



Social Control Theories. Social control theories of crime and delinquency attribute law-breaking to the weakness, breakdown, or absence of those social bonds or socialization processes that are presumed to encourage law-abiding conduct. Such theories accord primacy to relationships, commitments, values, norms and beliefs that are purported to explain why people do not break laws as compared to theories according primacy to motivating forces thought to explain why people do break laws. When taken to the extreme, social control theory can be an “amotivational” theory, dismissing or ignoring the necessity of addressing motivational issues. The most prominent social control theorist in the 20th Century, Travis Hirschi, viewed the motivations as so natural to human beings that no special forces were necessary to explain law-breaking. Law-breaking is often the most immediate source of gratification or conflict resolution, and no special motivation is required to explain such behavior. Human beings are active, flexible organisms who will engage in a wide range of activities, unless the range is limited by processes of socialization and social learning. On the other hand, many control-oriented theorists do introduce motivating forces, pressures and pulls into their explanations. However, such motivations are viewed as sufficiently common, diverse, transitory and situational that more explanatory power is to be gained from focusing on the barriers or constraints that inhibit law-breaking outcomes than attempting to discern specific motivating forces. Rather than being generated by one or a few dominant forces, the motives for delinquency are depicted as quite diverse, ranging from instrumental needs (stealing when one is poor and hungry) to emotional rage, frustration, and sheer thrill and excitement. However, since most people are “motivated” to break laws at one time or another, a focus on motives does not explain who will commit criminal and delinquent acts (Briar and Pilavin, 1965).

This type of theory has roots in the perspectives on human society proposed by the English social philosopher, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). In his best-known work, *Leviathan; or, The Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (1651), Hobbes argued that human nature would generate a perennial war of all against all were choices not constrained by implicit social contracts, agreements and arrangements among people. From such a perspective, there is nothing mysterious about theft and violence when it has no social or political costs. This argument does not imply that people are “naturally” evil or “bad.” Rather, such moral designations are created in the construction of social order, assigning costs and consequences to certain choices and defining some as evil, immoral and/or illegal.

Although “social control theory” is most often associated with the version proposed by Hirschi in his classic work, Causes of Delinquency (1969), numerous theorists have introduced ideas reflecting a control theory logic. In one of the early control theories, Albert J. Reiss (1951: 196) proposed that delinquency was “behavior consequent to the failure of personal and social controls.” Personal control was defined as “the ability of the individual to refrain from meeting needs in ways which conflict with the norms and rules of the community” while social control was “the ability of social groups or institutions to make norms or rules effective.” Reiss’s version did not specify the sources of such “abilities” nor the specific control mechanisms leading to conformity, but he did identify the failure of such primary groups as the family to provide reinforcement for non-delinquent roles and values was crucial to the explanation of delinquency. His perspective was true to control theory logic in that no specific motivational sources leading to delinquency when social and personal controls failed were identified.

Between 1956 and 1958, the importance of barriers delinquent behavior was highlighted in works by Walter Reckless and his colleagues (1956), Jackson Toby (1957) and F. Ivan Nye (1958). Reckless began developing a “containment” theory in 1956 by focusing on a youth’s self conception as an “insulator” against delinquency. By 1967, Reckless had developed that perspective into the most elaborate of the early control-based perspectives. A wide range of characteristics of individuals could operate as internal control mechanisms, but Reckless allotted special significance to “self-concepts” or “self images.” Even in the most criminogenic environments, youth who held images of themselves as “good students” or “good kids” could be insulated from pressures and pulls conducive to delinquency. Of course, formation of such self images was a reflection of strong social relationships with parents, teachers and other sources of conventional socialization. Delinquent behavior could also be “contained” through processes external to the individual and parents, school and neighborhood were particularly important. Reckless also introduced inner and outer pressures and pulls which encompassed a variety of potential motivating forces. However,. He listed a broad range of possibilities and, in contrast to other theories at that time, no specific motivational force was advocated. Indeed, most of the empirical work by Reckless and his students concentrated on inner containment. His research suggested that internal controls had an impact independent of external constraints, pressures and pulls.

