Social Process and Learning Theories of Crime

This section will discuss Sutherland's development of differential association theory and how this evolved into Akers's work of differential reinforcement and other social learning theories, such as techniques of neutralization. Then, the modern state of research on these theories will be presented. We will also discuss the evolution of control theories of crime, with an emphasis on social bonding and the scientific evidence found regarding the key constructs in Hirschi's control theories, two of the most highly regarded perspectives according to criminological experts and their studies.¹

Most of the social process theories assume that criminal behavior is learned behavior, which means that criminal activity is actually learned from others through social interaction, much like riding a bike or playing basketball. Namely, people learn criminal activity from significant others, such as family, peers, or coworkers. However, other social process theories, namely control theories, assume that offending is the result of natural tendencies and thus must be controlled by social processes. Social process theories examine how individuals interact with other individuals and groups and how the learning that takes place in these interactions leads to a propensity for criminal activity. This section will explore both of these theoretical frameworks and explain how social processes are vital to both perspectives in determining criminal behavior.

This section begins with social process theories known as learning theories. Such learning theories attempt to explain how and why individuals learn from significant others to engage in criminal rather than conventional behavior. Next, we discuss control theories, which emphasize personal or socialization factors that prevent individuals from engaging in selfish, antisocial behaviors.

Learning Theories

In this section, we review theories that emphasize how individuals learn criminal behavior through interacting with significant others, people with whom they typically associate. These learning theories assume that people are born meaning that all individuals are completely malleable and will believe what they are told by their significant others and act accordingly. Thus, such theories of learning tend to explain how criminal behavior is learned through cultural norms. One of the main concepts in learning theories is the influence of peers and significant others on one's individual behavior.

Here, three learning theories are discussed: (a) differential association theory, (b) differential identification theory, and (c) differential reinforcement theory; then we examine techniques of neutralization.

Differential Association Theory

Edwin Sutherland introduced his differential association theory in the late 1930s. He proposed a theoretical framework that explained how criminal values could be culturally transmitted to individuals from their significant others. Sutherland proposed a theoretical model that included nine principles, but rather than list them all, we will summarize the main points of his theory.

Perhaps the most interesting principle is the first: Criminal behavior is learned. This was a radical departure from previous theories (e.g., Lombroso's "born criminal" theory). Goddard's deviement model of sitting body type of when individuals associate with the wrong type of people, often by no fault of their own, in association with others, an individual will inevitably choose to engage in criminal behavior because that is what he or she has learned, Sutherland thought.

Perhaps the most important of Sutherland's principles, and certainly the most revealing one, is number six in his framework: "A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of values favorable to violation of law over definitions of what is correct and what is not." Sutherland noted that this principle represents the essence of differential association in an individual. This suggests that people can have associations that favor both criminal behavior and noncriminal behavior patterns. If an individual is receiving more information and values that promote such learning, it can take place only in interactions with significant others and not via television, movies, radio, or other media.

It is important to understand the cultural context at the time Sutherland was developing his theory. In the early 20th century, most academics, and society for that matter, believed that there was something abnormal or different who were of lower intelligence and supposedly predisposed to crime (both of these theories were covered in Section IV). So, the common assumption when Sutherland created the principles of differential association theory was that in light of this common assumption, Sutherland's proposal—that criminality is learned just like any conventional activity—was extremely profound. This suggests that any normal person, when exposed to attitudes for crime, will learn criminal activity, and that the processes and mechanisms of learning are the same mechanisms of learning books or watching movies. How many of us learned to play basketball or other sports by reading a book about

Classical Conditioning: A Learning Theory with Limitations

Sutherland used the dominant psychological theory of learning in his era as the basis for his theory of differential association. This model was classical conditioning, which was primarily developed by Ivan Pavlov. Classical conditioning assumes that animals, as well as people, learn through associations between stimuli and responses. "Organisms, animals or people, are somewhat passive actors in this process, meaning that they simply receive and respond in natural ways to various forms of stimuli; over time, they learn to associate certain stimuli with certain responses."

For example, Pavlov showed that dogs, which are naturally afraid of loud noises such as bells, could be quickly conditioned not only to be less afraid of bells but to actually desire and salivate at their sound. A dog naturally...
salivates when presented with meat, so when this presentation of an unconditioned stimulus (meat) is given, a dog will always salivate (unconditioned response) in anticipation of eating. Pavlov demonstrated through a series of experiments that if a bell (conditioned stimulus) is always rung at the same time the dog is presented with meat, then the dog will learn to associate what was previously a negative stimulus with a positive stimulus (food). Thus, the dog will very quickly begin to salivate at the ringing of a bell, even when meat is not presented. When this occurs, it is called a conditioned response because it is not natural; however, it is a very powerful and effective means of learning, and it often takes only a few occurrences of coupling the bell ringing with meat before the conditioned response takes place.

One modern use of this in humans is the administration of drugs that make people ill when they drink alcohol. Alcoholics are often prescribed drugs that make them very sick, often to the point of vomiting, if they ingest any alcohol. The idea is that they will learn to associate feelings of sickness with drinking and thus stop wanting to consume alcohol. One big problem with this strategy is that alcoholics often do not consistently take the drugs, so they quickly slip back into addiction. Still, if they were to maintain their regimen of drugs, it would likely work, because people do tend to learn through association.

This type of learning model was used in the critically acclaimed 1964 novel (and later motion picture) A Clockwork Orange. In this novel, the author, Anthony Burgess, tells the story of a juvenile murderer who is "rehabilitated" by doctors who force him to watch hour after hour of violent images while simultaneously giving him drugs that make him sick. In the novel, the protagonist is "cured" after only two weeks of this treatment, having learned to consistently associate violence with sickness. However, once he is let out, he lacks the ability to choose violence and other antisocial behavior, which is seen as losing his humanity. Therefore, the ethicists order a reversal treatment and make him back into his former self, a violent predator. Although a fictional piece, A Clockwork Orange is probably one of the best illustrations of the use of classical conditioning in relation to criminal offending and rehabilitation.

Another example of classical conditioning is the associations we make with certain smells and sounds. For example, all of us have had good times to smells that were present during those occasions. If a loved one or someone we dated wore a certain perfume or cologne, smelling that scent a later time can bring back memories of that person. If we were a partner goes out of town, we can smell his or her pillow, and it will remind us as of our partner because we associate his or her smell with his or her being. Or perhaps the smell of a turkey cooking in an oven always reminds us of Thanksgiving or another holiday. Regarding associations of sounds, we can all remember songs that remind us of happy and sad times in our lives. Often these songs will play on the radio, and they take us back to those occasions, whether good or bad. People with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) also experience sound associations; war veterans, for example, may hit the deck when a car backfires. These are all clear examples of classical conditioning and associating stimuli with response.

