Social Process and Learning Theories of Crime

This section will discuss Edwin Sutherland's development of differential association theory and how this evolved into Ronald Aker'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, emphasizing social bonding and the scientific evidence found regarding the key constructs in Travis Hirschi's control theories, which are two of the most highly regarded perspectives according to criminological experts and their studies. 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 with no tendency toward or away from committing crime. This concept is referred to as tabula rasa, or blank slate, meaning that all individuals are completely malleable and will believe what they are told by their significant

---

Differential Association Theory

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 feeblemindedness theory, Sheldon’s body type theory). Sutherland was one of the first to state that criminal behavior is the result of normal social processes, resulting when individuals associate with the wrong type of people, often by no fault on their part. By associating with crime-oriented people, whether parents or peers, 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, was number six in his framework: “A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law.” Sutherland noted that this principle represents the essence of differential association theory. It suggests that people can have associations that favor both criminal and noncriminal behavior patterns. If an individual is receiving more information and values that are pro-criminal than anti-criminal, the individual will inevitably engage in criminal activity. Also, Sutherland claimed that such learning 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 about criminals. Sheldon’s body type theory was popular in the same period, as was the use of IQ to pick out people 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 there was essentially something wrong with individuals who commit crime.

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 favorable to criminal behavior, will learn criminal activity and that the processes and mechanisms of learning are the same for crime as for most legal, everyday behaviors—namely, social interaction with family and friends and not reading books or watching movies. How many of us have learned to play basketball or other sports by reading a book about it? Virtually no one learns how to play sports this way. Rather, we learn the techniques (e.g., how to do a jump shot) and motivations for playing sports (e.g., it is fun or you might be able to earn a scholarship) through our friends, relatives, coaches, and other people close to us. According to Sutherland, crime is learned the same way; our close associates teach us both the techniques (e.g., how to steal a car) and the motivations (e.g., it is fun; you might be able to sell it or its parts). While most criminologists tend to take it for granted that criminal behavior is learned, the idea was rather unique and bold when Sutherland presented his theory of differential association.

2 Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald R. Cressey, Principles of Criminology, 5th ed. (Chicago: Lippincott, 1950), 78.

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 interpret in natural ways 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 sometimes takes only a few occurrences of coupling the bell ringing with meat before the conditioned response takes place.

For a discussion, see Thomas J. Bernard, Jeffrey R. Snipes, and Alexander L. Gerstälder, Voß's Theoretical Criminology, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55-57 (see chap. 2).
Another topic of criticism involves Sutherland’s claim that all criminals learn the behavior from others before they engage in such activity. However, many theorists have noted that individuals may engage in criminal activity without being taught such behavior, and then seek out others with attitudes and behavior similar to their own. So, do individuals learn to commit crime after they are taught by delinquent peers, or do they start associating with similar delinquents or criminals once they have initiated their offending career (i.e., "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.

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 expose 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—and 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. In addition, delinquents often associate with criminal peers prior to engaging in criminal activity. Furthermore, research has shown that criminal friends, attitudes, and activity are highly associated. Still, Sutherland’s principles are quite vague and elusive in terms of measurement, which renders them difficult for social scientists to test. 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.

Differential Identification Theory

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 previously, 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 1956, 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. Glaser claimed that it did not matter much whether an individual had a personal relationship

---

with a reference group; in fact, he argued, 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 Kenneth 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. Given the profound influence of movies, music, and television on today’s youth 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). He wanted Sutherland to account for the fact that people can be conditioned into behaving in certain ways, such as by being rewarded for conforming behavior. Then, in 1966, Robert Burgess and 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. 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 reinforcers and punishments that occur after an individual offenders. 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 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. 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, so 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, who ironically was working just across campus from Sutherland when he was developing differential association theory at Indiana University. As in modern times, academia was too intradisciplinary and introspective. 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 reinforcers 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. 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 good, old-fashioned scolding, 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, if the rat choose the wrong path 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 reinforcers 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 learn to use the bathroom to do their natural duty rather than doing it in the yard. To forest 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 reinforcers 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. 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 confirming behavior occurs and continues "depends on the past and present rewards or punishment for the behavior, and the rewards and punishments attached to alternative behavior." 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' 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 emphasize the importance of modeling in the process of learning behavior. Sutherland's failure was likely due to the fact that Albert Bandura's primary work in this area had not yet occurred when Sutherland was formulating differential association theory.

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 associations between stimuli and responses (i.e., classical conditioning). Rather, Bandura proposed that people learn many of their attitudes and behaviors from simply observing the behavior of others, namely through mimicking what others do. This is often referred to as monkey see, monkey do, but it is not just monkeys that do this. Like most animal species, humans are biologically hardwired to observe and learn the behavior of others, especially elders, to 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 randomized experimental group of children watched a video of adults acting aggressively toward Bobo dolls (which are blow-up plastic dolls) the control group of children did not watch such a video. Both groups of children were then sent into a room containing Bobo dolls, and the experimental group, who had seen the adult behavior, mimicked their elders by acting far more aggressively toward the dolls than the children in the control group. The experimental group had no previous experience of more aggressive behavior toward the dolls and no good feelings or motivations, let alone rewards, for such behavior. Rather, the children became more aggressive simply because they were imitating what they had seen older people do.

