

PART V

Varieties of Control Theory

Sociological explanations of crime have been dominated by three main traditions: differential association/learning theory, anomie/strain theory, and control theory. Other theories have been set forth, but usually they have either integrated concepts from, or have been developed explicitly to challenge, these three dominant traditions. The enduring appeal of these traditions is in part due to the elegant way in which original statements of the theories conveyed powerful theses as to the origins of criminal conduct. Indeed, each perspective was authored by a scholar of enormous accomplishment: anomie/strain theory by Robert K. Merton; differential association theory by Edwin Sutherland; and control theory by Travis Hirschi.

Hirschi was not the first control theorist. As noted previously, Shaw and McKay (Chapter 3) tied delinquency to the attenuation of control in inner-city areas. Other theorists focused on how types of control—usually differentiating between those inside individuals (e.g., conscience) and those outside individuals (e.g., parental reactions)—were related to wayward behavior. For example, Reiss (1951) delineated “personal and social controls,” and Nye (1958) emphasized controls that were “internal,” “direct,” and “indirect.” Sykes and Matza (Chapter 15 in this part) also are seen as control theorists, because they examined how people become free to commit crime only when beliefs can be evoked to “neutralize” the restraint normative standards usually exert over them. Furthermore, Walter Reckless (1961) advanced the “containment theory” perspective

that anticipated many of the ideas that Hirschi would later formalize (for an overview of control theory, see Britt and Costello, 2015).

Despite these predecessors, it was Hirschi’s “social bond theory,” published in *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), that emerged as the preeminent statement of control theory (Chapter 16 in this part; see Costello and Laub, 2020). In this work, Hirschi divided criminological theory into three main perspectives, which he identified by the terms “control theory,” “strain theory,” and “cultural deviance theory”—a term he used for differential association/learning approaches (see also Kornhauser, 1978). He argued that these three perspectives were incompatible, and that they should be seen as rivals to be tested empirically against one another. Thus, in *Causes of Delinquency*, Hirschi not only set forth his social bond theory but also presented data showing the merits of his perspective and the comparative weaknesses of strain and cultural deviance perspectives.

Up until this time, most theoretical statements were just that—essays proposing a plausible explanation of crime. Hirschi, however, “upped the ante” by showing that theories could be tested and by claiming that empirical evidence should be the arbiter of which perspective deserved allegiance. In particular, Hirschi revealed the utility of using survey research to test theories. In this method, respondents—usually juveniles in a high school—would be given a questionnaire that contained *both* measures of theoretical concepts and a “self-report” scale of delinquency. In this

way, it would be possible to see which theory, as operationalized by the measures on the questionnaire, could explain more or less involvement in delinquency. It is noteworthy that this approach is the chief way in which criminologists test micro-level theories of crime.

We will turn shortly to Hirschi's social bond theory. As a prelude, however, we will focus on perhaps his two most important theoretical predecessors: first, techniques of neutralization theory by Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza (1957 [Chapter 15 in this part]) and, second, containment theory by Walter C. Reckless (1961).

Techniques of Neutralization

Sykes and Matza's delinquency theory represents both the embrace of and departure from Sutherland's differential association perspective (see Chapter 7 in Part III). Sutherland had proposed that individuals enter crime because they learn definitions favorable to violation of the law. He was largely silent, however, on the content of these definitions. Building on Sutherland, Sykes and Matza provide insight on what specific definitions or beliefs might encourage offending. They delineate a core set of beliefs—which they label “techniques of neutralization”—that they argue are learned and permit law-breaking to take place. Unlike Sutherland, however, they do not see most offenders as becoming so enmeshed in a criminal value system as to reject the norms of the larger conventional society. Thus, they criticize in particular subcultural theories, such as the one proposed by Cohen (1955 [Chapter 12]), that portray youngsters as learning a value system that celebrates crime and opposes prosocial normative standards. In these subcultures, conventional society is stood on its head. “Conformity” entails following antisocial values and breaking the law without guilt or remorse.

Most youths, observe Sykes and Matza, cannot escape the powerful socializing influences of conventional society. Subcultural members are the rare exception, not the rule. Parents, teachers,

ministers, and criminal justice officials provide a unified message that crime is wrong and that youngsters should obey the law. Under normal circumstances, therefore, children come to internalize and believe in the morality of the dominant normative system. Thoughts of violating normative standards evoke feelings of guilt and shame. Individuals know and respect right from wrong. As a result, they are controlled by their conventional beliefs.

But if this is so, how is it possible—as Sykes and Matza put it—that people violate laws that they believe in? Sykes and Matza's contribution is in developing a *theory of how controls are neutralized*. They argue that there are sets of beliefs that, when invoked, in effect say that it is “okay” to commit a criminal act “in this circumstance.” They group these crime-justifying beliefs into five categories, which they call “techniques of neutralization.”

To give but one example, many college students illegally download music and computer programs. These same students would never even think to pilfer a fellow student's books, cell phone, or purse, for this would be “stealing” and clearly morally wrong. After all, they are not “thieves.” But appropriating music and software incurs little guilt or shame because it can be justified by explaining that such conduct “does not hurt anyone.” This technique, which neutralizes normative controls, is what Sykes and Matza call “denial of injury.” Another neutralizing justification might be that music and computer companies are monopolistic and charge excessively high prices. They are unfair and deserve to have their property taken. Sykes and Matza would term this “denial of the victim.” There is, in fact, some evidence that these types of beliefs identified by Sykes and Matza do facilitate criminal involvement not only for juveniles but also for adults (Benson, 1985; Maruna and Copes, 2005).

In a way, Sykes and Matza bridge differential association and control theories. Similar to the Sutherland tradition, they argue that learned beliefs or definitions lead to crime. But similar to

control theory, they do not believe in culture conflict. Rather, in their view, there is a dominant world, there is a dominant culture in which there is consensus and everyone is socialized. As a result, controls are present over most people. The theoretical task is to identify the circumstances, and the very normative standards, that lead to crime. The solution to this crime problem, according to Sykes and Matza, techniques of neutralization.

Matza (1964) summarizes the core of this effort in his classic book, *Delinquency and the Social Structure*. He did so in two ways.

First, in Chapter 1, he discusses Moffitt's (1993) theory of the relationship between two types of delinquency. The label implies, “a path of development that those who offend in their early years. Most offenders are thought of as being on a path of development that is considered normal and is ensnared by the problems encountered in adulthood. The path of development is not a pathway. It is a process of learning about the world and acting on it. It is not a theory of crime. It is a description of the process of crime.”

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control theory, they do not see a society wracked by culture conflict. Rather, in their theoretical world, there is a dominant normative system about which there is consensus and into which virtually everyone is socialized. Again, this means that controls are present over most of us most of the time. The theoretical task is to explain why, under certain circumstances, individuals are able to ignore the very normative standards that they typically believe and that typically control them. For Sykes and Matza, techniques of neutralization comprise the solution to this criminological puzzle.

Matza (1964) subsequently expanded these ideas in his classic book *Delinquency and Drift*. At the core of this effort was an attempt to normalize delinquents—to show that they were not so different from so-called conventional youngsters. He did so in two ways.

First, in Chapter 43, we will review Terrie Moffitt's (1993) theory in which she distinguishes between two types of antisocial youths. As the label implies, "adolescent-limited" offenders are those who confine their delinquency to the teenage years. Most antisocial teenagers follow this path of development, and, in this sense, it can be considered normal. "Life-course-persistent" offenders are those who start to manifest conduct problems early in life, become serious delinquents, and persist in their criminality well into adulthood. This second group is small in size and is ensnared in a problematic developmental pathway. For the most part, Matza was theorizing about the typical delinquent whose delinquent acts were limited to adolescence. He made much of what he called "maturational reform," noting that the majority of wayward youths do not become adult criminals. He criticized other theories, especially subcultural perspectives that depicted delinquents as fully embracing a criminal culture. Matza (1964: 21–22) said that such approaches suffered from an "embarrassment of riches" in the sense that they attributed too much criminality to their subjects. By seeing offenders as different and as constrained to break the law, they could not explain why the typical delinquent

would ever stop offending and become a conventional adult.

Second, Matza (1964) proposed that youths were not constantly preoccupied with crime and driven to break the law. He noted that despite having ubiquitous opportunities to offend, for most youths "delinquency fails to occur during all but a tiny proportion of those moments" (1964: 69). Most often, they are "distracted and restrained by convention from the commission of offenses" (p. 69). Only "episodically" are they "released from the moral bind of conventional order" (p. 69). One way this release occurs, of course, is by using techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957).

