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**Applications of Social Control Theory: Criminality and Governmentality**

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## **Applications of Social Control Theory: Criminality and Governmentality**

### **Abstract**

In sociology, the concept of social control has undergone various transformations. In contemporary sociology, social control is primarily understood in the context of the enforcement of law and/or the control of crime and deviance. Historically, however, the concept of social control enjoyed a much more expansive meaning. First, social control is an analytical concept (not a specific theory) that can be conceptualized in at least two ways: as a broad concept related to social order; or in a narrow understanding related to crime and/or deviance. This paper, reviews the concept of social control in sociology as well as its implications in empirical research in the social sciences. However, a sustained treatment of social control in a theoretically systematic way will contribute to better formulation of adequate theoretical models of social control which will also add to our study of institutions and practices.

**Keywords:** Crime, Government, Informal Control, Social Control, Theory.

### **Introduction**

Social control refers generally to societal and political mechanisms or processes that regulate individual and group behavior, leading to conformity and compliance to the rules of a given society, state, or social group (Deflem, 2007). Many mechanisms of social control are cross-cultural, if only in the control mechanisms used to prevent the establishment of chaos or anomie. Some theorists, such as Émile Durkheim, refer to this form of control as regulation. Sociologists identify two basic forms of social controls: internalization of norms and values, and external sanctions, which can be, either positive (rewards) or negative (punishment) (Jary and Jary, 1991). The means to enforce social control can be either formal or informal (Poore, 2007). Sociologist Edward A. Ross argued that belief systems exert a greater control on human behavior than laws imposed by government, no matter what form the beliefs take (Jary and Jary, 1991).

### **Informal Social Control**

The social values that are present in individuals are products of informal social control. It is exercised by a society without explicitly stating

these rules and is expressed through customs and mores. Individuals are socialized whether consciously or subconsciously. During informal sanctions, ridicule or ostracism can cause a straying towards norms. Through this form of socialization, the person internalizes these customs and mores. Traditional society uses mostly informal social control embedded in its customary culture relying on the socialization of its members to establish social order. Religion is thought of by some as a common and historically established form of informal social control. More rigidly-structured societies may place increased reliance on formal mechanisms.

Informal sanctions may include shame, ridicule, sarcasm, criticism and disapproval. In extreme cases sanctions may include social discrimination and exclusion. This implied social control usually has more effect on individuals because they become internalized and thus an aspect of personality. Informal sanctions check 'deviant' behavior. An example of a negative sanction comes from a scene in the Pink Floyd film 'The Wall,' whereby the young protagonist is ridiculed and verbally abused by a high school teacher for writing

poetry in a mathematics class. The scene illustrates how education is all about control and conformity, and not about creativity and individuality. As with formal controls, informal controls reward or punish acceptable or unacceptable behaviour (deviance). Informal controls are varied and differ from individual to individual, group to group and society to society. For example, at a women's institute meeting, a disapproving look might convey the message that it is inappropriate to flirt with the minister. In a criminal gang, on the other hand, a stronger sanction applies in the case of someone threatening to inform the police (Livesay, 2007).

### Shame and Guilt

Shame is a primary device for gaining control over children and maintaining control over adults by the inculcation of shame and the complementary threat of ostracism. The society of traditional Japan was long held to be a good example of one in which shame is the primary agent of social control (Benedict, 1946). Ruth Benedict drew what some regard as a clear picture of the basic workings of Japanese society. The high rate of suicide in Japan may be linked to this societal structure, as well as in South Korea, where there is a similar shame society.

Paul Hiebert characterizes the shame society as follows:

Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism, an acute personal chagrin at our failure to live up to our obligations and the expectations others have of us. In true shame oriented cultures, every person has a place and a duty in the society. One maintains self-respect, not by choosing what is good rather than what is evil, but by choosing what is expected of one (Hiebert, 1985).

Personal desires are sunk in the collective expectation. Those who fail will often turn their aggression against themselves instead of using violence against others. By punishing themselves they maintain their self-respect before others, for shame cannot be relieved, as guilt can be, by confession and atonement.

Shame is removed and honor restored only when a person does what the society expects of him or her in the situation, including committing suicide if necessary (Hiebert, 1985: 212).

Guilt is a primary method of social control by the inculcation of feelings of guilt for behaviors that the society defines as undesirable. As such it is opposed to a shame society. It involves creating the expectation of punishment now, when the behavior fails to be kept secret, and/or in the hereafter. A shame society is to be distinguished from a guilt society in which control is maintained by creating and continually reinforcing the feeling of guilt, and the expectation of punishment now or in the hereafter, for certain condemned behaviors.

A prominent feature of guilt societies is the provision of sanctioned releases from guilt for certain behaviors either before the fact, as when one condemns sexuality but permits it conditionally in the context of marriage, or after the fact. There is a clear opportunity in such cases for authority figures to derive power, monetary and/or other advantages, etc. by manipulating the conditions of guilt and the forgiveness of guilt.

