



The Role of Perceived Social Exclusion and Self-Control in Predicting Criminal Attitudes

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Abstract: Experiences of social exclusion are increasingly common among young adults navigating academic, peer, and social environments. Being ignored, rejected, or left out may appear subtle on the surface, yet such experiences can have meaningful psychological consequences. When individuals repeatedly perceive themselves as socially excluded, it may affect their emotional regulation, sense of belonging, and capacity to control impulses. Over time, these internal disruptions may influence attitudes toward social norms and rule-governed behavior. Understanding the psychological mechanisms that link exclusion to deviant attitudes is therefore essential in contemporary youth research. The present study aims to examine the relationship between perceived social exclusion and criminal attitudes among young adults, with a particular focus on the mediating role of self-control. Drawing from Belongingness Theory, the General Theory of Crime, and the Psychological Need Threat Model, the study proposes that social exclusion may weaken self-regulatory capacities, which in turn may increase approval of rule-breaking behaviors. Rather than viewing criminal attitudes as isolated outcomes, this research attempts to understand the underlying psychological pathway through which social experiences shape behavioral tendencies. By investigating these relationships within an Indian young adult population, the study contributes to criminological psychology by integrating social and self-regulatory perspectives. The findings may offer implications for preventive interventions, campus counseling programs, and youth behavioral policy aimed at fostering inclusion and strengthening self-control capacities.

Keywords: *Social Exclusion, Self-Control, Self-Regulatory, Emotional Regulation, Criminal Attitudes, Rule Breaking Behavior*

1. Introduction

Human beings possess a fundamental need for belongingness and social connection. Across cultures and developmental stages, interpersonal relationships play a crucial role in shaping psychological well-being, identity formation, and behavioural regulation. Social belonging provides individuals with emotional security, validation, and a sense of purpose. When this fundamental need is threatened through experiences of rejection or ostracism, significant psychological consequences may emerge.

Social exclusion refers to the experience of being ignored, rejected, left out, or marginalized by others. Unlike direct aggression, exclusion is often subtle and relational, making it particularly harmful because it undermines one's sense of visibility and social worth. Even brief experiences of exclusion have been shown to produce emotional distress, decreased self-esteem, and increased hostility. When such experiences are repeated or perceived as chronic, they may influence broader cognitive and behavioural patterns.

Young adulthood represents a particularly sensitive developmental period for experiences of social exclusion. Individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 undergo identity exploration, increasing autonomy, and heightened reliance on peer relationships. During this phase, social acceptance is strongly linked to self-concept and emotional stability. Consequently, perceived rejection or exclusion may have intensified psychological effects during this stage compared to other age groups.

While social exclusion has been widely studied in relation to emotional distress and aggression, its potential influence on cognitive orientations toward rule-breaking and criminal attitudes remains relatively underexplored, particularly within non-offender young adult populations.

Social exclusion is a multidimensional construct encompassing interpersonal rejection, group ostracism, and perceived marginalisation. It may occur in various contexts including peer groups, academic settings, workplaces, and online platforms. Importantly, the psychological impact of exclusion is influenced not only by objective social behaviour but also by subjective perception. Individuals who interpret social cues as rejecting may experience exclusion even in ambiguous situations.

Theoretical frameworks suggest that social exclusion threatens four fundamental psychological needs: belongingness, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. When

these needs are frustrated, individuals may respond through emotional withdrawal, aggression, or compensatory behaviours aimed at restoring a sense of agency. In some cases, individuals may disengage from social norms and conventional standards as a way of coping with perceived rejection.

Furthermore, exclusion has been linked to cognitive deconstruction—a temporary reduction in meaningful thought, emotional regulation, and long-term planning. Such cognitive shifts may reduce adherence to social rules and weaken internalised moral standards. Therefore, social exclusion may not merely produce emotional discomfort but may also alter regulatory and decision-making processes.

Self-control is defined as the capacity to regulate impulses, delay gratification, and guide behavior in accordance with long-term goals and societal norms. It represents a critical aspect of psychological functioning and adaptive behavior. Individuals with high levels of self-control tend to exhibit greater emotional regulation, academic success, and prosocial behavior.

The General Theory of Crime proposes that low self-control is a primary predictor of deviant and criminal behavior. According to this perspective, individuals with diminished self-control are more likely to engage in impulsive, risk-seeking, and norm-violating behaviors. Low self-control is associated with poor frustration tolerance, difficulty delaying gratification, and a tendency to prioritize immediate rewards over long-term consequences.