In a key contention, Matza asserted that "during release the delinquent is not constrained to commit offense; rather he is free to drift into delinquency" (1964: 69). The concept of "drift" is Matza's main theoretical contribution. Rejecting the image of the constrained, driven delinquent, he noted that "drift stands midway between freedom and control" (p. 28). A delinquent act is influenced by factors such as having committed crimes in the past ("preparation") and a fatalistic sense that an act must be carried out ("desperation"). But a delinquent act is also chosen, a reflection of a youth's "will" to offend. "Will, by definition, is something that may or may not be exercised," observed Matza. "Will is an option" (p. 191). In contemporary criminology, Matza's focus on the subjective decision to act is called "human agency," and it represents an important but debated line of inquiry (see, e.g., Brezina, 2020; Cullen, 2017; Laub and Sampson, 2003 [Chapter 44]; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009 [Chapter 45]). More broadly, as a classic contribution, *Matza's Delinquency and Drift* contains many theoretical insights that remain relevant today (see Blomberg et al., 2018).

Containment Theory

Twentieth-century sociological criminology was largely dominated by the "Big Three" theories: strain, differential association (also called

“cultural deviance” or “social learning”), and control. As noted above, Travis Hirschi clearly demarcated these three perspectives and called for a rigorous empirical competition to see which theory would still be standing after all the data were counted.

Walter Reckless was equally perceptive about the need to “make sense” of the prevailing theoretical paradigms so as to show how his “containment theory” differed. His terminology proved to be less compelling than Hirschi’s characterization of competing frameworks; still, he offered a similar understanding of alternative theories and of what was distinctive and important about his brand of control theory.

Thus, Reckless identified two categories of theories that were popular in his day: “push” theories and “pull” theories. When answering why people committed criminal acts, push theories demarcated forces that would “push” or propel individuals onto the other side of the law. Strain theories fell into this category (see Part IV). Reckless also believed that Bongers’s depiction of the way capitalism creates intense pressures toward crime would qualify as a push theory (see Chapter 21 in this volume). In contrast, pull theories showed how people could be lured into crime by providing antisocial models and criminal companions. Differential association or social learning theories would fall into this rubric (see Part III). Reckless also made room for pushes toward crime that emerge from deeply within the individual. Although this line of analysis was not well developed, he argued that pushes could be “psychologic or organic in origin” and include

... extreme restlessness and discontent, marked inner tensions, hostility, aggressiveness, aggrandizement and need for immediate gratification, extreme suggestibility, rebellion against authority, sibling rivalry, hypersensitivity, strong feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, guilt reactions, mental conflicts, anxieties, compulsions, phobias, organic impairments (brain damage, epilepsy, and so on). (Reckless, 1961: 356)

In making these observations, he recognized that individual traits could be implicated in crime causation (see Parts I, XII, and XIII in this volume).

Reckless believed, however, that “push” and “pull” theories were incomplete. His main criticism was that they assumed that there was an ineluctable relationship between a strong push or pull and participating in crime. To be sure, Reckless was schooled at the University of Chicago and was intellectually partial to Shaw and McKay’s (Chapter 3) perspective on crime. He agreed that social disorganization was an important source of wayward conduct—a point we will return to shortly. Reckless had an insight, however, that escaped others: What about the “good boy” in the “bad areas”? In disorganized inner-city neighborhoods, many boys (and girls) did not succumb to the criminogenic pushes and pulls that surrounded them. How did they *resist* these criminal influences? What made them different from the boys (and girls) who were propelled or lured into crime? In a series of empirical studies, Reckless proposed that a “good self-concept” *insulated* these boys from the “bad neighborhoods” in which they resided (see Reckless et al., 1957; see also Scarpitti, 2002). But self-concept was only one factor that played a role in insulating against crime and in controlling wayward impulses. A more comprehensive “containment theory” was needed to capture Reckless’s (1961) thoughts on this matter. Indeed, a major advantage of Reckless’s theory was that its scope included internal and external sources of control. Notably, subsequent control theories would tend to emphasize the importance of one or the other of these dimensions.

Reckless grouped one important set of controls under the category of “outer containment.” To a large extent, this insight arose from his witnessing the disorganization that prevailed in Chicago during his graduate school days. But Reckless had another source for his insight: anthropology (see 1961: 337–340). At one point, he had considered a scholarly career in archaeology

and had traveled to the Middle East. During this venture, he was struck by how “contained” these societies were—how unlike they were from the more socially open United States—and thus how little crime was experienced (personal interview with F. Cullen, 1980). In any event, for Reckless, outer containment is substantially the opposite of social disorganization. It occurs when individuals are enmeshed in “effective family life and an effective supporting structure in the neighborhood and the larger society” (1961: 352).

Again, however, Reckless realized that outer containment was often weak or not sufficiently strong to control the strong pulls and pushes individuals might experience. In such cases, the crucial last line of defense was whether a person had developed “inner containment.” Reckless (1961: 355) included a lengthy roster of components within this construct:

... inner containment consists of good self-control, ego strength, well developed superego (conscience), good self-concept, high resistance to diversions, high frustration tolerance, high sense of responsibility, goal orientation, ability to find substitute satisfactions, tension-reducing rationalizations, and so on.

In the end, Reckless’s multidimensional concept of inner containment may have proved too detailed and too difficult to measure. Indeed, it is instructive that his own empirical research focused only on the “self-concept as an insulator.” One recent study has attempted to revitalize containment theory, providing empirical support for its core propositions (Janssen et al., forthcoming). Still, this work remains the exception to the rule. Scientific paradigms, including criminological theories, earn support not only based on their potential accuracy but also based on whether they are stated in a parsimonious way such that they can be easily understood and tested. Travis Hirschi’s “social bond theory” would have these characteristics. He would clearly specify four social bonds (attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) and then show how these bonds

could be measured and tested against competing theories. Combined with its intellectual rigor, the parsimony and testability of his perspective would contribute to social bond theory playing a major role in American criminology to this day (Costello and Laub, 2020; Oleson and Costello, 2019).

Social Bond Theory

Although often unstated, most theories of crime make assumptions about human nature and its potential influence on behavior. For strain and cultural deviance theories, humans are usually considered to be “blank slates” onto which society writes its script for the person’s life. On occasion, scholars in these traditions will admit that humans have innate or universal drives, but they do not see these forces as inherently criminogenic. Take, for example, the ninth proposition of Sutherland’s differential association theory (see Chapter 7), which states that “while criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values since noncriminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values” (Sutherland and Cressey, 1970: 76).

Once they have rejected the notion that humans are driven to break the law because of their “nature,” strain and cultural deviance theorists must address the question: “Well, then, why do people commit crimes?” The theoretical challenge is to discern what social conditions motivate individuals to engage in illegal acts. For strain theory, the motivation is rooted in negative social relations and experiences that expose people to strain; crime is a way of relieving or otherwise responding to this strain. For cultural deviance or learning theories, the motivation is created by social relations or experiences in which individuals learn to positively value crime, at least under some circumstances. Just as youths learn to like going to baseball games, they can learn to like breaking windows, shoplifting from stores, and beating up others.

As Hirschi notes, control theorists start out with a different premise about human nature: people will “naturally” break the law. It is not necessary to show that humans have an “id,” as psychoanalytic theory would suggest, or that they have unique “animal impulses” or are innately aggressive, as some biological theories contend. Rather, for control theorists, it is sufficient to observe that like other animals, humans seek gratification and that crime is often an easy means to secure such gratification (see also Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). People may vary in their need for gratification, but humans generally have enough desire to seek pleasure that they have ample motivation to commit crimes on a regular basis.

This assumption has important theoretical implications (Costello, 2013). If all humans have motivations for crime, then theories that set forth special explanations of criminal motivation—such as strain and cultural deviance theories—are not needed. They are explaining something that does not need explaining; they are addressing the wrong question. Thus, rather than asking, “Why do they do it?,” criminologists should be asking, “Why don’t they do it?” (Hirschi, 1969: 34). That is, if humans’ natural pursuit of gratification makes crime attractive, what is it that stops them from acting on this impulse?

The answer, of course, is the *control* that society exerts over individuals. According to Hirschi (1969: 16), “control theories assume that delinquent acts result when an individual’s bond to society is weak or broken.” It follows that *variation in control*, not variation in motivation, explains why some people break the law more than others. The theoretical task thus is to uncover the nature of social control and how it constrains people from acting out their underlying wayward urges.

In *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), Hirschi set forth what remains, even to this day, the most influential variant of control theory, which he called “social bond” theory (see the selection in Chapter 16; Costello and Laub, 2020). This perspective is distinctly sociological, because Hirschi

focused not on internal controls, such as a superego or inner containment, but rather on how an individual’s *bond to society* influences decisions to break the law. He did not deny that internal controls exist—individual conduct is affected by what people think and anticipate will happen to them—but ultimately these controls originate with and are sustained by the person’s bond to society.