Since Sutherland’s theory was published, many of the principles outlined in his model have come under scrutiny. Follow-up research has shown some flaws in, as well as misinterpretations of, his work. Specifically, Sutherland theorized that crime occurs when associations favorable to the law outweigh associations favorable to the law. However, measuring this type of ratio is nearly impossible for social scientists.

Another topic of criticism involves Sutherland’s claim that all criminals learn the behavior of others before they engage in such activity. However, many theorists have noted that an individual may engage in criminal activity without being taught such behavior; rather, they develop their own blueprint for behavior that caters to their own desires. So, do individuals learn to commit crime as they are taught by delinquent peers, or do they start associating with similar delinquents or criminals once they have initiated their offending career (e.g., “birds of a feather flock together”)? This exact debate was examined by researchers, and the most recent studies point to the occurrence of both causal processes.

Criminal associations cause more crime, and committing crime causes more criminal associations. Both are key in the causal process, so Sutherland was missing half of this equation.8

Another key criticism is that, if each individual is born with a blank slate and all criminal behavior is learned, then who committed crime in the first place? Who could compose the first criminal to the definitions favorable to violation of law? Furthermore, what factor(s) caused that individual to do the crime if it was not learned? Obviously, if it were due to any factor(s) other than learning—it must have been because there was no one to teach it—then it obviously was not explained by learning theories. This criticism cannot be addressed, so it is somewhat ignored in the scientific literature.

Despite the criticisms and flaws, much research supports Sutherland’s theory. For example, researchers have found that older criminals teach younger delinquents.9 In addition, delinquents often associate with criminal peers prior to engaging in criminal activity.10 Furthermore, research has shown that criminal friends, attitudes, and activity are highly associated.11 Still, Sutherland’s principles are quite vague and elusive in terms of measurement, which renders them difficult for social scientists to test.12 Related to these issues, perhaps one of the biggest problems with Sutherland’s formulation of differential association is that he used primarily one type of learning model—classical conditioning—to formulate most of his principles, and thus he neglected other important ways that we learn attitudes and behavior from others. Ultimately, Sutherland’s principles are hard to test, more current versions of his framework have incorporated other learning models, and thus are easier to test so that empirical validity can be demonstrated.

Glaser’s Concept of Differential Identification

Another reaction to Sutherland’s differential association dealt with the influence of movies and television, as well as other reference groups outside of one’s significant others. As stated above, Sutherland claimed that learning of criminal definitions can take place only through social interactions with significant others as opposed to reading a book or watching movies. However, in 1965, Daniel Glaser proposed the idea of differential identification theory, which allows for learning to take place not only through people close to us but also through other reference groups, even distant ones, such as sports heroes or movie stars whom we have never actually met and with whom we have never corresponded.13 Glaser claimed that it did not matter much whether an individual had a personal relationship with a reference group(s); in fact, he argued that a group could be imaginary, such as fictitious characters in a movie or book. The important thing, according to Glaser, was that an individual must identify with a person or character and thus behave in ways that fit the norm set of this reference group or person.

Glaser’s proposition has been virtually ignored, with the exception of Dawes’s study of delinquency in 1973, which found that identification with people other than parents was strong when youths perceived a greater degree of rejection from their parents.14 Given the profound influence of movies, music, and television on today’s youth

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culture, it is obvious that differential identification was an important addition to Sutherland's framework, and more research should examine the validity of Glaser's theory in contemporary society.

Although Glaser and others modified differential association, the most valid and respected variation is differential reinforcement theory.

**Differential Reinforcement Theory**

In 1965, C. R. Jeffery provided an extensive critique and reevaluation of Sutherland's differential association theory. He argued that the theory was incomplete without some attention to an updated social psychology of learning (e.g., operant conditioning and modeling theories of learning).13 He wanted Sutherland to account for the fact that people can be conditioned into behaving certain ways, such as by being rewarded for conforming behavior. Then, in 1966, Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers criticized and responded to Jeffery's criticism by proposing a new theory that incorporated some of these learning models into Sutherland's basic framework.14 The result was what is now known as differential reinforcement theory. Ultimately, Burgess and Akers argued that by integrating Sutherland's work with contributions from the field of social psychology, criminal behavior could be more clearly understood.

In some ways, differential reinforcement theory may appear to be no different than rational choice theory (see Section III). To an extent, this is true, because both models focus on reinforcements and punishments that occur after an individual's actions. However, differential reinforcement theory can be distinguished from the rational choice perspective. The latter assumes that humans are born with the capacity for rational decision making, whereas the differential reinforcement perspective assumes that people are born with a blank slate and, thus, must be socialized and taught how to behave through various forms of conditioning (e.g., operant and classical) as well as modeling.

Burgess and Akers developed seven propositions to summarize differential reinforcement theory, which largely represent efficient modifications of Sutherland's original nine principles of differential association.15 The strong influence of social psychologists is illustrated in their first statement, as well as throughout the seven principles. Although differential reinforcement incorporates the elements of modeling and classical conditioning learning models in its framework, the first statement clearly states that the essential learning mechanism in social behavior is operant conditioning, since it is important to understand what operant conditioning is and how it is evident throughout life.

**Operant Conditioning**

The idea of operant conditioning was primarily developed by B. F. Skinner,16 who ironically was working just across campus from Edwin Sutherland when he was developing differential association theory at Indiana University. As in modern times, academia was too intradisciplinary and interdepartmental. Had Sutherland been aware of Skinner's studies and theoretical development, he likely would have included it in his original framework. In his defense, operant conditioning was not well known or researched at the time; as a result, Sutherland incorporated the then-dominant learning model, classical conditioning. Burgess and Akers went on to incorporate operant conditioning into Sutherland's framework.

Operant conditioning concerns how behavior is influenced by reinforcements and punishments. Furthermore, operant conditioning assumes that an animal or human being is a proactive player in seeking out rewards and not just a passive entity that receives stimuli, as classical conditioning assumes. Behavior is strengthened or encouraged through reward (positive reinforcement) and avoidance of punishment (negative reinforcement). For example, if someone is given a car for graduation from college, that would be a positive reinforcement. On the other hand, if a teenager who has been grounded is allowed to start going out again because he or she has better grades, this would be a negative reinforcement, because he or she is now being rewarded via the avoidance of something negative. Like different types of reinforcement, punishment comes in two forms as well. Behavior is weakened, or discouraged, through adverse stimuli (positive punishment) or lack of reward (negative punishment). A good example of positive punishment would be a bad, old-fashioned spanking, because it is certainly a negative stimulus; anything that directly presents negative sensations or feelings is a positive punishment. On the other hand, if parents take away car privileges from a teenager who broke curfew, that would be an example of negative punishment because the parents are removing a positive aspect or reward.