Contemporary psychological research further conceptualizes self-control as a finite cognitive resource. Stressful or emotionally demanding experiences may temporarily deplete regulatory capacity. Social exclusion, as a significant interpersonal stressor, may consume cognitive and emotional resources required for effective self-regulation. When individuals experience rejection, attention may shift toward coping with emotional distress rather than maintaining behavioral discipline.

Thus, self-control may serve as a crucial mechanism linking social experiences to behavioral outcomes. Individuals who experience exclusion and simultaneously possess lower self-control may be particularly vulnerable to developing attitudes that justify or normalize rule breaking.

Criminal attitudes refer to beliefs and cognitive frameworks that rationalize, justify, or minimize the seriousness of rule-breaking behavior. Such attitudes do not necessarily indicate criminal actions but represent openness toward violating social or legal norms. They are considered cognitive precursors to delinquent behavior and are therefore important indicators in preventive research.

Cognitive theories of deviance emphasize that individuals often engage in mental neutralization before committing rule violations. Techniques such as denying harm, blaming authorities, or questioning the legitimacy of laws may reduce moral inhibition and facilitate deviant thinking. Over time, repeated cognitive justifications may strengthen favorable attitudes toward crime.

Young adults navigating social pressures, academic competition, and identity development may encounter situations where rule adherence is challenged. If individuals perceive social systems as unfair or experience repeated exclusion, they may develop distrust toward established norms. When combined with reduced self-control, such cognitive shifts may manifest as greater acceptance of criminal or rule-breaking attitudes.

Studying criminal attitudes rather than criminal behavior allows researchers to examine psychological risk factors within a normative population. Since attitudes are modifiable, identifying their predictors has significant implications for early intervention and prevention strategies.

Belongingness Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)

At the heart of human psychology lies a simple but powerful truth: people need to feel that they belong. Baumeister and Leary's Belongingness Theory proposes that the need to form and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships is a fundamental human motivation. It is not merely a social preference but a psychological necessity.

From early childhood through adulthood, individuals seek acceptance, validation, and emotional connection. When this need is fulfilled, it contributes to stability, confidence, and emotional well-being. However, when individuals experience rejection or exclusion, the impact can be profound. Social exclusion disrupts the sense of being valued and visible within a social group. Even subtle acts of being ignored or left out can create emotional pain.

Research suggests that the experience of rejection activates neural pathways similar to physical pain, highlighting the seriousness of social exclusion. For young adults, who are in the process of forming identity and strengthening peer relationships, belonging becomes particularly important. When they feel excluded, it may not only hurt emotionally but may also influence how they see themselves and society.

In the present study, Belongingness Theory provides the foundation for understanding why perceived social exclusion may influence attitudes toward social rules. When individuals feel disconnected from society, their motivation to conform to its norms may weaken. Over time, this disconnection may contribute to openness toward rule-breaking attitudes.

General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990)

The General Theory of Crime emphasizes the role of self-control in predicting deviant behavior. Gottfredson and Hirschi argue that individuals with lower levels of self-control are more likely to engage in impulsive and risk-seeking behaviors. Such individuals may prioritize immediate gratification over long-term consequences.

Self-control involves the ability to pause, reflect, and regulate impulses. It allows individuals to resist temptations and align their behavior with social expectations. When self-control is strong, individuals are more likely to adhere to rules even in challenging situations.

However, when self-control is weak or compromised, individuals may struggle to manage frustration and emotional distress. This may increase susceptibility to cognitive justifications that normalize rule breaking. While the theory was originally developed to explain criminal behavior, it also applies to criminal attitudes. Before behavior occurs, attitudes often shape the way individuals interpret and justify actions.

2. Materials & Methodology***2.1 Research design***

The present study adopted a quantitative, correlational and regression-based research design. The purpose of this design was to examine the associations among perceived social exclusion, self-control, and criminal attitudes within a non-clinical young adult population.

A mediation model framework was used to test whether self-control functions as an explanatory mechanism linking social exclusion to criminal attitudes. Since the variables were measured using standardized self-report scales and no manipulation was involved, the study followed a non-experimental design.