Another criminologist, Jackson Toby (1957), argued that "the uncommitted adolescent is a candidate for gang socialization." Toby acknowledged “gang socialization” as part of the causal, motivational, dynamic leading to delinquency, but introduced the concept of “stakes in conformity” to explain “candidacy” for such learning experiences. Youth who had few stakes or

investments in conformity were more likely to be drawn into gang activity than youth who had a lot to lose. A variety of conventional social relationships and commitments could be jeopardized by involvement in delinquency and youth without such stakes were free to be recruited into gangs.(1957). The notion of “stakes in conformity” fit very well with concepts invoked in later versions of social control theory.

In Family Relationships and Delinquent Behavior (1958), F. Ivan Nye not only elaborated a social control theory of delinquency, but specified ways to “operationalize” (measure) control mechanisms and related them to self-reports of delinquent behavior. Like Reiss, he focused on the family as a source of control. Moreover, Nye specified different types of control, differentiating between internal, direct and indirect controls. Youth may be directly controlled through constraints imposed by parents, limiting the opportunity for delinquency, as well as through parental rewards and punishments. However, they may be constrained when free from direct control by their anticipation of parental disapproval (indirect control), or through the development of a conscience, an internal constraint on behavior. The focus on the family as a source of control was in marked contrast to the emphasis on economic circumstances as a source of criminogenic motivation at the time. Although he acknowledged motivational forces by stating that “*some* delinquent behavior results from a *combination* of positive learning and weak and ineffective social control” (1958: 4), he adopts a control- theory position when he proposes that “most delinquent behavior is the result of insufficient social control...” Hirschi was critical of Nye’s use of concepts such as internal control, but (together with Gottfredson) proposed “self-control” as a key explanatory variable over thirty years later. Nye’s work was the first major presentation of research from a social control perspective and most of his findings are quite consistent with

subsequent research using survey data.

Although it was not presented as a social control theory, David Matza's book, Delinquency and Drift (1964), incorporated several of the features of that type of theory. Delinquent youth were “neither compelled nor committed to” their delinquent actions deeds, but were “partially unreceptive to other more conventional traditions” (1964:28). In short, delinquent youth could be depicted as “drifters,” relatively free to take part in delinquency. This argument was a challenge to other theories in the 1960s which emphasized status frustration and the adoption of oppositional values by delinquent youth. According to Matza, the delinquent “flirts” with criminal and conventional behavior while drifting among different social worlds. Matza did not identify any specific constraints or controls that keep youth from drifting, but drifters were depicted as youth who have few stakes in conformity and are free to drift into delinquency. Similar to Hirschi’s presentation of social control theory, Matza challenged theories emphasizing distinct subcultural or contracultural value systems in the explanation of delinquency.

Scott Briar and Irving Piliavin presented one of the clearest statements of a control theory logic in an article on “Delinquency, situational inducements and commitments to conformity” in 1965. Like Matza, they specifically challenged other theoretical perspectives of the 1960s by emphasizing transitory, situational inducements as the motivating forces for delinquency in contrast to subcultural or contracultural value systems and socially structured status problems. Motivation did not differentiate delinquent and non-delinquent youth as much as variable commitments to conformity. They argued that the “central process of social control” were “commitments to conformity.” They included fear of material deprivations if apprehended, self-images, valued relationships and current and future statuses and activities. In his version of social

control theory, Hirschi limited the concept of commitment to the rational and emotional investments that people make in the pursuit of shared cultural goals

Although Hirschi was not the first to propose a social control theory, the research monograph based on his doctoral research, Causes of Delinquency (1969) established his reputation as the preeminent social control theorist of the 20th century. Indeed, any reference to social control theory was presumed to be a reference to Hirschi's version of the theory. There are several reasons for this preeminence and the fact that Causes of Delinquency became the most cited book in criminology. For one, he proposed his theory as a specific contrast to versions of two perspectives which were much better known at that time, so-called "strain" and "cultural conflict" perspectives. Other control theorists had challenged such theories, but Hirschi proposed what he considered to be "crucial" differences among the theories where confirmation of one position was believed to constitute dis-confirmation of an alternative. Second, he presented a parsimonious theory with four specific types of constraints rather than a list of examples and attempted to clearly define each as a type of "social bond." Third, he operationalized the concepts and tested his theory and addressed crucial contrasts with other theories using self-report survey data. Analyses of survey data would become the major method for testing theories in the decades to come.