Some notable examples of operant conditioning include teaching a rat to successfully run a maze. When rats take the correct path and finish the maze quickly, they are either positively reinforced (e.g., rewarded with a piece of cheese) or negatively reinforced (e.g., not zapped with electricity as they were when they chose the wrong path). On the other hand, when rats take wrong turns or do not complete the maze in adequate time, they are either positively punished (e.g., zapped with electricity) or negatively punished (e.g., not given the cheese they expect to receive). The rats, like humans, tend to learn the correct behavior very fast using such consistent implementation of reinforcements and punishments.

In humans, such principles of operant conditioning can be found even at very early ages. In fact, many of us have implemented such techniques (or been subjected to them) without really knowing they were called operant conditioning. For example, during toilet training, children are taught to learn the bathroom to do their natural duty rather than doing it in their pants. To reinforce the act of going to the bathroom on a toilet, we encourage the correct behavior by presenting positive rewards, which can be as simple as applauding the child or giving him or her a piece of candy for a successful job. While parents (we hope) rarely proactively use spanking in toilet training, there is an inherent positive punishment involved when children go in their pants; namely, they have to be in their dirty diaper for a while, not to mention the embarrassment that most children feel when they do this. Furthermore, negative punishments are present in such situations because the child does not get the applause or candy, so the rewards have been removed.

Of course, this does not apply only to early behavior. An extensive amount of research has shown that humans learn attitudes and behavior best through a mix of reinforcements and punishments throughout life. In terms of criminal offending, studies have clearly shown that the rehabilitative programs that appear to work most effectively in reducing recidivism in offenders are those that provide opportunities for reward as well as threats of punishment. Empirical research has combined the findings from hundreds of such studies of rehab programs, showing that the programs that are most successful in changing the attitudes and behavior of previous offenders are those that offer at least four reward opportunities for every one possible punishment.17 So, whether it is training children to go potty correctly or altering criminals' thinking and behavior, operant conditioning is a well-established form of learning that makes differential reinforcement theory a more valid and specified model of offending than differential association.

Whether deviant or conforming behavior occurs and continues 'depends on the past and present rewards or punishment for the behavior, and the rewards and punishment attached to alternative behavior.18 In contrast to Sutherland's differential association model, which looks only at what happens before an act (i.e., classical conditioning), not at what happens after the act is completed (i.e., operant conditioning), Burgess and Akers's model looks at both. Criminal behavior is likely to occur, Burgess and Akers theorized, when its rewards outweigh the punishments.
Bandura’s Theory of Modeling and Imitation

Another learning model that Burgess and Akers emphasized in their formulation of differential reinforcement theory was the element of modeling and imitation. Although Sutherland’s original formulation of differential association theory was somewhat inspired by Gabriel Tarde’s concept of imitation, the nine principles did not adequately reflect the importance of modeling in the process of learning behavior. Sutherland’s failure was likely due to the association theory.24

Through a series of experiments and theoretical development, Bandura demonstrated that a significant amount of learning takes place without any form of conditioning. Specifically, he claimed that individuals can learn even if they are not rewarded or punished for behavior (i.e., operant conditioning) and even if they have not been exposed to the same behaviors that they observed (i.e., classical conditioning). Rather, Bandura proposed that people form their own ideas about what others do. This is often referred to as *monkey see, monkey do*, but it is not just monkeys that do this. Like most see what behavior is essential for survival and success.

Bandura showed that simply observing the behavior of others, especially adults, can have profound learning effects on the behavior of children. Specifically, he performed experiments in which a random sample of children watched a video of adults engaging in aggressive behavior toward Bo-Bo dolls (which are blow-up plastic dolls) and learned to mimic the aggressive behavior of the adults. The experimental group with no prior exposure to Bo-Bo dolls, and the experimental group who had seen the adult behavior, mimicked their elders’ behavior regardless of whether or not they had been exposed to the same behavior. Bandura’s findings have important implications for the modeling behavior of adults and for the influence of television, movies, video games, and other media. Furthermore, the influences demonstrated by Bandura supported a phenomenon in everyday life. Many adult peers are the source of cultural contexts—wearing clothing. This can be seen very early in life, parents are the only individuals that they say we are, especially in the teenage years. Younger persons imitate the cool trends and styles as well as behaviors. Of course, behaving with little regard for potential rewards or punishments, individuals are often simply mimicking the way their friends or others are imitating adds a great deal of explanation to a model of learning, and differential reinforcement theory includes such behavior but it has not yet been studied.

Burgess and Akers’s theory of differential reinforcement has also been the target of criticism by theorists and researchers. Perhaps the most important criticism of differential reinforcement theory is that it appears tautological, meaning that the variables and measures used to test its validity are true by definition. To clarify, studies testing this theory have been divided into four groups based on variables or factors: associations, reinforcements, definitions, and modeling.

Some critics have noted that, if individuals who report that they associate with those who offend are rewarded for offending, believe offending is good, and have seen many of their significant others offend, they will inevitably be more likely to offend. In other words, if your friends and family are doing it, there is little doubt that you will be doing it.25 For example, critics would argue that a person who primarily hangs out with car thieves, knows he will be rewarded for stealing cars, believes stealing cars is good and not immoral, and has observed many respected others stealing cars, will inevitably commit auto theft himself. However, it has been well argued that such criticisms of tautology are not valid because none of these factors necessarily makes offending by the respondent true by definition.26

Differential reinforcement theory has also faced the same criticism that was addressed to Sutherland’s theory, namely, that delinquent associations may take place after criminal activity rather than before. However, Burgess and Aker’s model clearly has this area of criticism covered in the sense that differential reinforcement includes what comes after the activity, not just what happens before. Specifically, it addresses the rewards or punishments that follow criminal activity, whether those rewards come from friends, parents, or other members or institutions of society.

It is arguable that differential reinforcement theory may have the most empirical validity of any contemporary (nonintegrated) model of criminal offending, especially considering that studies have examined a variety of behaviors, ranging from drug use to property crimes to violence. The theoretical model has also been tested in samples across the United States as well as in other cultures, such as South Korea, with the evidence being quite supportive of the framework. Furthermore, a variety of age groups have been examined, ranging from teenagers to middle-aged adults to the elderly, with all studies providing support for the model.27

Specifically, researchers found that the major variables of the theory had a significant effect in explaining marijuana and alcohol use among adolescents.28 The researchers concluded that the study demonstrates that central learning concepts are amenable to meaningful questionnaire measurement and that social learning theory can be adequately tested with survey data.29 Other studies have also supported the theory when attempting to understand delinquency, cigarette smoking, and drug use.30 Therefore, the inclusion of three psychological learning models, namely, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and modeling and imitation, appears to have made differential reinforcement one of the most valid theories of human behavior, especially in regard to crime.

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28Akers et al., Social Learning and Deviant Behavior, 651.