Paul Hiebert characterizes the guilt society as follows:

Guilt is a feeling that arises when we violate the absolute standards of morality within us, when we violate our conscience. A person may suffer from guilt although no one else knows of his or her misdeed; this feeling of guilt is relieved by confessing the misdeed and making restitution. True guilt cultures rely on an internalized conviction of sin as the enforcer of good behavior, not, as shame cultures do, on external sanctions. Guilt cultures emphasize punishment and forgiveness as ways of restoring the moral order; shame cultures stress self-denial and humility as ways of restoring the social order (Hiebert, 1985: 213).

Contemporary Western society uses shame as one modality of control, but its primary dependence rests on guilt, and, when that does not work, on the criminal justice system.

### **Formal Social Control**

Formal social control is expressed through law as statutes, rules, and regulations against deviant behavior. It is conducted by government and organizations using law enforcement mechanisms and other formal sanctions such as fines and imprisonment (Poore, 2007). In democratic societies the goals and mechanisms of formal social control are determined through legislation by elected representatives and thus enjoy a measure of support from the population and voluntary compliance.

### **Social control theory**

Social control theory began to be studied as a separate field in the early 20th century. In criminology, Social Control Theory as represented in the work of Travis Hirschi fits into the Positivist School, Neo-Classical School, and, later, Right Realism. It proposes that exploiting the process of socialization and social learning builds self-control and reduces the inclination to indulge in behavior recognized as antisocial. It was derived from Functionalist theories of crime and Ivan Nye (1958) proposed that there are four types of control:

- Direct: by which punishment is threatened or applied for wrongful behavior, and compliance is rewarded by parents, family, and authority figures.
- Internal: by which a youth refrains from delinquency through the conscience or superego.
- Indirect: by identification with those who influence behavior, say because his or her delinquent act might cause pain and disappointment to parents and others with whom he or she has close relationships.
- Control through needs satisfaction, that is, if all an individual's needs are met, there is no point in criminal activity.

Social Control Theory proposes that people's relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs encourage them not to break the law. Thus, if moral codes are internalized and individuals are tied into, and have a stake in their wider community, they will voluntarily limit their propensity to commit deviant acts. The theory seeks to understand the ways in which it is possible to reduce the likelihood of criminality developing in individuals. It does not consider motivational issues, simply stating that human beings may choose to engage in a wide range of activities, unless the range is limited by the processes of socialization and social learning. This derives from a Hobbesian view of human nature as represented in Leviathan, that is, that all choices are constrained by implicit social contracts, agreements and arrangements among people. Thus, morality is created in the construction of social order, assigning costs and consequences to certain choices and defining some as evil, immoral and/or illegal.

The earliest form of the theory (or at least the earliest recorded) was proposed by Reiss (1951: 196) who defined delinquency as, "...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' version did not specify the sources of such "abilities" nor the specific control mechanisms leading to conformity, but he did assert that the failure of primary groups such as the family to provide reinforcement for non-delinquent roles and values was crucial to the explanation of delinquency.

Toby (1957), argued that "the uncommitted adolescent is a candidate for gang socialization". Acknowledging "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. He believed that all could be tempted into delinquency, but most refused because they considered that they had too much

to lose. But the young who had few stakes or investments in conformity were more likely to be drawn into gang activity. The notion of "stakes in conformity" fits very well with concepts invoked in later versions of social control theory.

Nye (1958) 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. He formulated the theory having formally interviewed 780 young people in Washington State, but the sample was criticized because it contained no-one from an urban environment and those selected might be those more willing to describe their families unfavorably. Some were concerned that criminal activity was only mentioned in two of the questions so the extrapolations to crime in general were considered unsafe. Like Reiss, he focused on the family as a source of control. Moreover, Nye specified different types of control:

- direct control = punishments and rewards
- indirect control = affectionate identification with non-criminals; and
- internal control = conscience or sense of guilt.

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 adopted a control-theory position when he proposed that, "...most delinquent behavior is the result of insufficient social control..."

Reckless (1967) developed Containment Theory by focusing on a youth's self-conception or self-image of being a good person as an insulator against peer pressure to engage in delinquency.

- inner containment = positive sense of self;
- outer containment = supervision and discipline.

This inner containment through self-images is developed within the family and is essentially formed by about the age of twelve. Outer containment was a reflection of strong social relationships with teachers and other sources of conventional socialization within the neighborhood. The basic proposition is there are "pushes" and "pulls" that will produce delinquent behavior unless they are counteracted by containment. The motivations to deviate as pushes are:

- discontent with living conditions and family conflicts;
- aggressiveness and hostility, perhaps due to biological factors;
- frustration and boredom, say arising from membership of a minority group or through lack of opportunities to advance in school or find employment; and
- the pulls are delinquent peers, and delinquent subcultures.