Three crucial contrasts involved conceptions of culture, the role of ambition, and the role of peers. On the first issue, Hirschi argued that there is a general consensus in American society that criminal and delinquent activities involving personal harm and loss or damage to property are improper or immoral. He did not mean that everyone feels strongly about the impropriety of lawbreaking, but that some people accept the morality behind laws as more binding than others,

and are less likely to break laws. Some cultural conflict theories (e.g. Walter Miller) had proposed that sizable racial, ethnic, or status groups in America have subcultural systems of values and norms that require criminal or delinquent behavior, and some strain theorists (e.g. Albert Cohen) had argued that delinquent youth embrace an oppositional or contracultural values that accord status based on law-breaking. Hirschi's social control perspective challenged both theories by introducing variation in acceptance of one basic moral system as the crucial factor in understanding the relation between moral beliefs and delinquency.

Hirschi also advocated a view on the impact of ambition that was contrary to one of the most popular theories of crime at that time. Robert Merton (1957) had proposed that high rates of crime reflect embracement of widely shared cultural values emphasizing the merits of the pursuit of wealth and success. When coupled with limits on the prospects of realizing such goals in a stratified society, the disadvantaged resort to "innovative" ways of realizing those goals. In contrast, Hirschi proposed that conventional ambitions constituted barriers to delinquency even among youth with few prospects of realizing those dreams.

Finally, Hirschi challenged differential association theory (Edwin Sutherland and Donald Cressey) with regard to the impact of delinquent peers on delinquency. One of the most consistent findings in research on delinquency was that increases in association with delinquent peers were associated with increases in delinquency. One of his most iconoclastic stands was that delinquent peers would be found to have no direct effect on delinquency when social bonds inhibiting delinquency were taken onto account. He argued that similarly unattached youth drifted together into delinquent groups. It was weak social bonds that resulted in both delinquency and association with delinquents.

The dominance of Hirschi's social control theory also reflected its simplicity. The version he proposed was quite parsimonious in comparison to lists of inner and outer containments, and the range of phenomena that could be considered commitments to or stakes in conformity. Hirschi argued that there were four basic "social bonds" that could constitute significant barriers to youths' involvement in delinquency, attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. Attachment encompassed the emotional bonds of youth to other people and attachments to parents and teachers were viewed as particularly crucial. Attachment encompassed the interpersonal, emotional barriers to delinquency. Commitment was measured in terms of the aspirations and goals of youth, encompassing rational as well as emotional investments. Involvement referred to behavioral investments in conventional lines of action that could preclude involvement in delinquent behavior. Belief referred to the personal embracement of moral or normative conceptions that inhibit delinquent choices. He proposed that each type of social bond should have its own separable effect in the explanation of delinquency and proceeded to test the theory.

Another reason for the preeminence of Hirschi's social control theory was the empirical approach he took to test the theory. Not only did Hirschi attempt to identify crucial contrasts, but he brought survey data collected from a large sample of junior and senior high school students in California to bear on these crucial differences. Such an approach was daring in that precise specification of measures and presentation of data eliminated the ambiguities that allow theorists to ignore troublesome findings. Hirschi's approach allowed replication and detailed attention to the links between concepts and indicators. Moreover, it put his theory to test in competition with others. His analysis showed that measures of attachment, commitment and belief had significant and independent effects of delinquency, but that mere involvement in conventional activities did

not inhibit delinquency. Attachment, commitment and moral beliefs are the key social bonds. Moreover, contrary to the implications of some “strain” theories of delinquency, commitments to conventional goals inhibited delinquency even among categories of youth with few prospects for realizing those aspirations. Contrary to some subcultural and contracultural theories, he found few relationships between measures of social class and values or attitudes towards the law.