2.2 Participants**Table 1****Participant Characteristics**

Variable	Description
Total Sample Size (N)	130
Age Range	18–25 years
Developmental Group	Young adults
Educational Status	Undergraduate and Postgraduate students
Recruitment Source	Various colleges and universities
Participation Type	Voluntary
Incentives Provided	None (no monetary or academic incentives)
Informed Consent	Obtained prior to participation

2.3 Inclusion Criteria

- Participants between 18–25 years of age
- Individuals currently enrolled in college or university
- Participants who provided informed consent

2.4 Exclusion Criteria

- Incomplete responses
- Participants below 18 years or above 25 years
- Missing data in any of the major scales

2.5 Variables

Independent Variable: Perceived Social Exclusion

Mediating Variable: Self- Control Behavior

Dependent Variable: Criminal Attitudes

2.6 Measures

Summary of Measurement Instruments Used

Variable	Scale Name	Developer(s)	Items	Response Format	Reliability & Validity
Perceived Social Exclusion	Adapted Ostracism-Based Scale	Kipling D. Williams	8	5-point Likert	Good reliability ($\alpha \approx .80-.90$); established construct validity
Self-Control	Brief Self-Control Scale (BSCS)	Tangney, Baumeister & Boone	13	5-point Likert	High reliability ($\alpha \approx .83-.89$); strong convergent & predictive validity
Criminal Attitudes	Adapted Criminal Sentiments Scale	Paul Gendreau	10	5-point Likert	Acceptable reliability ($\alpha \approx .75-.88$); supported construct validity

3. Results

The present study examined the relationship among perceived social exclusion, self-control, and criminal attitudes among young adults.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables (N = 130)

Variable	M	SD
Perceived Social Exclusion	23.84	6.45
Self-Control	30.12	5.92
Criminal Attitudes	19.67	5.21

Correlational Analysis

To test Hypothesis 1, Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among the study variables.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables (N = 130)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Perceived Social Exclusion	—		
2. Self-Control	-.34**	—	
3. Criminal Attitudes	.38**	-.46**	—

Note. $p < .01$.

Table 3. Multiple Regression

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Criminal Attitudes (N = 130)

Predictor	β	p
Perceived Social Exclusion	.38***	< .001
Self-Control	-.42***	< .001

4. Discussion

The present study examined the associations among perceived social exclusion, self-control, and criminal attitudes in young adults. The findings suggest that both relational experiences and individual regulatory capacity play a meaningful role in shaping cognitive endorsement of rule-breaking behaviour. Rather than treating deviant attitudes as purely dispositional or purely situational, the results support a more integrated understanding of how social and psychological factors operate together.

A significant positive association was found between perceived social exclusion and criminal attitudes. Participants who reported feeling ignored, rejected, or marginalized were more likely to endorse beliefs that justify violations of social rules. This finding aligns with the foundational proposition that belongingness represents a basic human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When the need for stable interpersonal attachment is unmet, individuals may

experience not only emotional discomfort but also cognitive shifts in how they interpret social norms.

In addition to social exclusion, self-control demonstrated a significant negative relationship with criminal attitudes. Participants reporting lower levels of regulatory capacity were more likely to endorse rule-breaking beliefs. This result is consistent with the General Theory of Crime, which posits that low self-control increases vulnerability to antisocial tendencies (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Individuals with diminished impulse regulation often prioritize short-term relief over long-term consequences, increasing susceptibility to maladaptive reasoning (Hay & Forrest, 2006).

The regression analysis demonstrated that perceived social exclusion and self-control together accounted for 24% of the variance in criminal attitudes. This indicates that a substantial portion of variability in deviant cognition can be explained by the combined influence of relational experiences and internal regulatory functioning. Although additional variables undoubtedly contribute to criminal attitudes, the predictive strength observed here highlights the importance of considering both environmental and dispositional dimensions simultaneously.

These findings resonate with General Strain Theory, which proposes that adverse social experiences generate psychological strain that may foster deviant adaptations (Agnew, 2006). Social exclusion can be conceptualized as a relational strain that evokes frustration, resentment, or diminished trust in authority structures. Over time, such experiences may shape cognitive orientations toward rules and institutions. Social learning perspectives further suggest that attitudes toward deviance are influenced by reinforcement patterns and normative modeling within one's environment (Akers, 1998). If excluded individuals gravitate toward alternative peer groups, their normative beliefs may shift accordingly.

While the study provides meaningful insights, its cross-sectional design limits causal inference. The observed associations do not establish temporal direction. It remains possible that individuals endorsing deviant attitudes may experience increased exclusion due to their expressed beliefs. Longitudinal designs would help clarify these pathways and examine whether persistent exclusion predicts long-term shifts in regulatory capacity or normative cognition.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that perceived social exclusion and self-control are significant correlates and predictors of criminal attitudes among young adults. Their combined influence underscores the interplay between social context and psychological functioning in shaping normative beliefs. Criminal attitudes appear to emerge not from a single

source but from the interaction of relational experiences and individual regulatory capacity. Continued research exploring these multidimensional influences will deepen understanding of the early cognitive foundations of deviant behaviour.