Hirschi’s theoretical genius is seen in his willingness to move beyond the general proposition that weak controls cause crime to specifying the four major elements of the social bond: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. In essence, Hirschi argued that delinquency would be low among youngsters who are attached to and care about the opinions of others—especially their parents, whose commitment to school gives them a strong investment in conformity that they do not wish to risk by getting into trouble, who are involved in conventional activities that occupy their time, and who believe they should obey rules. In contrast, youths who are not close to their parents, have few prospects for a successful future, are idle after school hours, and have no allegiance to conventional morality are prime candidates for delinquency.

Self-Control Theory

Two decades after the publication of *Causes of Delinquency*, Travis Hirschi joined with Michael Gottfredson to author *A General Theory of Crime* (1990), a volume in which he set forth the premise that a lack of “self-control” was the chief source of criminal behavior (see Chapter 17 in this part). In this book, Gottfredson and Hirschi did not explicitly try to reconcile social bond and self-control theories. It is clear, however, that Hirschi’s thinking about crime had changed over time and that his latest work was a marked departure from his earlier theorizing. In particular, whereas Hirschi’s social bond theory located control in a person’s *relation to society*, self-control theory moved the locus of control *inside the individual*. To a large

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extent, Hirschi now saw crime as rooted not in social experiences but in individual differences that developed early in life and had effects across the life course (see Parts XII and XIII).

Gottfredson and Hirschi embraced the view that criminal behavior is gratifying; indeed, they observed that crime is an easy source of short-term pleasure because committing a crime requires few skills and opportunities to offend are readily available. Why, then, would people bypass the chance to gain easy gratification through crime? Why don't they do it? The answer to this classic control theory question, as in *Causes of Delinquency*, is that controls hold these impulses in check, but unlike before, Gottfredson and Hirschi asserted that self-control, not social bonds, is the chief source of resistance against criminal temptations.

Social bond theory was largely an explanation of juvenile delinquency, focusing on how adolescents attach to parents, commit to school, are involved in recreational activities, and the like. By 1990, however, research had revealed that many wayward youths do not suddenly become seriously delinquent in their teen years. Instead, they begin to manifest conduct problems in childhood—problems that evolve into delinquency (see Moffitt, 1993 [Chapter 43]; Patterson et al., 1989). This continuity or stability in misconduct suggests that the roots of crime lie not in adolescence but in the first years of life. It would follow, of course, that criminologists should search for the causes of crime in childhood and not, as had previously been the case, in the experiences of juveniles in the teenage years.

The critical social milieu in childhood is the family, and the critical experiences children encounter are intimately shaped by their parents. What, then, distinguishes the children who can resist seeking immediate gratification from those who act on their impulses, engaging in such precursors of delinquency as stealing, bullying, and lying? For Gottfredson and Hirschi, the key differentiating factor is whether a child can exercise "self-control." They reject the idea that this

self-control is caused by biological predispositions (see, however, Wright and Beaver, 2005). Instead, here they remain sociologists in attributing the inculcation of self-control to how parents raise their children. In particular, they assert that parents who monitor their children, recognize deviant behavior when it occurs, and then correct this conduct will instill self-control. Conversely, say Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990: 97), "the major 'cause' of low self-control thus appears to be ineffective child-rearing" (for an assessment of this parenting thesis, see Cullen et al., 2008; Hay and Meldrum, 2016).

Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that the level of self-control, once established in childhood, is an enduring propensity or individual difference that has general effects in a person's life. This explains why there is stability of offending across the life course. The continuing lack of self-control also explains why criminal offenders also engage in activities that are "analogous" to crime—that is, acts, such as smoking, drinking, skipping school, having unprotected sex, and driving fast, which, like crime, provide easy and immediate gratification. As Gottfredson and Hirschi note, traditional sociological theories of crime have not shown that they can account for these key empirical facts: the early emergence of conduct problems, the stability of offending, and the participation of criminals in wide-ranging forms of deviance.

Notably, since its publication in 1990, Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory has been subjected to extensive conceptual analysis and empirical investigation (see Burt, 2020; Goode, 2008). Thus, scholars have shown that the concept of self-control has various dimensions. According to Tittle et al. (2004), individuals not only vary in the capacity for self-control—as Gottfredson and Hirschi argue—but also in their desire to exercise control. In this vein, Muraven et al. (2006) suggest that self-control is not stable in a situation—again as Gottfredson and Hirschi argue—but can experience depletion if, similar to a muscle that loses strength, it is overused in

a short period of time. It is further relevant that some of the bolder claims of the theory have not been supported, such as the contention that social learning variables (e.g., antisocial values) are unrelated to crime. Even so, there is now extensive evidence linking self-control to crime and “analogous behaviors” across social groups (e.g., gender and age) and across cultures (Gottfredson, 2006; Hay and Meldrum, 2016; Pratt and Cullen, 2000; Vazsonyi et al., 2017). Furthermore, research shows that low self-control is a predictor of being victimized by a crime (Pratt et al., 2014).

Social Bonds Across the Life Course

Although they share certain features because they are both control theories, self-control theory and social bond theory are incompatible in fundamental ways (cf. Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1995, with Sampson and Laub, 1995; see also Pratt, 2016). Social bond theory asserts that experiences beyond childhood can affect a person’s ties to conventional society, and thus that as bonds strengthen or weaken, people’s involvement in crime can ebb and flow. In contrast, self-control theory contends that criminal propensities are established in childhood, and thus that misconduct is stable across the life course. Even more provocatively, self-control theory claims that any apparent empirical relationship between social bonds (e.g., attachment to others, commitment to schooling) and crime is spurious. Self-control would account for both the bond and the level of crime. Thus, if being in a good marriage is associated with less crime, Gottfredson and Hirschi would argue that this is because people with high levels of self-control are both more likely to have good marriages and less likely to engage in crime.

Ironically, social bond theory received its most potent shot in the arm from two former students of Gottfredson and Hirschi, Robert Sampson and John Laub (1993). Sampson and Laub agree with their mentors that sociological theorists have largely neglected the “considerable

evidence that antisocial behavior is relatively stable across stages of the life course” (1993: 11). But they take Gottfredson and Hirschi to task for committing what Elliott Currie (1985: 185) calls the “fallacy of intractability—the belief that because childhood problems often appear early in life, they are therefore fundamentally irreversible, portents of criminality worsening into adulthood.” While there is continuity in antisocial behavior, observe Sampson and Laub, there is also *change*. Some problem children grow up to be delinquents, but others do not; some delinquents become adult criminals, but others do not; and some adult criminals persist in their offending, but others do not.

Individual difference theories, such as Gottfredson and Hirschi’s self-control theory, are adept at explaining *continuity* in problem behavior. Once equipped with an enduring criminal propensity, people carry this trait from situation to situation and from one age to the next. These theories encounter difficulty, however, in explaining *change* in behavior. If, for example, a person has low self-control, why would he or she ever stop being criminal? Or why would a juvenile who had no record of childhood misconduct—and thus whose parents instilled self-control—start getting into trouble in the teenage years (see Moffitt, Chapter 43)?

Using a life-course perspective, Sampson and Laub suggest that people usually are on certain “trajectories” that result in continuity of behavior. Even so, people also experience “transitions,” life events that may serve as “turning points” that evoke behavioral change. Sampson and Laub propose that establishing *social bonds*, such as through schooling or marriage, is a salient reason why people are redirected away from crime and into conformity. Explaining change, in short, requires a consideration of sociological factors.

Although borrowing from Hirschi’s social bond theory, Sampson and Laub do not simply rehash this perspective. First, while Hirschi focused on the juvenile years, Sampson and Laub examine the entire life course, from childhood

to adulthood. Second, they develop an theoretical perspective, accepting that differences and social bonds combine to explain the onset of and desistance from behavior. Third, they argue that the key is not whether a social bond exists but whether the bond is of high *quality*. Quality relationships such as a good marriage or a job—engender close attachment, growth, commitment, and reciprocity. In turn, note Sampson and Laub (1993: 141), “relations characterized by an extensive set of obligations, expectations, and interdependent social networks are better able to facilitate social control.”

As discussed above, Sampson and Laub’s social bond theory with the notion that social bonds should be studied as a developmental process that occurs across the life course. Their contribution is thus two-fold. First, they elaborate on social bond theory and show its relevance to crime in adolescence but also to crime in adulthood. Importantly, their theory argues that formal social controls are *age-graded*, with different types of bonds affecting individuals at different stages in life (e.g., bonds to parents in childhood, school in adolescence, to work in adulthood). The evidence is largely consistent with the theoretical predictions (Laub et al., 2006).