Hirschi was forced to admit that delinquent peers appeared to have a direct effect on delinquency that could not be explained by social control variables. This finding would become the basis for continuing debate between Hirschi and another prominent criminologist, Ronald Akers, who was developing a “social learning theory” in the late 1960s. Social learning theory combined variables which encouraged delinquency (e.g. delinquent peers) with variables that discouraged delinquency (e.g. parental response). In addition, social learning theory posits that the behavior of people that a youth is attached to affects the consequences of such relationships—a prediction that has been substantiated in several studies (See Akers 2001).

Most references to social control theory are likely to be references to Hirschi’s social bond theory. However, the concept of social control is not defined clearly in Hirschi’s work or earlier works developing a control framework. It is understood that social control can refer to mechanisms intended to inhibit deviance and encourage conformity, and that social bonds facilitate process. In contrast, Jack Gibbs (1981) has devoted a considerable amount of scholarly attention to defining social control in a manner that distinguishes it from other concepts. Moreover, he has applied it to develop a control theory of homicide.

According to Gibbs, any attempt to get someone else to do something or refrain from doing something can be considered an attempt at “control.” To qualify as “social” control, such

attempts must involve three parties. Social control is an attempt by one or more individuals to manipulate the behavior of another individual or individuals by or through a third party (by means other than a chain of command). Gibbs' "third party" can be an actual person or a reference to "society," "expectations" or "norms." For example, if one party attempts to influence another by invoking reference to a third party assumed to have authority (such as "I'll tell Mom!"), it is a type of "referential" social control. If one party attempts to control another by punishing a third (e.g. general deterrence), it is a form of vicarious social control. Numerous categories and subcategories of social control are delineated by Gibbs, but the major point is that the third party distinguishes social control from mere external behavioral control, simple interpersonal responses, or issuing orders for someone to do something. This definition clearly distinguishes social control from "prophylactic" conceptions of social control, equating it with "reactions to deviance" and from deviant behavior itself. A variety of phenomenon typically thought of as some type of social control are not clearly "reactions to deviance" (such as propaganda, advertising, education, strikes, protests and governmental regulations). Moreover, deviant behavior, itself, can be a type of social control (in terms of his final definition of it). If deviant behavior can be a form of social control and social control can involve more than reactions to deviance, then the two concepts cannot be equated; nor can one be subsumed by the other.

Gibbs draws on these distinctions to propose a control theory of homicide. Gibbs argues that "Homicide can be described either as control or as resulting from control failure (1989: 35)," and proposes that the homicide rate is a function "not just of the sheer volume of disputes but also of the frequency of recourse to a third party for peaceful dispute settlement (37)." A dispute typically arises when attempts at some form of direct or proximate control by of one person over

another fails and homicide itself represents another attempt at direct control. This argument is similar to Donald Black's discussion of crime as "self-help" which he defines as "the expression of a grievance by unilateral aggression such as personal violence or property destruction (1983:34)." People resort to self-help (e.g. attempts at direct control through violence) when forms of social control are unavailable or fail. Like other social control theories, the emphasis in Gibbs' theory of homicide is on recourse to third party social control mechanisms.

Gibbs is critical of Hirschi's social control theory because it does not define social control, but merely presumes that social relationships, personal investments and beliefs that discourage delinquency are social controls. Hirschi's theory is often referred to as a "social bond theory" for that very reason. Social bonds may make youths subject to more effective control attempts (direct and social), but Gibbs' argues that "the conditions themselves are not control (1981: 147)." At this point in the history of criminological theory, there has been very little attention paid to clear conceptual distinctions among a variety of concepts introduced in the explanation of crime and delinquency, including social control, social bonds, socialization and social learning. Gibbs' has been working on the concept of social control, but careful delineation among related concepts is rare.