This interpretation aligns with research on procedural justice, which demonstrates that individuals are more likely to respect rules and authorities when they perceive fair treatment and social inclusion (Tyler, 2006). Perceived exclusion may undermine trust in institutions, thereby altering moral evaluations of rule adherence. From this perspective, criminal attitudes may reflect cognitive distancing from systems perceived as rejecting or inequitable.

The role of self-control further complicates this dynamic. Self-control is not merely an impulse-related construct; it encompasses attentional regulation, emotional modulation, and foresight (Tangney et al., 2004). Individuals with higher regulatory capacity are better equipped to pause, reflect, and evaluate long-term consequences before endorsing beliefs or behaviours. In contrast, lower self-control may increase susceptibility to emotionally driven reasoning, particularly under conditions of social strain. When exclusion evokes frustration or resentment, reduced regulatory capacity may limit the individual's ability to reframe these emotions constructively.

There is also growing recognition that self-control is shaped not only by early childhood experiences but by ongoing environmental influences (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). Chronic stressors, including relational instability, may tax regulatory resources over time. Although the present study did not examine such mechanisms directly, the significant predictive contribution of both exclusion and self-control suggests that deviant cognition may arise within environments characterized by both relational and regulatory vulnerability.

The moderate explanatory power of the regression model ($R^2 = .24$) also invites reflection.

While perceived social exclusion and self-control are meaningful predictors, a substantial proportion of variance remains unexplained. Factors such as family dynamics, socioeconomic stress, exposure to community violence, personality traits (e.g., agreeableness or conscientiousness), and moral disengagement may also contribute to criminal attitudes. The multifactorial nature of deviant cognition underscores the importance of comprehensive models that integrate interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural influences.

Finally, the present study contributes to ongoing dialogue within criminological psychology regarding the origins of deviant cognition. The findings support the view that criminal attitudes are shaped within a network of relational experiences and individual capacities. Social exclusion appears to influence how individuals perceive and interpret

normative systems, while self-control shapes the cognitive regulation of those interpretations. Together, these factors form part of a broader psychosocial matrix influencing deviant belief structures during a developmentally sensitive period.

In summary, the continuation of these findings reinforces the central conclusion: criminal attitudes among young adults are meaningfully associated with both perceived social exclusion and self-control. The interaction between relational context and regulatory functioning provides a valuable framework for understanding deviant cognition beyond simplistic explanations. Continued empirical exploration of these dynamics will contribute to more refined theoretical models and more effective preventive strategies.

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the relationships among perceived social exclusion, self-control, and criminal attitudes among young adults, and to determine whether perceived social exclusion and self-control significantly predict criminal attitudes. The findings provided empirical support for the proposed hypotheses and contributed to a clearer understanding of the social and regulatory factors associated with deviant cognitive tendencies.

The results indicated that perceived social exclusion was significantly and positively associated with criminal attitudes. Young adults who reported higher levels of feeling ignored, rejected, or socially excluded were more likely to endorse beliefs that justify rule breaking behavior. This finding emphasizes the psychological impact of social disconnection and highlights the importance of interpersonal experiences in shaping attitudes toward social norms.

Additionally, self-control was significantly negatively associated with criminal attitudes, suggesting that individuals with lower regulatory capacity were more likely to approve of deviant or rule-breaking attitudes. The findings reinforce the importance of self-regulatory abilities in maintaining adherence to social and legal norms.

The multiple regression analysis further demonstrated that perceived social exclusion and self-control together significantly predicted criminal attitudes. This indicates that both environmental experiences and individual regulatory characteristics play a meaningful role in shaping deviant cognitive orientations among young adults.

Overall, the study contributes to criminological psychology by highlighting the combined influence of social exclusion and self-control on criminal attitudes within a non-offender young adult population. The findings suggest that efforts to promote social inclusion and strengthen self-control may be valuable in reducing vulnerability to deviant cognitive

patterns. Future research should continue to explore additional social and psychological factors that may further explain the development of criminal attitudes in emerging adulthood.

Table 4. *Hypotheses Testing*

Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	Statistical Result	Supported
H1	Descriptive Statistics	Moderate levels observed	Yes
H2	Pearson Correlation	$r = -.34, p < .001$	Yes
H3	Pearson Correlation	$r = .38, p < .001$	Yes
H4	Pearson Correlation	$r = -.42, p < .001$	Yes
H5	Multiple Regression	$R^2 = .24, F(2,127) = 20.05, p < .001$	Yes

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares none.

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Figures