Neutralization Theory

Neutralization theory is associated with Gresham Sykes and David Matza’s techniques of neutralization16 and Matza’s drift theory.17 Like Sutherland, both Sykes and Matza thought that social learning influences delinquent behavior, but they also asserted that most criminals hold conventional beliefs and values. Specifically, Sykes and Matza argued that most criminals are still partially committed to the dominant social order. According to Sykes and Matza, youths are not immersed in a subculture that is committed to either extreme: complete conformity or complete nonconformity. Rather, these individuals vacillate, or drift, between these two extremes and are in a state of 
transience.18

While remaining partially committed to the conventional social order, youths can drift into criminal activity. Sykes and Matza claimed, and avoid feelings of guilt for these actions by justifying or rationalizing their behavior. This typically occurs in the teenage years, when social controls (parents, family, etc.) are at their weakest point and peer pressures and associations are at their highest level. Why is this called neutralization theory? The answer is that situational excuses for behavior that they know is wrong to alleviate the guilt they feel for doing such immoral acts. In many ways, this resembles Freud’s defense mechanisms, which allow us to forgive ourselves for the bad things we do even if we know they are wrong. The specific techniques of neutralization outlined by Sykes and Matza in 1957 are much like excuses for inappropriate behavior.

Techniques of Neutralization

Sykes and Matza identified methods or techniques of neutralization19 that people use to justify their criminal behavior. These techniques allow people to neutralize or rationalize their criminal and delinquent acts by making themselves look as though they are conforming to the rules of conventional society. If individuals can create such rationalizations, then they are free to engage in criminal activities without serious damage to their consciences or self-images. According to Sykes and Matza, there are five common techniques of neutralization:

1. Denial of responsibility: Individuals may claim they were influenced by forces outside themselves and that they are not responsible or accountable for their behavior. For example, many youths blame their peers for their own behavior.

2. Denial of injury: This is the rationalization that no one was actually hurt by the offender’s behavior. For instance, if someone steals from a store, he or she may rationalize this by saying that the store has insurance, so there is no direct victim.

3. Denial of the victim: Offenders see themselves as avengers and the victims as the wrongdoers. For example, some offenders believe that a person who disrespects or “disres” them deserves what he or she gets, even if it means serious injury.

4. Condemnation of the condemners: Offenders claim that the condemners (usually the authorities who catch them) are hypocrites. For instance, one may claim that police speed on the highway all the time, so everyone else is entitled to drive higher than the speed limit.

5. Appeal to higher loyalties: Offenders often overlook the norms of conventional society in favor of the rules of a belief they have or of a group to which they belong. For example, people who kill doctors who perform abortions tend to see their crimes as above the law because they are serving a higher power.

Although Sykes and Matza specifically labeled only five techniques of neutralization, it should be clear that there may be endless excuses people make up to rationalize behaviors they know are wrong. Techniques of neutralization have been applied to white-collar crime, for example. Several studies have examined the tendency to use such excuses to alleviate guilt for engaging in illegal corporate crime; they point out new types of excuses white-collar criminals use to justify their acts, techniques that were not discussed in Sykes and Matza’s original formulation.20 Studies that have attempted to empirically test neutralization theory are, at best, inconsistent. For example, Apel’s argued that there are essentially two general criticisms of studies that support neutralization theory.21, First, theorists and researchers have noted that some neutralization techniques are much more difficult to measure than commitment to unconventional attitudes or norms.22 The second major criticism is the concern that criminals may not use techniques of neutralization prior to committing a criminal offense but rather only after committing a crime. As estimated by previous studies, temporal ordering can be problematic in terms of causal implications when neutralization follows a criminal act.23 This temporal ordering problem results from research conducted at a single point in time. Some would argue that the temporal ordering problem is not a major criticism because individuals may be predisposed to make up such rationalizations for their behavior regardless of whether they do it before or after the act of offending. Such a propensity is related to low self-control theory, which will we examine later in this section.

Summary of Learning Theories

Learning theories tend to emphasize the social processes of how and why individuals learn criminal behavior. These theories also focus on the impact of significant others involved in the socialization process, such as family, friends, and teachers. Ultimately, empirical research has shown that learning theories are key in understanding criminal behavior, particularly in terms of whether criminal behavior is rewarded or punished. In summary, if individuals are taught and rewarded for performing criminal acts by the people they interact with on a day-to-day basis, they will in all likelihood engage in illegal activity.

CONTROL THEORIES

The learning theories discussed in the previous section assume that individuals are born with a conforming disposition. By contrast, control theories assume that all people would naturally commit crimes if it weren’t for restraints on their innate selfish tendencies. Social control perspectives of criminal behavior thus assume that there is some

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type of basic human nature and that all human beings exhibit antisocial tendencies. Such theories are concerned about society and human interaction that causes people not to act on their impulses. The assumption that people have innate antisocial tendencies is controversial because it is nearly impossible to test. Nevertheless, some recent evidence supports the idea that human beings are inherently selfish and aggressive behaviors at an early age, with such behaviors peaking at the end of the second year (see Figure 8.1). An example of antisocial dispositions appearing early in life was reported by Tremblay and LeMarquand, who found that most young children's (particularly boys') aggressive behaviors peaked at age 27 months. These behaviors included hitting, biting, and kicking others. Their research is not isolated; virtually all developmental experts acknowledge that toddlers exhibit a tendency to show aggressive behavior toward others. This line of research would seem to support the notion that people are predisposed toward antisocial, even criminal, behavior.

![Figure 8.1](image)

**Figure 8.1** Frequencies of hitting, biting, and kicking at ages 2 to 12 years

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**Early Control Theories of Human Behavior**

**Thomas Hobbes**

Control theories are found in a variety of disciplines, including biology, psychology, and sociology. Perhaps the earliest significant use of social control in explaining deviant behavior is found in a perspective offered by the 17th-century enlightenment philosopher Thomas Hobbes (see Section II). Hobbes claimed that the natural state of humanity is one of selfishness and self-centeredness to the point of constant chaos, characterized by a state of warfare between individuals. He stated that all individuals are inherently disposed to take advantage of others in order to improve their own personal well-being.

However, Hobbes also claimed that the constant fear created by such selfishness results in humans rationally coming together to create binding contracts that will keep individuals from violating others' rights. Even with such controlling arrangements, however, Hobbes was clear that the selfish tendencies people exhibit can never be extinguished. In fact, they explain why punishments are necessary to maintain an established social contract among people.

**Durkheim's Idea of Awakened Reflection and Collective Conscience**

Consistent with Hobbes's view of individuals as naturally selfish, Durkheim later proposed a theory of social control in the late 1800s that suggested that humans have no internal mechanism to let them know when they are fulfilled. To this end, Durkheim coined the term 'automatic spontaneity' and awakened reflection. Automatic spontaneity can be understood with reference to animals' eating habits. Specifically, animals stop eating when they are full, and they are content until they are hungry again; they don't start hunting right after they have filled their stomachs with food. In contrast, awakened reflection recognizes the fact that humans do not have such an internal, regulatory mechanism. That is because people often acquire resources beyond what is immediately required. Durkheim went so far as to say...
that "our capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss." This is one of the reasons that Durkheim believed crime and deviance are quite normal, even essential, in any society.