Two of the early control theorists included some form of "internal" control or "inner" containment in their theories, and many of Hirschi's social bonds can be conceptualized as part of the personality, character, identity, mind or self-conception of individual youth. Youths who want to "do well" in conventional contexts, "care" about their parents and teachers and "believe" that acts hurting others are wrong are unlikely to become seriously delinquent. While these characteristics are embodied in desires, feelings, and ideas "mentally" embraced by youths, they

are “social” in the sense that they constitute constraints on choices established in interaction with other people. In Causes of Delinquency (1969), Hirschi distinguished attachment to others from “internal control” by “locating the ‘conscience’ in the bond to others rather than making it part of the personality (19).” He challenged related notions such as “internalization” and Freud’s “superego” on the grounds that externalizing the social bonds made “change or variation in behavior explainable (1969: 19).” Moreover, while there were correlations among the social bonds, Hirschi proposed that each had separable effects that “justifies their separation” (1969: 30).” He challenged psychological perspectives that lumped distinct variables together, or viewed them as mere symptoms of some underlying, hidden, or latent construct such as psychopathology. Indeed, an additional reason for the appeal of Hirschi’s theory among sociologists was that it incorporated social, normative, and rational bonds as conceptually distinct, measureable characteristics of youth and allowed for variation or changes in behavior over time.

In 1990, Michael Gottfredson and Hirschi published A General Theory of Crime which emphasized variations in “self-control” established at a relatively early age and variations in opportunity to commit crimes as the keys to understanding most empirical regularities in criminality. They argued that the crimes people could commit varied by age, but that the individual “tendency” to do so is a product of self-control established in interaction with parents and others during childhood. People low in self-control are “free to enjoy the quick and easy and ordinary pleasures of crime without undue concern for the pains that follow from them (Hirschi and Gottfredson 2001: 90).” People who learn to “consider the long term consequences of their acts” have “self-control.” Variations in self-control are established through interaction and socialization processes involving parents who care about their children, monitor their activities,

recognize transgressions when they occur, and takes steps to correct their children. In the process, “the child learns to avoid acts with long term negative consequences (2001: 90).”

This “self-control” theory retains the logic of a social control theory in that no special motivation is necessary to explain deviance, crime, or delinquency. “Low self-control” is identified as the “natural” state and actions that hurt others need no special motivational explanation. Moreover, the theory retains the emphasis on barriers to deviance and locates the origins of self-control as a barrier in early socialization and relationships with parents and other conventional role models.

This perspective is not a mere extension or reformulation of Hirschi’s social control theory. As presented in A General Theory of Crime, and subsequent explications of that theory, self-control theory is a major departure from Hirschi’s social bond theory as presented in Causes of Delinquency. Most of the features of social bond theory that made it appealing to sociologists have been abandoned in Gottfredson and Hirschi. In fact, self-control theory is subject to all of the criticisms Hirschi leveled against psychological theories in Causes of Delinquency. In his earlier work, Hirschi challenged theories that focused on internal, unchanging motivations or constraints. In his new work with Gottfredson, the central focus is on just such states. Hirschi challenged perspectives that lumped conceptually distinct social bonds together as well as theories that transformed disparate barriers or constraints into simple latent constructs. Yet, in A General Theory internal barriers are lumped together under the rubric of self-control. In short, the arguments concerning the primacy of self-control presented in A General Theory are directly contrary to the arguments presented when advocating social bond theory. In Causes, Hirschi demonstrated the distinct relevance of different types of bonds, whether conceived of as social or

personal aspects of the self. But, in A General Theory, variation in criminality is explained by one inclusive, psychological construct, self-control. Absence of self-control explains continuity in crime among individuals over the life course with the form of crime varying by the age-related structure of criminal opportunity.

There have been two types of research relevant to self-control theory. In one line of research, self-control is inferred to be the stable underlying factor that explains the continuity of deviant behavior or conformity over the life course. The correlations between childhood transgressions and more serious offenses later in life is taken as evidence of an underlying lack of self control. In contrast, conformity at various ages is attributed to the early establishment of self-control. The second line of research attempts to more directly test the theory by operationalizing “low self-control” and relating it to law-breaking with other criminogenic variables controlled. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi “people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical, risk-seeking, short-sighted, and nonverbal (1990: 90-91).” The opposite set of characteristics apply to people high in self-control. The attempt to specify the indicators of “low” self control differentiates Gottfredson and Hirschi’s self-control theory from social bond theory in that it introduces quasi-motivational sources of variation (i.e. impulsivity and risk-taking), relevant to the question, “Why do people break laws?” .