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to adulthood. Second, they develop an integrated theoretical perspective, accepting that individual differences and social bonds combine to explain the onset of and desistance from criminal behavior. Third, they argue that the key issue is not whether a social bond exists but whether the bond is of high *quality*. Quality relationships—such as a good marriage or a rewarding job—engender close attachment, growing commitment, and reciprocity. In turn, note Sampson and Laub (1993: 141), “relations characterized by an extensive set of obligations, expectations, and interdependent social networks are better able to facilitate social control.”

As discussed above, Sampson and Laub merged social bond theory with the notion that crime should be studied as a developmental process that occurs across the life course. Their contribution is thus two-fold. First, they elaborate social bond theory and show its relevance not only to crime in adolescence but also to crime in adulthood. Importantly, their theory argues that informal social controls are *age-graded*, with different types of bonds affecting individuals at different stages in life (e.g., bonds to parents in childhood, to school in adolescence, to work in adulthood). The evidence is largely consistent with their theoretical predictions (Laub et al., 2006).

However, recent research suggests that in adulthood, desisting from crime may often precede rather than be the consequence of the formation of social bonds (Skardhamar and Savolainen, 2014; Skardhamar et al., 2015). That is, offenders may have to give up criminal endeavors before they will be capable of building a quality marriage and retaining a good job—a causal order opposite of what Sampson and Laub (1993) propose. Of course, it also is possible that desistance and social bonds have a reciprocal relationship, with each affecting the other as the process of leaving a life in crime unfolds.

Second, they furnish one of the most important *life-course theories of crime*, a model that accounts for both continuity and change across time. For this reason, although we have discussed Sampson and Laub’s perspective with regard to social bond theory here, their work is relevant to Part XIII, where perspectives that explore “Getting Into and Out of Crime: Life-Course Theories” are discussed. In this section, we review their more recent theoretical views (Laub and Sampson, 2003 [Chapter 44]). At that later juncture, we will also have more to say about how Sampson and Laub’s ideas converge with and differ from competing life-course theories of crime, including Gottfredson and Hirschi’s self-control approach.

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16. Social Bond Theory

Travis Hirschi

Although *Causes of Delinquency* is a complex book filled with intricate theoretical discussions and numerous statistical analyses, Hirschi's theory has an appealing quality: It can be simply stated and thus easily understood and studied by criminologists. Indeed, his theory can be reduced to two propositions. First, delinquency and social bonds are inversely related. Second, the concept of social bonds has four elements—attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief—that independently and in combination restrain criminal conduct.

But how exactly do these bonds exert control over youngsters? Hirschi argued that youths can be attached to peers, teachers, and other adults, although relationships with parents are most crucial. Attachment involves an emotional connection to another person. When such a relationship exists, youths will be more likely to care what that other person thinks of them. In turn, when in a situation where the opportunity for trouble presents itself, they will be restrained from delinquency if they are concerned that such action will disappoint the other person or disrupt this relationship.

The importance of attachment is that during the teenage years, youths are frequently outside their parents' watchful eyes. In such instances, parents cannot exert "direct control"—that is, personally supervise their children and punish misconduct when it occurs. They can, however, exert "indirect control" if youths take into account their parents' preferences. When attachment is strong, observed

Hirschi, "the parent is psychologically present when temptation to commit a crime appears. If, in the situation of temptation, no thought is given to parental reaction, the child is to this extent free to commit the act" (1969: 88).

Much like rational choice theory (see Part X), Hirschi suggested that there is a "rational component" to conformity, which he calls "commitment." Juveniles who are doing well in school and have bright prospects ahead are less likely to engage in acts that will jeopardize their future. Conversely, uncommitted youths—those with little or no stake in conformity—have nothing to lose and thus are freer to break the law.

Hirschi also contended that the mere involvement in conventional activities facilitates control. If idleness presents opportunities for crime, filling up a youth's day with wholesome activities—such as school and recreational pursuits—leaves little time for getting into trouble.

Finally, Hirschi (1969: 26) argued that youths who believe that they should "obey the rules of society" are less likely to violate them. The social bond of "belief" is controversial because such beliefs or "definitions" are also central to differential association theory (or what Hirschi called "cultural deviance" theory). Hirschi contended, however, that an important analytical distinction could be made: While cultural deviance theorists like Sutherland (Chapter 7) focus on beliefs that positively value crime ("definitions favorable to violation of law"),

control theorists focus on beliefs that preclude crime. "Delinquency is not caused by beliefs that require delinquency," noted Hirschi (1969: 26) "but rather made possible by the absence of (positive) beliefs that forbid delinquency."

In *Causes of Delinquency*, Hirschi used a detailed analysis of survey data drawn from a 1964 Richmond (California) Youth Project, which provided substantial support for social bond theory. A replication of Hirschi's study was undertaken in the Fayetteville (Arkansas) Youth Project. The results were remarkably similar (Costello and Akers, 2019). Over the past half century, social bond theory has been subjected to numerous empirical tests, perhaps more than any other theory. This section reveals a more complicated assessment of the theory's perspective (Kempf-Leonard, 2019). Empirical support of the theory varies, for example, by factors such as a study's methodology (Agnew, Costello and Vowell, 1999; Krohn, 2000; Sampson et al., 2009). Still, overall there is fairly good support for the general thesis that weak social bonds increase the risk of being involved in criminal behavior (Akers and Sellers, 2008; Costello and Akers, 2020; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Hirschi's theory that competing perspectives—especially "cultural deviance" theories—are not empirically viable, however, is mistaken (Akers and Sellers, 2008; Krohn, 2000; Kubrin et al., 2009). A further limitation of Hirschi's approach is largely a structuralist one. Unlike Shaw and McKay (Chapter 10), Hirschi does not examine how macrosocial changes in the United States affect the strength of social bonds for people located in different sectors of American society (see also Sampson and Wilson, 1994 [Chapter 28]; Sampson and Laub, 1994). In his original analysis, Hirschi (1969) paid no attention to gender and little attention to race (Akers and Laub, 2020; Unnever et al., 2009).

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Bond Theory

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Books, from *Causes of Delinquency*, Travis Hirschi, pages 3–4, at Clearance Center, Inc.

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Three fundamental perspectives on delinquency and deviant behavior dominate the current scene. According to *strain* or motivational theories, legitimate desires that conformity cannot satisfy force a person into deviance. According to *control* or bond theories, a person is free to commit delinquent acts because his ties to the conventional order have somehow been broken. According to *cultural deviance* theories, the deviant conforms to a set of standards not accepted by a larger or more powerful society. Although most current theories of crime and delinquency contain elements of at least two and occasionally all three of these perspectives, reconciliation of their assumptions is very difficult. If, as the control theorist assumes, the ties of many persons to the conventional order may be weak or virtually nonexistent, the strain theorist, in accounting for their deviance, builds into his explanation pressure that is unnecessary. If, on the other hand, it is reasonable to assume with the strain theorist that everyone is at some point strongly tied to the conventional system, then it is unreasonable to assume that many are not (control theories), or that many are tied to different "conventional" systems (cultural deviance theories). . . .

Control theories assume that delinquent acts result when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. Since these theories embrace two highly complex concepts, the *bond* of the individual to *society*, it is not surprising that they have at one time or another formed the basis of explanations of most forms of aberrant or unusual behavior. It is also not surprising that

control theories have described the elements of the bond to society in many ways, and that they have focused on a variety of units as the point of control. . . .

Elements of the Bond

Attachment

In explaining conforming behavior, sociologists justly emphasize sensitivity to the opinion of others. Unfortunately, . . . they tend to suggest that man *is* sensitive to the opinion of others and thus exclude sensitivity from their explanations of deviant behavior. In explaining deviant behavior, psychologists, in contrast, emphasize insensitivity to the opinion of others. Unfortunately, they too tend to ignore variation, and, in addition, they tend to tie sensitivity inextricably to other variables, to make it part of a syndrome or "type," and thus seriously to reduce its value as an explanatory concept. The psychopath is characterized only in part by "deficient attachment to or affection for others, a failure to respond to the ordinary motivations founded in respect or regard for one's fellows"; he is also characterized by such things as "excessive aggressiveness," "lack of superego control," and "an infantile level of response." Unfortunately, too, the behavior that psychopathy is used to explain often becomes part of the *definition* of psychopathy. As a result, in Barbara Wootton's words:

[The psychopath] is . . . par excellence, and without shame or qualification, the model of the circular process by which mental abnormality is inferred from anti-social behavior while anti-social behavior is explained by mental abnormality.