Durkheim's awakened reflection has become commonly known as greed. People tend to favor better conditions and additional fulfillment because they apparently have no biological or psychological mechanism to limit such tendacies. As Durkheim noted, the selfish desires of humankind "are unlimited so far as they depend on the individual alone. ... The more one has, the more one wants." Thus, society must step in and provide the regulative force that keeps humans from acting too selfishly.

One of the primary elements of this regulative force is the collective conscience, which is the extent of similarities or likenesses that people share. For example, almost everyone can agree that homicide is a serious and harmful act that should be avoided in any civilized society. The notion of collective conscience can be seen as an early form of the idea of social bonding, which has become one of the dominant theories in criminology. According to Durkheim, the collective conscience serves many functions in society. One such function is the establishment of rules that keep individuals from following their natural tendencies toward selfish behavior. Durkheim also believed that crime allows people to unite together in opposition against deviants. In other words, crime and deviance allow conditioning individuals to be bonded together in opposition against a common enemy, as can be seen in everyday life when groups come together to face opposition. This enemy consists of the deviants who have not internalized the code of the collective conscience.

Many of Durkheim's ideas hold true today. Just recall a traumatic incident you may have experienced with other strangers (e.g., being stuck in an elevator during a power outage, witnessing a serious crime, or being involved in a traffic accident). Incidents like these bring people together and permit a degree of bonding that would not take place in everyday life. Crime, Durkheim argued, serves a similar function.

How is all of this relevant today? Most control theorists claim that individuals commit crime and deviant acts not because they are lacking in any way but because certain controls have been weakened in their development. This assumption is consistent with Durkheim's theory, which we discussed previously (see Section VI).

Freud's Concepts of the Id, Superego, and Ego

Although psychoanalytic theory would seem to have few similarities with sociological positivistic theory, in this case, it is extremely complementary. One of Freud's most essential propositions is that all individuals are born with a tendency toward inherent drives and selfishness due to the id domain of the psyche (see Figure 8.2). According to Freud, all people are born with equal amounts of id drives (e.g., libido, food) and motivations toward selfishness. The superego, which is the subconscious domain of the psyche that contains our conscience, according to Freud, is formed through the interactions between a young infant or child and his or her significant others. As you can see, the control perspective has a long history in many philosophical and scientific disciplines. These two drives of the subconscious domains of the id and superego are regulated, Freud thought, by the only conscious constraints of the psyche: the ego. This ego mediates the battles between our innate drives (id) and our civilized constraints (superego); it represents our personality. There have been a number of applications of Freud's theoretical model to criminality, such as the concept of a deficient superego (due to a lack of early attachments) or a weak ego (which fails to properly regulate the battle between the id and superego). The main point is that Freud was an early control theorist and that his theoretical model was highly influential among psychologists in the early 1900s as they tried to determine why certain individuals committed criminal offenses.

Early Control Theories of Crime

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, criminologists borrowed and built on some of the ideas just discussed. Until that time, most research in the criminological literature was dominated by the learning theories discussed earlier in this section, or social structure theories such as the Chicago School or Merton's strain theory (see Sections VI and VII). While early control theories may not be particularly popular in this day and age, they were vitally important in the sense that they laid the groundwork for future theoretical development.

Reiss's Control Theory

One of the first control theories of crime was proposed by Albert Reiss in 1951. Reiss claimed that delinquency was a consequence of weak ego or superego controls among juvenile probationers. Reiss found no explicit motivation for delinquent activity. Rather, he thought it would occur in the absence of controls or restraints against such behavior.
Like Freud, Reiss believed that the family was the primary source through which deviant predispositions were discouraged. Furthermore, Reiss claimed that a sound family environment would provide for an individual's needs and the essential emotional bonds that are so important in socializing individuals. Another important factor in Reiss's model was close supervision, not only by the family but also by the community. He said that individuals must be closely monitored for delinquent behavior and adequately disciplined when they break the rules.

Personal factors, such as the ability to restrain one's impulses and delay gratification, were also important in Reiss's framework. These concepts are similar to later, more modern concepts of control theory, which have been consistently supported by empirical research.58 For this reason, Reiss was ahead of his time when he first proposed his control theory. Although the direct tests of Reiss's theory have provided only partial support for it, his influence is apparent in many contemporary criminological theories.59

**Toby's Concept of Stake in Conformity**

Soon after Reiss's theory was presented, a similar theory was developed. In 1957, Jackson Toby proposed a theory of delinquency and gangs.60 He claimed that individuals were more inclined to act on their natural inclinations when the controls on them were weak. Like most other control theorists, Toby claimed that such inclinations toward deviance were distributed equally across all individuals. Furthermore, he emphasized the concept of a stake in conformity that supposedly prevents most people from committing crime. The stake in conformity Toby was referring to is the extent to which individuals have investments in conventional society. In other words, how much is a person willing to risk when he or she violates the law?

Studies have shown that stake in conformity is one of the most influential factors in individuals' decisions to offend. People who have nothing to lose are much more likely to take risks and violate others' rights than those who have relatively more invested in social institutions.61

One distinguishing feature of Toby's theory is his emphasis on peer influences in terms of both motivating and inhibiting antisocial behavior depending on whether most peers have low or high stakes in conformity. Toby's stake in conformity has been used effectively in subsequent control theories of crime.

**Nye's Control Theory**

- year after Toby introduced the stake in conformity, E. Ivan Nye proposed a relatively comprehensive control theory that placed a strong focus on the family.62 Following the assumptions of early control theorists, Nye claimed that these was no significant positive force that caused delinquency because such antisocial tendencies are universal and could be found in virtually everyone if not for certain controls usually found in the home.

Nye's theory consisted of three primary components of control. The first component was internal control, which formed through social interaction. This socialization, he claimed, assisted in the development of a conscience. Nye further claimed that if individuals are not given adequate resources and care, they will follow their natural tendencies toward deviance, which is necessary to protect their interests.

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**Social Process and Learning Theories of Crime**

Nye's second component of control was direct control, which consists of a wide range of constraints on individual propensities to commit deviant acts. Direct control includes numerous types of sanctions, such as jail and ridicule, and the restriction of one's chances to commit criminal activity. Nye's third component of control was indirect control, which occurs when individuals are strongly attached to their early caregivers. For most children, it is through an intense and strong relationship with their parents or guardians that they establish an attachment to conventional society. However, Nye suggested that when the needs of an individual are not met by their caregivers, inappropriate behavior can result.