Research attempting to measure self-control directly (e.g. Grasmick et al. 1993) has used survey data assessing attitudes of respondents that are thought to tap variations in these traits The most recent review of such research concludes that measures of self-control are significantly related to law-breaking, but that it can be challenged as a general theory of crime. Variables central to differential association and social learning theory affect law-breaking, regardless of

variations in self-control (Pratt and Cullen 2000). At present, self-control theory has not been shown to have superior explanatory power over Hirschi's earlier social bond theory.

There is a mounting body of research drawing on social bond theory to argue that discontinuities between juvenile and adult crime are a product of variations in new social bonds. In an award-winning research monograph, Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life (1993), Robert Sampson and John Laub, challenge Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory and report that, consistent with social bond theory, such variables as marital attachment and stable employment explain discontinuities in deviance. Discontinuities can be explained by social bond theory, social learning theory and a variety of new theories categorized under the rubric of "life course" perspectives.

Numerous "new" perspectives on crime emerged in the late 20th century and two of them included the concept of control. John Hagan (Hagan, Gillis and Simpson 1985) introduced a variant of control theory named "power-control" theory and Charles Tittle (1995) introduced "control-balance" theory. Power-control theory integrated ideas from feminist theories with some ideas from social control theory to explain variations in "common delinquency" by gender and parental occupation. Girls were predicted to differ the most from boys in patriarchal households where father's occupational power exceeded mother's occupational power. Increases in mother's power relative to father's power would reduce that gap. That prediction was supported in research by Hagan and colleagues, but has not been found in other research (See Jensen and Rojek 1998). In contrast to earlier versions of social control theory, power-control theory included very limited social bonds and incorporated a motivational variable in the form of "tastes for risks." Thus, power-control theory can be considered an integrated theory as opposed to a

social control theory.

Tittle views his control- balance theory as an integrated theory because it incorporates ideas from a variety of perspectives, including social control theory. He also draws on Gibbs' conception of social control. The central premise is that "the amount of control to which people are subject relative to the amount of control they can exercise affects the probability that they will commit specific types of deviance (1995: 142)." Consistent with social control theory, it is presumed that all people are predisposed towards deviance by common desires for "autonomy" and to fulfill "basic needs." When people experience "control deficits" their probability of engaging in predatory, defiant, or submissive deviance increases relative to people with balanced control ratios. When people have "control surpluses," the probability of exploitative and decadent deviance increases. The theory is very elaborate and, at present, crucial differences and appropriate measures of key concepts have not been clearly specified.

Several issues involving social control theory are likely to be the subject of continuing debate and theoretical elaboration in the 21st century. First, the shift to "self-control" theory will continue to be a source of controversy, since it appears that Hirschi's social bond version of the theory may have superior explanatory power compared to newer "general theory." The self-control version of the theory will be contrasted with predictions by theorists operating from "life course" perspectives, including social bond theory, to explain both continuities and discontinuities in criminality. Self-control is likely to be found to have minimal explanatory power when variables central to social bond and social learning theories are taken into account. Second, social control theory might be effectively incorporated into social learning theory in the coming decades. Whenever there has been a test of crucial differences between the two theories, social learning

theory has been supported. Of course, several steps will have to be taken for social learning theory to incorporate social control theory.. Social control theory was intimately linked with social disorganization perspectives and Hirschi addressed “macro-level” issues (e.g., “Are their class-based subcultures?; “Do shared cultural goals help cause crime?”) that have not been central to elaborations of learning theory. Social learning theory can encompass both sources of conformity and sources of deviance to provide a more complete model for explaining criminal and delinquent conduct, but will have to address broader etiological issues to broaden its appeal in some disciplines. Third, taking Gibbs’ definition of social control as a starting point, concepts used loosely in the presentation of social control theory (and other theories) such as socialization, social bonds and social control will have to be more clearly defined and differentiated. There has been minimal effort to define each of these concepts in a manner that would facilitate empirical differentiation and more precise incorporation into theories of law-breaking. Finally, the crucial differences (if any), between new perspectives such as control-balance theory and social control theory have yet to be fully explicated, and no crucial tests have been identified or attempted. Regardless of the outcome of new debates and new research, social control theory has to be recognized as one of the dominant theoretical perspectives in criminology in the 20th century.

Further Reading

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