The problems of diagnosis, tautology, and name-calling are avoided if the dimensions of psychopathy are treated as causally and therefore problematically interrelated, rather than as logically and therefore necessarily bound to each other. In fact, it can be argued that all of

the characteristics attributed to the psychopath follow from, are effects of, his lack of a bond to others. To say that to lack attachment is to be free from moral restraints is to say that of attachment to explain the guiltless psychopath, the fact that he appears to lack conscience or superego. In this view, lack of attachment to others is not merely a symptom of psychopathy, it is psychopathy; lack of conscience is just another way of saying the same thing; and the violation of norms is (or a consequence).

For that matter, given that man is an "impulsivity" and "aggressiveness" can be seen as natural consequences of freedom from moral restraints. However, since the psychopath is man as endowed with natural propensities and capacities like other animals is peculiarly palatable to sociologists, we need not fall on such a view to explain the amoral man's aggressiveness. The process of becoming alienated from others often involves or is based on interpersonal conflict. Such conflict does not easily supply a reservoir of *socially derived* moral restraints sufficient to account for the aggressiveness of those whose attachments to others have weakened.

Durkheim said it many years ago: "We are moral beings to the extent that we are social beings." This may be interpreted to mean that we are moral beings to the extent that we have internalized the norms of society. But what does it mean to say that a person has internalized the norms of society? The norms of society are defined by the members of society. To violate a norm is, therefore, to act contrary to the wishes and expectations of other people. If a person does not care about the wishes and expectations of other people—that is, if he is insensitive to the opinion of others—then he is free to deviate.

The essence of internalization of norms, conscience, or super-ego thus lies in the attachment of the individual to others. This view has several

the characteristics attributed to the psychopath follow from, are effects of, his lack of attachment to others. To say that to lack attachment to others is to be free from moral restraints is to use lack of attachment to explain the guiltlessness of the psychopath, the fact that he apparently has no conscience or superego. In this view, lack of attachment to others is not merely a symptom of psychopathy, it is psychopathy; lack of conscience is just another way of saying the same thing; and the violation of norms is (or may be) a consequence.

For that matter, given that man is an animal, "impulsivity" and "aggressiveness" can also be seen as natural consequences of freedom from moral restraints. However, since the view of man as endowed with natural propensities and capacities like other animals is peculiarly unpalatable to sociologists, we need not fall back on such a view to explain the amoral man's aggressiveness. The process of becoming alienated from others often involves or is based on active interpersonal conflict. Such conflict could easily supply a reservoir of *socially derived* hostility sufficient to account for the aggressiveness of those whose attachments to others have been weakened.

Durkheim said it many years ago: "We are moral beings to the extent that we are social beings." This may be interpreted to mean that we are moral beings to the extent that we have "internalized the norms" of society. But what does it mean to say that a person has internalized the norms of society? The norms of society are by definition shared by the members of society. To violate a norm is, therefore, to act contrary to the wishes and expectations of other people. If a person does not care about the wishes and expectations of other people—that is, if he is insensitive to the opinion of others—then he is to that extent not bound by the norms. He is free to deviate.

The essence of internalization of norms, conscience, or super-ego thus lies in the attachment of the individual to others. This view has several

advantages over the concept of internalization. For one, explanations of deviant behavior based on attachment do not beg the question, since the extent to which a person is attached to others can be measured independently of his deviant behavior. Furthermore, change or variation in behavior is explainable in a way that it is not when notions of internalization or superego are used. For example, the divorced man is more likely after divorce to commit a number of deviant acts, such as suicide or forgery. If we explain these acts by reference to the superego (or internal control), we are forced to say that the man "lost his conscience" when he got a divorce; and, of course, if he remarries, we have to conclude that he gets his conscience back.

This dimension of the bond to conventional society is encountered in most social control-oriented research and theory. F. Ivan Nye's "internal control" and "indirect control" refer to the same element, although we avoid the problem of explaining changes over time by locating the "conscience" in the bond to others rather than making it part of the personality. Attachment to others is just one aspect of Albert J. Reiss's "personal controls"; we avoid his problems of tautological empirical *observations* by making the relationship between attachment and delinquency problematic rather than definitional. Finally, Scott Briar and Irving Piliavin's "commitment" or "stake in conformity" subsumes attachment, as their discussion illustrates, although the terms they use are more closely associated with the next element to be discussed.

Commitment

"Of all passions, that which inclineth men least to break the laws, is fear. Nay, excepting some generous natures, it is the only thing, when there is the appearance of profit or pleasure by breaking the laws, that makes men keep them." Few would deny that men on occasion obey the rules simply from fear of the consequences. This rational component in conformity we label commitment. What does it mean to say that a person is

sociological opinion ends to notion of from their explanation, in con-opinion of d to ignore d to tie sen-sibles, to make and thus seri-lanatory con-erized only in or affection for ne ordinary mo-r regard for one's ed by such things "lack of superego level of response." vior that psychopa-becomes part of the . As a result, in Bar-

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committed to conformity? In Howard S. Becker's formulation it means the following:

First, the individual is in a position in which his decision with regard to some particular line of action has consequences for other interests and activities not necessarily [directly] related to it. Second, he has placed himself in that position by his own prior actions. A third element is present though so obvious as not to be aware [of other interests] and must recognize that his decision in this case will have ramifications beyond it.

The idea, then, is that the person invests time, energy, himself, in a certain line of activity—say, getting an education, building up a business, acquiring a reputation for virtue. When or whenever he considers deviant behavior, he must consider the costs of this deviant behavior, the risk he runs of losing the investment he has made in conventional labor.

If attachment to others is the sociological counterpart of the superego or conscience, commitment is the counterpart of the ego or common sense. To the person committed to conventional lines of action, risking one to ten years in prison for a ten-dollar holdup is stupidity, because to the committed person the costs and risks obviously exceed ten dollars in value. (To the psychoanalyst, such an act exhibits failure to be governed by the "reality-principle.") In the sociological control theory, it can be and is generally assumed that the decision to commit a criminal act may well be rationally determined—that the actor's decision was not irrational given the risks and costs he faces. Of course, as Becker points out, if the actor is capable of in some sense calculating the costs of a line of action, he is also capable of calculational errors: ignorance and error return, in the control theory, as possible explanations of deviant behavior.

The concept of commitment assumes that the organization of society is such that the interests of most persons would be endangered if they were to engage in criminal acts. Most

people, simply by the process of living in an organized society, acquire goods, reputations, prospects that they do not want to risk losing. These accumulations are society's insurance that they will abide by the rules. Many hypotheses about the antecedents of delinquent behavior are based on this premise. For example, Arthur L. Stinchcombe's hypothesis that "high school rebellion . . . occurs when future status is not clearly related to present performance" suggests that one is committed to conformity not only by what one has but also by what one hopes to obtain. Thus "ambition" and/or "aspiration" play an important role in producing conformity. The person becomes committed to a conventional line of action, and he is therefore committed to conformity.

Most lines of action in a society are of course conventional. The clearest examples are educational and occupational careers. Actions thought to jeopardize one's chances in these areas are presumably avoided. Interestingly enough, even nonconventional commitments may operate to produce conventional conformity. We are told, at least, that boys aspiring to careers in the racket or professional thievery are judged by their "honesty" and "reliability"—traits traditionally in demand among seekers of office boys.

Involvement

Many persons undoubtedly owe a life of virtue to a lack of opportunity to do otherwise. Time and energy are inherently limited: "Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a bon vivant, and a hitler, a killer, as well as a philosopher, a philanthropist, a statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a 'tone-poet' and saint. But the thing is simply impossible." The things that William James here says he would like to be or do are, I suppose, within the realm of conventional actions, but if he were to include illicit actions he would still have to eliminate some of them as simply impossible.

Involvement or engagement in these activities is thus often a necessary condition. The assumption, widespread in the literature, may be simply too naive. The person involved in these things to find time to engage in them is tied to appointments, plans, and the like, so that deviant acts rarely arise. The person engaged in conventional activities even think about deviant acts or their inclinations.

This line of reasoning stresses the stress placed on recreational programs to reduce delinquency. The concern with the high status idea that boys should be kept out of trouble is the idea that involvement in these activities is a major determinant of delinquency. It was accepted even by

In the general area of delinquency, it is probable that the difference between juveniles who do not offend and those who do offend is not provided abundant conventional type for satisfaction of interests, while the former have facilities.

The view that "idle hands are the devil's workshop" has received more attention in recent sociological literature. David Matza and Gresham Sykes, for example, suggest that delinquency is not a leisure class, the same as the leisure class: a desire for the work, a desire for the life of aggressive toughness. Matza and Sykes explain the prevalence of this system of delinquency among adolescents at all class levels as a limbo between early delinquency and future integration.