An analysis of 'neutralization' was developed by Sykes and Matza (1957) who believed that there was little difference between delinquents and non-delinquents, with delinquents engaging in non-delinquent behavior most of the time. They also asserted that most delinquents eventually opt out of the delinquent lifestyle as they grow older, suggesting that there is a basic code of morality in place but that the young are able to deviate by using techniques of neutralization, i.e. they can temporarily suspend the applicability of norms by developing attitudes "favorable to deviant behavior". The five common techniques were:

- denial of responsibility (I couldn't help myself)
- denial of injury (nobody got hurt)
- denial of victim (they had it coming)
- condemnation of the condemners (what right do they have to criticize me?)
- appeal to higher loyalties (I did it for someone else).

Later Matza (1964) developed his theory of "drift" which proposed that people used neutralization to drift in and out of conventional behaviour, taking a temporary break from moral restraints. Matza based his "drift" theory upon four observations which were:

- Delinquents express guilt over their criminal acts
- Delinquents often respect law-abiding individuals
- A line is drawn between those they can victimize and those they can not
- Delinquents are not immune to the demands of conforming

Although Drift Theory has not been widely supported by empirical tests, it remains a key idea in criminology despite not answering why some conform and others don't.

Hirschi adopted Toby's concept of an investment in conventionality or "stake in conformity". He stressed the rationality in the decision whether to engage in crime and argued that a person was less likely to choose crime if they had strong social bonds.

Hirschi has since moved away from his bonding theory, and in co-operation with Gottfredson, developed a General Theory or "Self-Control Theory" in 1990. Akers (1991) argued that a major weakness of this new theory was that Gottfredson and Hirschi did not define self-control and the tendency toward criminal behavior separately. By not deliberately operationalized self-control traits and criminal behavior or criminal acts individually, it suggests that the concepts of low self-control and propensity for criminal behavior are the same. Hirschi and Gottfredson

(1993) rebutted Akers argument by suggesting it was actually an indication of the consistency of General Theory. That is, the theory is internally consistent by conceptualizing crime and deriving from that a concept of the offender's traits. The research community remains divided on whether the General Theory is sustainable but there is emerging confirmation of some of its predictions (e.g. LaGrange & Silverman: 1999)

Gibbs (1989) has redefined social control and applied it to develop a control theory of homicide. Any attempt to get an individual to do or refrain from doing something can be considered an attempt at control. To qualify as 'social' control, such attempts must involve three parties. One or more individuals intend to manipulate the behavior of another by or through a third party. 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 threatening to refer the matter to a third party assumed to have authority, this is 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. The presence of 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 mere "reactions to deviance" and from deviant behavior itself.

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 (p37). When one person fails to control the actions of another through the third party, murder represents another violent attempt at direct control. People resort to self-help when forms of social control are unavailable or fail. Gibbs is critical of Hirschi's Social Control Theory because it merely assumes that social relationships, personal investments and beliefs that discourage delinquency are social controls (which is one

reason why Hirschi's theory is often referred to as a Social Bond Theory).

Additionally developed by Foucault and especially popular among contemporary post-Foucauldian scholars, the concept of governmentality broadens the perspective of social control to focus on the objectives of modern power (Foucault, 1978). Governmentality is defined as "the way in which the conduct of a whole of individuals is found implicated, in an ever more marked fashion, in the exercise of sovereign power" (p. 101). Central to Foucault's notion is that governmental power centers on the population and its truth by presupposing, measuring, and evaluating individuals in their conduct as living subjects.

Applying and extending the concepts of social control and governmentality, the burgeoning scholarly move towards the study of surveillance and governance can be conceptualized as referring to the instrumental and goal-directed components of modern manifestations of social control, respectively. Importantly, the concept of social control has thereby come to be understood in an again increasingly broadened meaning that is no longer tied up exclusively with crime and deviance. Sometimes, even, scholars have altogether abandoned the notion of social control to move away from an implied functionality in surveillance and governance towards an observing attitude in terms of risk and suspicion. Not surprisingly, a tendency of postmodernism, implied or explicit can often be detected in contemporary surveillance studies (Deflem, 2008). The continual application of low-level fear, as in mass surveillance or an electronic police state also exerts a powerful coercive force upon a populace.

### Conclusion

According to the propaganda model theory, the leaders of modern, corporate-dominated societies employ indoctrination as a means of social control (Poore, 2007). Theorists such as Noam Chomsky have argued that systematic bias exists in the modern media (Chomsky and Herman, 1988). The marketing, advertising,

and public relations industries have thus been said to utilize mass communications to aid the interests of certain business elites. Powerful economic and religious lobbyists have often used school systems and centralised electronic communications to influence public opinion. Democracy is restricted as the majority is not given the information necessary to make rational decisions about ethical, social, environmental, or economic issues. To maintain control and regulate their subjects, authoritarian organizations and governments promulgate rules and issue decrees. However, due to a lack of popular support for enforcement, these entities may rely more on force and other severe sanctions such as censorship, expulsion and limits on political freedom. Some totalitarian governments, such as the late Soviet Union or the current North Korea, rely on the mechanisms of the police state (Deflem, 2008).

Sociologists consider informal means of social control vital in maintaining public order, but also recognize the necessity of formal means as societies become more complex and for responding to emergencies (Livesay, 2007; Poore, 2007).

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