As shown in Figure 8.3, Nye predicted a U-shaped curve of parental controls in predicting delinquency. Specifically, he argued that either no controls (i.e., complete freedom) or too much control (i.e., no freedom at all) would predict the most chronic delinquency. He believed that a healthy balance of freedom and parental control was the best strategy for inhibiting criminal activity. Some recent research supports Nye's prediction. Contemporary control theories, such as Titel's control-balance theory, draw heavily on Nye's idea of having a healthy balance of controls and freedom.63

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**Figure 8.3 Nye's control theory**

- **High**
  - Criminality: Not Enough Control
  - Good Balance of Controls
  - Too Much Control

- **Low**
  - Criminality: Complete Freedom
  - Amount of Controls: Complete Control

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Reckless claimed that individuals can be pushed into delinquency by their social environment, such as by a lack of opportunities for education or employment. Furthermore, he pointed out that some individual factors, such as brain disorders or risk-taking personalities, could push some people to commit criminal behavior. Reckless also noted that some individuals could be pulled into criminal activity by hanging out with delinquent peers, watching too much violence on television, and so on. All told, Reckless went beyond the typical control theory assumption of inborn tendencies. In addition to these natural dispositions toward deviant behavior, control theory proposes that extra pushes and pulls can motivate people to commit crime.

Reckless further claimed that the pushes and pulls toward criminal behavior could be enough to force individuals into criminal activity unless they are sufficiently contained or controlled. Reckless claimed that such containment should be both internal and external. By internal containment, he meant building a person's sense of self, which helps the person resist the temptations of criminal activity. According to Reckless, other forms of internal containment include the ability to internalize societal norms. With respect to external containment, Reckless claimed that social organizations, such as school, church, and other institutions, are essential in building bonds that inhibit individuals from being pushed or pulled into criminal activity.

Reckless offered a visual image of containment theory, which we present in Figure 8.4. The outer circle (Circle 1) in the figure represents the social realm of pressures and pulls (e.g., peer pressure), whereas the innermost circle (Circle 4) symbolizes a person's individual-level pushes to commit crime, such as predispositions or personality traits that are linked to crime. In between these two circles are the two layers of controls, external containment (Circle 2) and internal containment (Circle 3). The structure of Figure 8.4 and the examples included in each circle are specific to the research.

While some studies have shown general support for containment theory, others offer more support for some components, such as internalization of rules, than for other factors, such as self-perception, in accounting for variations in delinquency. External factors may be more important than internal ones. Furthermore, some studies have noted weaker support for Reckless's theory among minorities and females, who may be more influenced by their peers or other influences. Thus, the model appears to be most valid for White males, at least according to empirical studies.

One of the problems with containment theory is that it does not go far enough toward specifying the factors that are important in predicting criminality, especially regarding specific groups of individuals. For example, an infinite number of concepts could potentially be categorized either as a push or pull toward criminality or as an inner or outer containment of criminality. Thus, the theory could be considered too broad and vague and not specific enough to be of practical value. To Reckless's credit, however, containment theory has increased the exposure of control theories of criminal behavior. And although support for containment theory has been mixed, there is no doubt that it has influenced other, more recent control theories.

**Modern Social Control Theories**

As the previous sections attest, control theory has been around in various forms for some time. Modern social control theories build on these earlier versions and add levels of depth and sophistication. Two modern social control theories are Matza's drift theory and Hirschi's social bonding theory.

**Matza's Drift Theory**

The theory of drift, or drift theory, presented by David Matza in 1964, claims that individuals offend at certain times in their lives when social controls—such as parental supervision, employment, and family ties—are weakened. In developing his theory, Matza criticized earlier theories and their tendency to predict too much crime. For example, the Chicago School would incorrectly predict that all individuals in bad neighborhoods will commit crime. Likewise, strain theory predicts that all poor individuals will commit crime. Obviously, this is not true. Thus, Matza claimed that there is a degree of determinism (i.e., Positive School) in human behavior but also a significant amount of free will (i.e., Classical School). He called this perspective soft determinism, which is the gray area between free will and determinism. This is illustrated in Figure 8.5.

Returning to the basics of Matza's theory, he claimed that individuals offend at the time in life when social controls are most weakened. As is well known, social controls are most weakened for most individuals during the teenage years. At this time, parents and other caretakers stop having a constant supervisory role, and at the same time, teenagers generally do not have too many responsibilities—such as careers or children—that would inhibit...
them from experimenting with deviance. This is very consistent with the well-known age–crime relationship: most individuals who are arrested experience this in their teenage years.\textsuperscript{63} Once sufficient ties are developed, people tend to mature out of criminal lifestyles.

Matza further claimed that when supervision is absent and ties are minimal, the majority of individuals are the most free to do what they want. Where, then, does the term drift come from? During the times when people have few ties and obligations, they will drift in and out of delinquency, Matza proposed. He pointed out that previous theories were unsuccessful in explaining this age–crime relationship:

Most theories of delinquency take no account of maturational reform; those that do often do so at the expense of violating their own assumptions regarding the constrained delinquent.\textsuperscript{63}

Matza insisted that drifting is not the same as a commitment to a life of crime. Instead, it is experimenting with questionable behavior and then rationalizing it. The way youths rationalize behavior that they know to be wrong is through learning the techniques of neutralization discussed earlier.

Drift theory goes on to say that individuals do not reject the conventional normative structure. On the contrary, much offending is based on neutralizing or adhering to subterranean values, which young people have been socialized to use as a means of circumventing conventional values. This is basically the same as asserting one’s independence, which tends to occur with a vengeance during the teenage years.


\textsuperscript{64}Age-arrest rate curve is loosely based on data provided by Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime in the United States report (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997).

Section VIII – Social Process and Learning Theories of Crime

Subterranean values are quite prevalent and underlie many aspects of our culture, which is why Matza’s drift theory is also classified as a learning theory. For example, while it is conventional to believe that violence is wrong, boxing matches and sports that commonly lead to injury are some of the most popular spectator activities. Such phenomena create an atmosphere that readily allows neutralization or rationalization of criminal activity.

We will see other forms of subterranean values when we discuss risk-taking and low self-control later in this section. In many contexts, such as business, risk-taking and aggressiveness are seen as desirable characteristics, so many individuals are influenced by such subterranean values. This, according to Matza, adds to individuals’ likelihood of drifting into crime and delinquency.

Matza’s theory of drift seems sensible on its face, but empirical research examining the theory has shown mixed results.\textsuperscript{64} One of the primary criticisms of Matza’s theory, which even he acknowledged, is that it does not explain the most chronic offenders, the people who are responsible for the vast majority of serious, violent crimes. Chronic offenders often officials long before and well past their teenage years, which clearly limits the predictive value of Matza’s theory.

Despite its shortcomings, Matza’s drift theory appears to explain why many people offend exclusively during their teenage and young adult years but then grow out of it. Also, the theory is highly consistent with several of the ideas presented by control theorists, including the assumption that (a) selfish tendencies are universal, (b) these tendencies are inhibited by socialization and social controls, and (c) the selfish tendencies appear at times when controls are weakest. The theory goes beyond previous control theories by adding the concepts of soft determinism, neutralization, and subterranean values, as well as the idea that, in many contexts, selfish and aggressive behaviors are not wrong but actually desirable.