Involvement or engrossment in conventional activities is thus often part of a control theory. The assumption, widely shared, is that a person may be simply too busy doing conventional things to find time to engage in deviant behavior. The person involved in conventional activities is tied to appointments, deadlines, working hours, plans, and the like, so the opportunity to commit deviant acts rarely arises. To the extent that he is engrossed in conventional activities, he cannot even think about deviant acts, let alone act out his inclinations.

This line of reasoning is responsible for the stress placed on recreational facilities in many programs to reduce delinquency, for much of the concern with the high school dropout, and for the idea that boys should be drafted into the Army to keep them out of trouble. So obvious and persuasive is the idea that involvement in conventional activities is a major deterrent to delinquency that it was accepted even by Sutherland:

In the general area of juvenile delinquency it is probable that the most significant difference between juveniles who engage in delinquency and those who do not is that the latter are provided abundant opportunities of a conventional type for satisfying their recreational interests, while the former lack those opportunities or facilities.

The view that "idle hands are the devil's workshop" has received more sophisticated treatment in recent sociological writings on delinquency. David Matza and Gresham M. Sykes, for example, suggest that delinquents have the values of a leisure class, the same values ascribed by Veblen to the leisure class: a search for kicks, disdain of work, a desire for the big score, and acceptance of aggressive toughness as proof of masculinity. Matza and Sykes explain delinquency by reference to this system of values, but they note that adolescents at all class levels are "to some extent" members of a leisure class, that they "move in a limbo between earlier parental domination and future integration with the social structure

through the bonds of work and marriage." In the end, then, the leisure of the adolescent produces a set of values, which, in turn, leads to delinquency.

Belief

Unlike the cultural deviance theory, the control theory assumes the existence of a common value system within the society or group whose norms are being violated. If the deviant is committed to a value system different from that of conventional society, there is, within the context of the theory, nothing to explain. The question is, "Why does a man violate the rules in which he believes?" It is not, "Why do men differ in their beliefs about what constitutes good and desirable conduct?" The person is assumed to have been socialized (perhaps imperfectly) into the group whose rules he is violating; deviance is not a question of one group imposing its rules on the members of another group. In other words, we not only assume the deviant *has* believed the rules, we assume he believes the rules even as he violates them.

How can a person believe it is wrong to steal at the same time he is stealing? In the strain theory, this is not a difficult problem. (In fact, . . . the strain theory was devised specifically to deal with this question.) The motivation to deviance adduced by the strain theorist is so strong that we can well understand the deviant act even assuming the deviator believes strongly that it is wrong. However, given the control theory's assumptions about motivation, if both the deviant and the nondeviant believe the deviant act is wrong, how do we account for the fact that one commits it and the other does not?

Control theories have taken two approaches to this problem. In one approach, beliefs are treated as mere words that mean little or nothing if the other forms of control are missing. "Semantic dementia," the dissociation between rational faculties and emotional control which is said to be characteristic of the psychopath, illustrates this way of handling the problem. In short, beliefs, at least insofar as they are expressed in words, drop

out of the picture; since they do not differentiate between deviants and nondeviants, they are in the same class as "language" or any other characteristic common to all members of the group. Since they represent no real obstacle to the commission of delinquent acts, nothing need be said about how they are handled by those committing such acts. The control theories that do not mention beliefs (or values), and many do not, may be assumed to take this approach to the problem.

The second approach argues that the deviant rationalizes his behavior so that he can at once violate the rule and maintain his belief in it. Donald R. Cressey has advanced this argument with respect to embezzlement, and Sykes and Matza have advanced it with respect to delinquency. In both Cressey's and Sykes and Matza's treatments, these rationalizations (Cressey calls them "verbalizations," Sykes and Matza term them "techniques of neutralization") occur prior to the commission of the deviant act. If the neutralization is successful, the person is free to commit the act(s) in question. Both in Cressey and in Sykes and Matza, the strain that prompts the effort at neutralization also provides the motive force that results in the subsequent deviant act. Their theories are thus, in this sense, strain theories. Neutralization is difficult to handle within the context of a theory that adheres closely to control theory assumptions, because in the control theory there is no special motivational force to account for the neutralization. This difficulty is especially noticeable in Matza's later treatment of this topic, where the motivational component, the "will to delinquency" appears *after* the moral vacuum has been created by the techniques of the neutralization. The question thus becomes: Why neutralize?

In attempting to solve a strain theory problem with control theory tools, the control theorist is thus led into a trap. He cannot answer the crucial question. The concept of neutralization assumes the existence of moral obstacles to the commission of deviant acts. In order plausibly to account for a deviant act, it is necessary to generate motivation to deviance that is at least equivalent in

force to the resistance provided by these moral obstacles. However, if the moral obstacles are removed, neutralization and special motivation are no longer required. We therefore follow the implicit logic of control theory and remove these moral obstacles by hypothesis. Many persons do not have an attitude of respect toward the rules of society; many persons feel no moral obligation to conform regardless of personal advantage. Insofar as the values and beliefs of these persons are consistent with their feelings, and there should be a tendency toward consistency, neutralization is unnecessary; it has already occurred.

Does this merely push the question back a step and at the same time produce conflict with the assumption of a common value system? I think not. In the first place, we do not assume, as does Cressey, that neutralization occurs in order to make a specific criminal act possible. We do not assume, as do Sykes and Matza, that neutralization occurs to make many delinquent acts possible. We do not assume, in other words, that the person constructs a system of rationalizations in order to justify commission of acts he *wants* to commit. We assume, in contrast, that the beliefs that free a man to commit deviant acts are *unmotivated* in the sense that he does not construct or adopt them in order to facilitate the attainment of illicit ends. In the second place, we do not assume, as does Matza, that "delinquents concur in the conventional assessment of delinquency." We assume, in contrast, that there is *variation* in the extent to which people believe they should obey the rules of society, and, furthermore, that the less a person believes he should obey the rules, the more likely he is to violate them.

In chronological order, then, a person's beliefs in the moral validity of norms are, for no teleological reason, weakened. The probability that he will commit delinquent acts is therefore increased. When and if he commits a delinquent act, we may justifiably use the weakness of his beliefs in explaining it, but no special motivation is required to explain either the weakness of his beliefs or, perhaps, his delinquent act.

The keystone of the assumption that the moral validity of social norms is amenable to direct measurement is the assumption that there is at least one common value system. For the present, the keystone of the assumption that there is at least one common value system was begun.

The idea of a single value system is a presumption, of course, based on beliefs; we have not believed delinquency and efficacy upon other beliefs; other ties to the

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The keystone of this argument is of course the assumption that there is variation in belief in the moral validity of social rules. This assumption is amenable to direct empirical test and can thus survive at least until its first confrontation with data. For the present, we must return to the idea of a common value system with which this section was begun.

The idea of a common (or, perhaps better, a single) value system is consistent with the fact, or presumption, of variation in the strength of moral beliefs. We have not suggested that delinquency is based on beliefs counter to conventional morality; we have not suggested that delinquents do not believe delinquent acts are wrong, but the meaning and efficacy of such beliefs are contingent upon other beliefs and, indeed, on the strength of other ties to the conventional order.

Where Is the Motivation?

The most disconcerting question the control theorist faces goes something like this: "Yes, but *why* do they do it?" In the good old days, the control theorist could simply strip away the "veneer of civilization" and expose man's "animal impulses" for all to see. These impulses appeared to him (and apparently to his audience) to provide a plausible account of the motivation to crime and delinquency. His argument was *not* that delinquents and criminals alone are animals, but that we are all animals, and thus all naturally capable of committing criminal acts. It took no great study to reveal that children, chickens, and dogs occasionally assault and steal from their fellow creatures; that children, chickens, and dogs also behave for relatively long periods in a perfectly moral manner. Of course the acts of chickens and dogs are not "assault" or "theft," and such behavior is not "moral"; it is simply the behavior of a chicken or a dog. The chicken stealing corn from his neighbor knows nothing of the moral law; he does not *want* to violate rules; he wants merely to eat corn. The dog maliciously destroying a pillow or feloniously assaulting another dog

is the moral equal of the chicken. No motivation to deviance is required to explain his acts. So, too, no special motivation to crime within the human animal was required to explain his criminal acts.

Times changed. It was no longer fashionable (within sociology, at least) to refer to animal impulses. The control theorist tended more and more to deemphasize the motivational component of his theory. He might refer in the beginning to "universal human needs," or some such, but the driving force behind crime and delinquency was rarely alluded to. At the same time, his explanations of crime and delinquency left the reader uneasy. What, the reader asked, is the control theorist assuming? Albert K. Cohen and James F. Short answer the question this way:

... it is important to point out one important limitation of both types of theory. They [culture conflict and social disorganization theories] are both control theories in the sense that they explain delinquency in terms of the absence of effective controls. They appear, therefore, to imply a model of motivation that assumes that the impulse to delinquency is an inherent characteristic of young people and does not itself need to be explained; it is something that erupts when the lid—i.e., internalized cultural restraints or external authority—is off.

