, I do a good job as a person, and I feel good about myself

Control Variables

- Age
- Delinquent Peers – proportion of friends that have engaged in a variety of delinquent activities
- Impulsivity – scale including whether subjects act on spur of the moment, take risks, are excited to get in trouble, and believe excitement is more important than security
- SES – parental education

RESULTS

Negative Binomial Regression Predicting Delinquency

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	P Value
Parental Bond	-.059	.025	.016
Self-Worth	-.012	.013	.368
Age	.121	.044	.006
Impulsivity	.173	.046	.000
Del. Friends	.375	.033	.000
SES	.006	.021	.770

Regression Predicting Self-Worth

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	P Value
Parental Bond	.447	.080	.000
Age	.030	.147	.840
Impulsivity	-.079	.147	.590
Del. Friends	-.180	.114	.114
SES	-.041	.068	.546

DISCUSSION

The results from this study suggest that Hirschi's (1969) bond theory, at least in relation to parental attachment, is applicable to African American adolescent males. Specifically, subjects who had strong attachments to their parents were significantly less likely to report engagement in delinquent activities. In contrast, self-worth did not have a statistically significant relationship with self-reported delinquency. Even so, it is interesting to note that parental attachment also predicted higher levels of self-worth, net of several control variables.

These results suggest that interventions aimed at improving parental bonds and attachments among young African American men can pay dividends both because doing so may reduce delinquent behavior and because it may promote better emotional and psychological health in a population that is often deemed "at risk" for a host of problematic outcomes. Still, researchers should be cautious with such implications given the fact that these results come from cross-sectional data analyses with a specific sample.

Future research should ideally extend the study here to other samples in order to test generalizability. Further, literature suggests that ethnic self-concept/worth is also an important part of psychosocial development for young African American men (Porter and Washington, 1979). It would be informative to test whether this dimension of self-worth is related to parental attachment and/or delinquency.

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