Hirschi’s Social Bonding Theory

Perhaps the most influential social control theory was presented by Travis Hirschi in 1969.\textsuperscript{65} Hirschi’s model of social bonding theory takes an assumption from Durkheim that “we are all animals, and thus naturally capable of committing criminal acts.”\textsuperscript{66} However, as Hirschi acknowledged, most humans can be adequately socialized to become tightly bonded to conventional entities, such as families, schools, and communities. Hirschi said that the more strongly a person is bonded to conventional society, the less prone he is to engaging in crime or he will be. More specifically, the stronger the social bond, the lower the likelihood that an individual will commit criminal offenses.

As shown in Figure 8.6, Hirschi’s social bond is made up of four elements: (a) attachment, (b) commitment, (c) involvement, and (d) moral belief. The stronger or more developed the person in each of the four elements, the lower the likelihood that he or she will commit crime. Let us now consider each element in detail.

The most important factor in the social bond is attachment, which consists of affective bonds between an individual and his or her significant others. Attachment is vitally important for the internalization of conventional values. Hirschi said, “The essence of internalization of norms, conscience, or superego thus lies in the attachment of the individual to others.”\textsuperscript{66} Hirschi made it clear, as did Freud, that strong, early attachments are the most important factor in developing a social bond. The other constructs in the social bond—commitment, involvement, and belief—are contingent on adequate attachment to others, he argued. That is, without healthy attachments, especially early in life, the probability of acting inappropriately increases.

\textsuperscript{65}See Bernard et al., Volke Theoretical Criminology, 205–7.

\textsuperscript{66}Hirschi, Causes of Delinquency (see chap. 6, n. 30).

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid., 31, in which Hirschi cites Durkheim.

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid., 18.
Commitment, the second element of Hirschi's social bond, is the investment a person has in conventional society. This has been explained as one's stake in conformity, or what is at risk of being lost if one gets caught committing crime. If people feel they have much to lose by committing crime, they will probably not do it. In contrast, if someone has nothing to lose, what is to prevent that person from doing something he or she may be punished for? The answer is, of course, not much. And this, some theorists claim, is why it is difficult to control so-called chronic offenders. Trying to instill a commitment to conventional society in such individuals is extremely difficult.

Another element of the social bond is involvement, which is the time spent in conventional activities. The assumption is that time spent in constructive activities will reduce time devoted to illegal behaviors. This element of the bond goes back to the old adage that "idle hands are the devil's workshop." Hirschi claimed that participating in conventional activities can inhibit delinquent and criminal activity.

The last element of the social bond is beliefs, which have generally been interpreted as moral beliefs concerning the laws and rules of society. This is one of the most examined and consistently supported aspects of the social bond. Basically, individuals who feel that a course of action is against their moral beliefs are much less likely to pursue it than individuals who don't see a breach of morality in such behavior. For example, we all probably know some people who see drunk driving as a very serious offense because of the injury and death it can cause. However, we also probably know individuals who don't see a problem with such behavior. The same can be said about speeding in a car, shoplifting from a store, or using marijuana: people differ in their beliefs about most forms of criminal activity.

Hirschi's theory has been tested by numerous researchers and has, for the most part, been supported. However, one criticism is that the components of the social bond may predict criminality only if they are defined in a certain way. For example, with respect to the involvement element of the bond, studies have shown that not all conventional activities are equal when it comes to preventing delinquency. Only academic or religious activities seem to have consistent effects in inhibiting delinquency. In contrast, many studies show that teenagers who date or play sports actually have an increased risk of committing crime.

Another major criticism of Hirschi's theory is that the effect of attachment on crime depends on to whom one is attached. Studies have clearly and consistently shown that attachment to delinquent peers is a strong predictor of criminal activity.

Finally, some evidence indicates that social bonding theory may better explain why individuals start offending than why they continue or escalate in their offending. One reason for this is that Hirschi's theory does not elaborate on what occurs after an individual commits criminal activity. This is likely the primary reason why some of the more complex, integrated theories of crime often attribute the initiation of delinquency to a breakdown in the social bond. However, other theories (such as differential reinforcement) are typically seen as better predictors of what happens after the initial stages of the criminal career.

Despite the criticism it has received, Hirschi's social bonding theory is still one of the most accepted theories of criminal behavior. It is a relatively convincing explanation for criminality because of the consistent support that it has found among samples of people taken from all over the world.

### Integrated Social Control Theories

Although we will review integrated theories in detail in Section XI, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss the two integrated models that most incorporate the control perspective into their frameworks. These two integrated models are control-balance theory and power-control theory. Both have received considerable attention in the criminological literature. Other integrated theories that incorporate control theory to a lesser extent include Braithwaite's shame theory and Sampson and Laub's life-course theory. These will be covered in more detail in Sections XI and XII.

**Tittle's Control-Balance Theory**

Presented by Charles Tittle in 1995, control-balance theory proposes that (a) the amount of control to which one is subjected and (b) the amount of control one can exercise determine the probability that deviance will occur. The balance between these two types of control, he argued, can even predict the type of behavior that is likely to be committed.40

40Ibid.

41Ibid.


43Walsh and Ellis, "Political Ideology."


Hagan's Power-Control Theory

Power-control theory is an integrated theory that was proposed by John Hagan and his colleagues. The primary focus of this theory is on the level of control and patriarchal attitudes, as well as structure in the household. Power-control theory assumes that, in households where the mother is the primary caregiver, power levels will be lower in the household. However, in cases where fathers are the primary caregivers, power levels will be higher in the household. In addition, assertiveness and riskiness among the mates in the house will be encouraged. This assertion is consistent with the idea of the gender-specific context in which the control-balance theory was formulated.

Most empirical tests of control-balance theory have produced mixed results, with both surpluses and deficits in sibling ratios on two types of deviance that are contingent on gender. This finding is consistent with the gender-specific context in which the control-balance theory was formulated.

A General Theory of Crime: Low Self-Control

In 1990, Travis Hirschi, along with his colleague Michael Gottfredson, proposed a general theory of low self-control, which is often referred to as the general theory of crime.24 This theory has led to a significant amount of debate and research in the field since its appearance—more than any other contemporary theory of crime. Like previous control theories of crime, this theory assumes that individuals are born predisposed toward selfish, self-centered activities and that these activities will become manifest in various forms across an individual's life. For example, teenagers with low self-control will likely be more likely to engage in deviant behaviors than those with high self-control. These results suggest that individuals who lack self-control will be more prone to engage in deviant behaviors and take advantage of resources and toward avoiding negative emotional feelings (e.g., shame) that are primarily induced through socialization.