There are several possible and I think reasonable reactions to this criticism. One reaction is simply to acknowledge the assumption, to grant that one is assuming what control theorists have always assumed about the motivation to crime—that it is constant across persons (at least within the system in question):

There is no reason to assume that only those who finally commit a deviant act usually have the impulse to do so. It is much more likely that most people experience deviant impulses frequently. At least in fantasy, people are much more deviant than they appear.

There is certainly nothing wrong with *making* such an assumption. We are free to assume

17. A General Theory of Crime

Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi

Traditional sociological theories placed their primary focus on the social experiences of youths outside the family. For differential association theory, for example, most attention has been given to the role of peer groups in fostering delinquency; for strain theory, the lack of opportunities in school and in the labor market is considered as the source of crime-inducing frustration. In contrast, Gottfredson and Hirschi have redirected the attention of criminologists to the family and to what parents do, or do not do, during childhood.

In his social bond theory, Hirschi emphasized the importance of “indirect control”—how close attachment to parents allows the parents to have a “psychological presence” when youths are not under their surveillance. Gottfredson and Hirschi, however, argue that “direct control” is the key to effective parenting (see Wells and Rankin, 1988). Unless parents monitor their children closely and then take steps to punish misbehavior when it occurs—that is, unless they teach children that breaking rules has consequences—self-control will not be instilled. Instead, the child “will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short-sighted, and nonverbal” (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 90). As they endlessly succumb to life’s temporary temptations, children burdened with low self-control will constantly engage in crime and other forms of deviance. They also will lack the persistence needed to

succeed in school, in the workplace, and in social relationships. In short, they will be consigned to a wayward life replete with brushes with the law and with personal and social failure.

We should note that Gottfredson and Hirschi differentiate between “criminality,” which is the propensity to offend, and “crime,” which is an actual event in which a law is broken. They recognize that a propensity cannot be acted on unless the opportunity to do so exists. As a result, they see crime as a byproduct of people with low self-control, who have high criminogenic propensities, coming into contact with illegal opportunities. Still, given that most offenses are easy to commit, and opportunities for crime are constantly available, over time people with low self-control inevitably will become deeply involved in criminal behavior. That is, self-control, not opportunities, will be the primary determinant of people’s involvement in crime across their life course.

Similar to social bond theory, the core premise of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory is easily identified and thus amenable to testing: the lower a person’s self-control, the higher his or her involvement in criminal behavior and in acts analogous to crime. Not surprisingly, a growing body of research assessing self-control theory soon arose, including an important study on how best to measure the construct (see Grasmick et al., 1993). In the three decades following, there has been consistent support

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for Gottfredson and Hirschi's core thesis, including across nations—a fact that ensures that their self-control theory will remain an important theoretical perspective (Gottfredson, 2006; Hay and Meldrum, 2016). Most notably, meta-analyses of the extant literature at different points in time have confirmed that low self-control is a robust correlate of crime and other deviant outcomes (see Pratt and Cullen, 2000; Vazsonyi et al., 2017).

The limits of self-control theory, however, should also be mentioned (see Goode, 2008). Thus, in empirical tests, low self-control cannot, as Gottfredson and Hirschi predict, explain away the effects on crime of other sociological factors, especially the effects of differential association/social learning variables (see, e.g., Evans et al., 1997; Pratt and Cullen, 2000; Unnever et al., 2006). The stability of self-control is also at issue. Contrary to Gottfredson and Hirschi's view, for example, research shows that intervention programs can improve self-control, suggesting that such regulation is malleable rather than fixed in childhood (Na and Paternoster, 2012; Piquero et al., 2010). Situational contingencies—such as the presence of emotions, illicit substances, external threat, fatigue, or the time available to make a decision—can create fluctuations in manifestations of self-control (Burt, 2020). Perhaps most consequential, Gottfredson and Hirschi commit what Currie (1985: 185) calls the “fallacy of autonomy—the belief that what goes on inside the family can usefully be separated from the forces that affect it from the outside: the larger social context in which families are embedded for better or for worse.” Thus, despite emphasizing the salience of parenting in crime causation, Gottfredson and Hirschi remain largely silent on the social forces that are transforming the American family and challenging the ability of parents to raise their children effectively.

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Theories of crime in the propensities criminal acts. T labeled “criminality people committing propensities. They tendency to enhance differed from not to their location in sanction system cut off from the others from the individual unsequences of trolled by the people aware will not be penalties to Classical t' called con preventive ful to the Altho rists er tance that t' veyol list act go a

Vazsonyi, Alexander T., Jakub Mikuška, and Erin L. Kelley. 2017. "It's Time: A Meta-Analysis on the Self-Control-Deviance Link." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 48: 48-63.

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Theories of crime lead naturally to interest in the propensities of individuals committing criminal acts. These propensities are often labeled "criminality." In pure classical theory, people committing criminal acts had no special propensities. They merely followed the universal tendency to enhance their own pleasure. If they differed from noncriminals, it was with respect to their location in or comprehension of relevant sanction systems. For example, the individual cut off from the community will suffer less than others from the ostracism that follows crime; the individual unaware of the natural or legal consequences of criminal behavior cannot be controlled by these consequences to the degree that people aware of them are controlled; the atheist will not be as concerned as the believer about penalties to be exacted in a life beyond death. Classical theories on the whole, then, are today called *control theories*, theories emphasizing the prevention of crime through consequences painful to the individual.

Although, for policy purposes, classical theorists emphasized legal consequences, the importance to them of moral sanctions is so obvious that their theories might well be called underdeveloped *social control* theories. In fact, Bentham's list of the major restraining motives—motives acting to prevent mischievous acts—begins with goodwill, love of reputation, and the desire for amity (1970: 134-36). He goes on to say that fear of detection prevents crime in large part because of detection's consequences for "reputation, and the desire for amity" (p. 138). Put another way,

in Bentham's view, the restraining power of legal sanctions in large part stems from their connection to social sanctions.

If crime is evidence of the weakness of social motives, it follows that criminals are less social than noncriminals and that the extent of their asociality may be determined by the nature and number of their crimes. Calculation of the extent of an individual's mischievousness is a complex affair, but in general the more mischievous or depraved the offenses, and the greater their number, the more mischievous or depraved the offender (Bentham 1970: 134-42). (Classical theorists thus had reason to be interested in the seriousness of the offense. The relevance of seriousness to current theories of crime is not so clear.)

Because classical or control theories infer that offenders are not restrained by social motives, it is common to think of them as emphasizing an asocial human nature. Actually, such theories make people only as asocial as their acts require. Pure or consistent control theories do not add criminality (i.e., personality concepts or attributes such as "aggressiveness" or "extraversion") to individuals beyond that found in their criminal acts. As a result, control theories are suspicious of images of an antisocial, psychopathic, or career offender, or of an offender whose motives to crime are somehow larger than those given in the crimes themselves. Indeed, control theories are compatible with the view that the balance of the total control structure favors conformity, even among offenders:

For in every man, be his disposition ever so depraved, the social motives are those which . . . regulate and determine the general tenor of his life. . . . The general and standing bias of every man's nature is, therefore, towards that side to which the force of the social motives would determine him to adhere. This being the case, the force of the social motives tends continually to put an end to that of the dissocial ones; as, in natural bodies, the force of friction tends to put an end to that which is

generated by impulse. Time, then, which wears away the force of the dissocial motives, adds to that of the social. (Bentham 1970: 141)

Positivism brought with it the idea that criminals differ from noncriminals in ways more radical than this, the idea that criminals carry within themselves properties peculiarly and positively conducive to crime. [Previously], we examined the efforts of the major disciplines to identify these properties. Being friendly to both the classical and positivist traditions, we expected to end up with a list of individual properties reliably identified by competent research as useful in the description of "criminality"—such properties as aggressiveness, body build, activity level, and intelligence. We further expected that we would be able to connect these individual-level correlates of criminality directly to the classical idea of crime. As our review progressed, however, we were forced to conclude that we had overestimated the success of positivism in establishing important differences between "criminals" and "noncriminals" beyond their tendency to commit criminal acts. Stable individual differences in the tendency to commit criminal acts were clearly evident, but many or even most of the other differences between offenders and nonoffenders were not as clear or pronounced as our reading of the literature had led us to expect.