Psychological Aspects of Low Self-Control

Criminologists have recently claimed that low self-control may be due to the emotional dispositions of individuals. For example, one study showed that the effects of low self-control on intentions to commit drunk driving and shoplifting were tied to individuals' perceptions of pleasure and shame. More specifically, the findings of this study showed that individuals who had low self-control had significantly lower levels of anticipated shame but significantly higher levels of perceived pleasure in committing both drunk driving and shoplifting. These results suggest that individuals who lack self-control will be more prone to engage in deviant behaviors and take advantage of resources and toward avoiding negative emotional feelings.
Physiological Aspects of Low Self-Control

Low self-control can also be tied to physiological factors. Interestingly, research has shown that chronic offenders are measured by monitoring brain activity in response to certain stimuli. The research suggests that individuals by releasing pleasure chemicals in their brains.66

In a similar vein, recent studies show that chronic gamblers tend to get a physiological high (such as a sudden, intense release of brain chemicals similar to that following a small dose of cocaine) from the activity of betting, particularly when they are gambling with their own money and risking a personal loss.67 Undoubtedly, a minority as well as psychological differences may explain why certain individuals favor risky behaviors.

Researchers have also found that criminal offenders generally perceive a significantly lower level of internal sanctions (e.g., shame, guilt, embarrassment) than do nonoffenders.68 So, in summary, a select group of individuals appear to derive physiological and psychological pleasure from engaging in risky behaviors while simultaneously claiming, is very dangerous and helps explain why impulsive individuals often end up in prison.

Finally, the psychological and physiological aspects of low self-control may help explain the gender differences observed between males and females. Specifically, studies show that females are significantly more likely than males to possess an inattentive different about males and females that helps explain the differing levels of self-control each possesses.

Summary of Control Theories

Control perspectives are among the oldest and most respected explanations of criminal activity. The fundamental observation is that humans have an inborn, selfish disposition that must be controlled through socialization and the like. Theories of criminal behavior demonstrate the legitimacy in an explanation of behavior. This is likely due to the dedication which we have discussed here.

Policy Implications

Numerous policy implications can be taken from the various types of social learning and control theories presented in the chapter. We will concentrate on those that are likely to be most effective and pragmatic in helping to reduce criminal behavior.

A number of policy implications can be drawn from the various learning models. Perhaps their most important implication is to supply many opportunities for positive reinforcements, or rewards, for good behavior. Such

Reinforcements have been found to be far more effective than punishments, especially among criminal offenders.69 Furthermore, studies show that the most effective rehabilitation programs for offenders should be based on a cognitive behavioral approach, which teaches individuals to think before they act.70 Furthermore, evaluation studies have shown that simply grouping offenders together for counseling or peer-therapy sessions is not an effective strategy; rather, it appears that such programs often have no effect, or actually increase offending among participants, perhaps because they tend to learn more antisocial attitudes from such sessions.71 Ultimately, offender programs that emphasize positive reinforcements and are based on a cognitive behavioral approach show the greatest success.

Regarding the policy implications of control theories, we will focus on the early social bonding that must take place and the need for more parental supervision to help an individual develop or learn self-control and create healthy, strong bonds to conventional society. Most control theories assume that individuals are predisposed to criminal behavior, so the primary focus of programs should be to reduce this propensity toward such behavior. According to most control perspectives, the most important factor in preventing or controlling this predisposition involves early parenting and building attachments or ties to prosocial aspects of the individual’s environment.

Thus, perhaps the most important policy recommendation is to increase the ties between early caregivers or parents and their children. A variety of programs try to increase the relationship and bonding that takes place between infants and young children and their parents, as well as to monitor the supervision that takes place in this dynamic. Such programs have consistently been shown to be effective in preventing and reducing criminality in high-risk children, especially when such programs involve home visitations by health care providers (e.g., nurses) and social care experts (e.g., social workers).72 By visiting the homes of high-risk children, workers can provide more direct, personal attention in aiding and counseling parents about how best to nurture, monitor, and discipline their young children.73 These types of programs may lead to more control over behavior while building stronger bonds to society and developing self-control among these high-risk individuals.

Conclusion

In this section, we have discussed a wide range of theories that may appear to be quite different. However, all of the criminological theories here share an emphasis on social processes as the primary reason why individuals commit crime. This is true of the learning theories, which propose that people are taught to commit crime, as well as the control theories, which claim that people offend naturally and must be taught not to commit crime. Despite their seemingly opposite assumptions of human behavior, the fact is that learning and control theories both identify socialization, or the lack thereof, as the key cause of criminal behavior.

We also examined some of the key policy recommendations that have been suggested by both of these theoretical perspectives. Specifically, we noted that programs that simply group offenders together can still seem to reinforce their tendency to offend, whereas programs that take a cognitive behavioral approach and use many reward opportunities appear to have some effect in reducing recidivism. Also, we concluded that programs that involve home visitations by experts (e.g., nurses, counselors) tend to aid in developing more effective parenting and building social bonds among young individuals, which helps them to build strong attachments to society and develop self-control.
Section Summary

- First, we discussed what distinguishes learning theories of crime from other perspectives.
- Then we reviewed Glaser’s differential identification theory, which emphasizes the learning that takes place via reference groups or role models.
- We then discussed Sutherland’s differential association theory and how this framework was improved by Aker’s differential reinforcement theory.
- We examined in depth the psychological learning model of classical conditioning, as well as its limitations.
- We then explored two other learning models that formed the basis of differential reinforcement theory, namely, operant conditioning and learning according to modeling or imitation.
- We reviewed the theory of neutralization, including the five original techniques of neutralization presented by Sykes and Matza.
- We also reviewed several early forms of social control theory, such as Hobbes’s, Freid’s, and Durkheim’s.
- Then we examined the early social control theories of crime, presented by Reiss, Tobey, and Nye, along with Reckless’s containment theory.
- We then examined more modern social control theories, such as Matza’s drift theory and Hirschi’s social bonding theory.
- Integrated social control theories were briefly examined, including Tittle’s control-balance theory and Hagan’s power-control theory.
- Finally, we reviewed low self-control theory from both a psychological and a physiological perspective.

KEY TERMS

classical conditioning
containment theory
control-balance theory
control theories
differential association theory
differential identification theory
differential reinforcement theory
drift theory
go

Learning theories
modeling and imitation
negative punishment
negative reinforcement
neutralization theory
operant conditioning
positive punishment
positive reinforcement

power-control theory
social bonding theory
soft determinism
stake in conformity
subterranean values
superego
tabula rasa
teaching of low self-control

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What distinguishes learning theories from other criminological theories?
2. What distinguishes differential association from differential reinforcement theory?
3. What did differential identification add to learning theories?
4. Which technique of neutralization do you use or relate to the most? Why?

WEB RESOURCES

Differential Association Theory
http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/sutherland.html

Differential Reinforcement Theory
http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/akers.htm

Social and Self-Control Theory
http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/hirschi.htm

Techniques of Neutralization
http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/matza.htm