If individual differences in the tendency to commit criminal acts (within an overall tendency for crime to decline with age) are at least potentially explicable within classical theory by reference to the social location of individuals and their comprehension of how the world works, the fact remains that classical theory cannot shed much light on the positivistic finding (denied by most positivistic theories. . . .) that these differences *remain reasonably stable with change in the social location of individuals and change in their knowledge of the operation of sanction systems.* This is the problem of self-control, the differential tendency of people to avoid criminal acts

whatever the circumstances in which they find themselves. Since this difference among people has attracted a variety of names, we begin by arguing the merits of the concept of self-control.

Self-Control and Alternative Concepts

Our decision to ascribe stable individual differences in criminal behavior to self-control was made only after considering several alternatives, one of which (criminality) we had used before (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1986). A major consideration was consistency between the classical conception of crime and our conception of the criminal. It seemed unwise to try to integrate a choice theory of crime with a deterministic image of the offender, especially when such integration was unnecessary. In fact, the compatibility of the classical view of crime and the idea that people differ in self-control is, in our view, remarkable. As we have seen, classical theory is a theory of social or external control, a theory based on the idea that the costs of crime depend on the individual's current location in or bond to society. What classical theory lacks is an explicit idea of self-control, the idea that people also differ in the extent to which they are vulnerable to the temptations of the moment. Combining the two ideas thus merely recognizes the simultaneous existence of social and individual restraints on behavior.

An obvious alternative is the concept of criminality. The disadvantages of that concept, however, are numerous. First, it connotes causation or determinism, a positive tendency to crime that is contrary to the classical model and, in our view, contrary to the facts. Whereas self-control suggests that people differ in the extent to which they are restrained from criminal acts, criminality suggests that people differ in the extent to which they are compelled to crime. The concept of self-control is thus consistent with the observation that criminals do not require or need crime, and the concept of criminality is

inconsistent with this observation. If, for example, taken, the idea of low self-control with the observation that criminals have no special capabilities, needs are, in this sense, available in contrast, the idea of criminality suggests that criminal acts for their performance a lack of restraint or low self-control is any deviant, criminal, act. In contrast, the idea of a narrow portion of the population engaged in by people at large are now discussing.

The concept of criminality to self-control distinguishes it from other connotations of the term. It is not, strictly speaking, a model (or with that connotation) that does not seem to apply to crime that apply sanctions rather than and in the end feel about their that they will accidents and are usually seen as and writers typically not and prude primarily via negatively say about Herrmann. We of several assumptions be are F

the circumstances in which they find since this difference among people a variety of names, we begin by arts of the concept of self-control.

and Alternative Concepts

scribe stable individual differences in behavior to self-control was considering several alternatives, including (and possibly excluding) the concept of self-control (Liska and Gottman 1986). A major concern is the consistency between the classical and our conception of the concept. It is wise to try to integrate a concept with a deterministic image of behavior when such integration is possible. The compatibility of the concept with the idea that people have a free will, in our view, is remarkable. A theory of self-control based on the idea that people depend on the individual's bond to society. An explicit idea of self-control is also present in the concept of self-control. Combining the two concepts simultaneously is a challenge.

cept of criminal causation and, in fact, the extent of self-control acts, and the relationship between them.

inconsistent with this observation. By the same token, the idea of low self-control is compatible with the observation that criminal acts require no special capabilities, needs, or motivation; they are, in this sense, available to everyone. In contrast, the idea of criminality as a special tendency suggests that criminal acts require special people for their performance and enjoyment. Finally, lack of restraint or low self-control allows almost any deviant, criminal, exciting, or dangerous act; in contrast, the idea of criminality covers only a narrow portion of the apparently diverse acts engaged in by people at one end of the dimension we are now discussing.

The concept of conscience comes closer than criminality to self-control, and is harder to distinguish from it. Unfortunately, that concept has connotations of compulsion (to conform) or, not strictly speaking, consistent with a choice model (or with the operation of conscience). It does not seem to cover the behaviors analogous to crime that appear to be controlled by natural sanctions rather than social or moral sanctions, and in the end it typically refers to how people feel about their acts rather than to the likelihood that they will or will not commit them. Thus accidents and employment instability are not usually seen as produced by failures of conscience, and writers in the conscience tradition do not typically make the connection between moral and prudent behavior. Finally, conscience is used primarily to summarize the results of learning via negative reinforcement, and even those favorably disposed to its use leave little more to say about it (see, e.g., Eysenck 1977; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985).

We are now in position to describe the nature of self-control, the individual characteristic relevant to the commission of criminal acts. We assume that the nature of this characteristic can be derived directly from the nature of criminal acts. We thus infer from the nature of crime what people who refrain from criminal acts are like before they reach the age at which crime becomes

a logical possibility. We then work back further to the factors producing their restraint, back to the causes of self-control. In our view, lack of self-control does not require crime and can be counteracted by situational conditions or other properties of the individual. At the same time, we suggest that high self-control effectively reduces the possibility of crime—that is, those possessing it will be substantially less likely at all periods of life to engage in criminal acts.

The Elements of Self-Control

Criminal acts provide immediate gratification of desires. A major characteristic of people with low self-control is therefore a tendency to respond to tangible stimuli in the immediate environment, to have a concrete "here and now" orientation. People with high self-control, in contrast, tend to defer gratification.

Criminal acts provide easy or simple gratification of desires. They provide money without work, sex without courtship, revenge without court delays. People lacking self-control also tend to lack diligence, tenacity, or persistence in a course of action.

Criminal acts are exciting, risky, or thrilling. They involve stealth, danger, speed, agility, deception, or power. People lacking self-control therefore tend to be adventuresome, active, and physical. Those with high levels of self-control tend to be cautious, cognitive, and verbal.

Crimes provide few or meager long-term benefits. They are not equivalent to a job or a career. On the contrary, crimes interfere with long-term commitments to jobs, marriages, family, or friends. People with low self-control thus tend to have unstable marriages, friendships, and job profiles. They tend to be little interested in and unprepared for long-term occupation pursuits.

Crimes require little skill or planning. The cognitive requirements for most crimes are minimal. It follows that people lacking self-control need not possess or value cognitive or academic

skills. The manual skills required for most crimes are minimal. It follows that people lacking self-control need not possess manual skills that require training or apprenticeship.

Crimes often result in *pain or discomfort for the victim*. Property is lost, bodies are injured, privacy is violated, trust is broken. It follows that people with low self-control tend to be self-centered, indifferent, or insensitive to the suffering and needs of others. It does not follow, however, that people with low self-control are routinely unkind or antisocial. On the contrary, they may discover the immediate and easy rewards of charm and generosity.

Recall that crime involves the pursuit of immediate pleasure. It follows that people lacking self-control will also tend to pursue immediate pleasures that are *not* criminal: They will tend to smoke, drink, use drugs, gamble, have children out of wedlock, and engage in illicit sex.

Crimes require the interaction of an offender with people or their property. It does not follow that people lacking self-control will tend to be gregarious or social. However, it does follow that, other things being equal, gregarious or social people are more likely to be involved in criminal acts.

The major benefit of many crimes is not pleasure but relief from momentary irritation. The irritation caused by a crying child is often the stimulus for physical abuse. That caused by a taunting stranger in a bar is often the stimulus for aggravated assault. It follows that people with low self-control tend to have minimal tolerance for frustration and little ability to respond to conflict through verbal rather than physical means.

Crimes involve the risk of violence and physical injury, of pain and suffering on the part of the offender. It does not follow that people with low self-control will tend to be tolerant of physical pain or to be indifferent to physical discomfort. It does follow that people tolerant of physical pain or indifferent to physical discomfort will be more likely to engage in criminal acts whatever their level of self-control.

The risk of criminal penalty for any given criminal act is small, but this depends in part on the circumstances of the offense. Thus, for example, not all joyrides by teenagers are equally likely to result in arrest. A car stolen from a neighbor and returned unharmed before he notices its absence is less likely to result in official notice than is a car stolen from a shopping center parking lot and abandoned at the convenience of the offender. Drinking alcohol stolen from parents and consumed in the family garage is less likely to receive official notice than drinking in the parking lot outside a concert hall. It follows that offenses differ in their validity as measures of self-control: those offenses with large risk of public awareness are better measures than those with little risk.

In sum, people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short sighted, and non-verbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts. Since these traits can be identified prior to the age of responsibility for crime, since there is considerable tendency for these traits to come together in the same people, and since the traits tend to persist through life, it seems reasonable to consider them as comprising a stable construct useful in the explanation of crime.

The Many Manifestations of Low Self-Control

Our image of the "offender" suggests that crime is not an automatic or necessary consequence of low self-control. It suggests that many noncriminal acts analogous to crime (such as accidents, smoking, and alcohol use) are also manifestations of low self-control. Our image therefore implies that no specific act, type of crime, or form of deviance is uniquely required by the absence of self-control.

Because both crime and analogous behaviors stem from low self-control (that is, both are manifestations of low self-control), they