Bandura's findings have important implications for the modeling of behavior of adults (and peers) and for the influence of television, movies, video games, and other factors. Furthermore, the influences demonstrated by Bandura supported a phenomenon commonplace in everyday life. Mimicking is the source of fashion trends—wearing low-slung pants or baseball hats turned a certain way. Styles tend to ebb and flow based on how some respected person (often a celebrity) wears clothing. This can be seen very early in life; parents must be careful what they say and do because their children, as young as 2 years old, imitate what their parents do. This continues throughout life, especially in the teenage years as young persons imitate the cool trends and styles as well as behaviors. Of course, sometimes this behavior is illegal, but individuals are often simply mimicking the way their friends or others are behaving with little regard for potential rewards or punishments. Ultimately, Bandura's theory of modeling and imitation adds a great deal of explanation to a model of learning, and differential reinforcement theory includes such influences, whereas Sutherland's model of differential association does not, largely because the psychological perspective had not yet been developed.

Burgess and Akers' 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...
Neutralization Theory

Neutralization theory is associated with Gresham Sykes and David Matza's techniques of neutralization and Matza's drift theory. 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 transition.

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 people justify and rationalize behavior through neutralizing it or making it appear not so serious. They make up 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 when 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 neutralization 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 "disse" 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.

References:

- David, ibid., 28.
- "Sykes and Matza, "Techniques of Neutralization."
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 actions, techniques that were not discussed in Sykes and Matza’s original formulation. Studies that have attempted to empirically test neutralization theory are, at best, inconsistent. For example, Agnew argued that there are essentially two general criticisms of studies that support neutralization theory. First, theorists and researchers have noted that some neutralization techniques are much more difficult to measure than commitment to unconventional attitudes or norms. 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. 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 may be related to low self-control theory, which we will 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 of 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 type of basic human nature and that all human beings exhibit antisocial tendencies. Such theories are concerned with why individuals don’t commit crime or deviant behaviors. Control theorists ask questions like this: What is it about society and human interaction that causes people not to act on their impulses?

The assumption that people have innate antisocial tendencies is a controversial one because it is nearly impossible to test. Nevertheless, some recent evidence supports the idea that human beings are inherently selfish and anti-social by nature. Specifically, researchers have found that most individuals are oriented toward selfish and aggressive behavior 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 Richard Tremblay and David 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.

---

Control theorists do not necessarily assume that people are predisposed toward crime in a way that remains constant throughout life. On the contrary, research shows that most individuals begin to desist from such behaviors starting at around age two. This trend continues until approximately age 5, wherein only the most aggressive individuals (i.e., chronic offenders) continue such behavior at higher ages.

It is important to note that, at the same time, selfish and aggressive behaviors decline, self-consciousness begins to form. In addition, social emotions—such as shame, guilt, empathy, and pride—begin to appear. This observation is critical because it is what separates control theories from the Classical School of criminology and the dispositional theories that we already discussed. According to control theories, without appropriate socialization, people act on their preprogrammed tendency toward crime and deviance.

In short, control theories claim that all individuals have natural tendencies to commit selfish, antisocial, and even criminal behaviors. So, what is it that curbs this natural propensity? Many experts believe the best explanation is that individuals are socialized and controlled by social attachments and investments in conventional society.

This assumption regarding the vital importance of early socialization is probably the primary reason why control theories are currently the most popular and accepted theories among criminologists. We will now discuss several early examples of these control theories.

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 cannot 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, Émile Durkheim later proposed a theory of social control in the late 1800s that suggested humans have no internal mechanism to let them know when they are fulfilled. To this end, Durkheim coined the terms 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 concerns 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 tendencies. 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 regulating force that keeps humans from acting too selfishly.

One of the primary elements of this regulatory 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 conforming 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, weathering a serious storm, or being involved in a traffic accident). Incidents such as 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 and greed. Freud said this inherent selfish tendency must be countered by controls produced from the development of the superego, which is the subconscious domain of the psyche that contains our conscience. According to Freud, the superego is formed through the interactions between a young infant and child and his or her significant others. As you can see, the control perspective has a long history in many philosophical and scientific disciplines.


7Walsh and Ellis, "Political Ideology.

8Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (1651); repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904.

9Émile Durkheim, The Division of Labor in Society (1899); repr. New York: Free Press, 1965; Émile Durkheim, Suicide (1897); repr. New York: Free Press, 1951 (see chap. 6, n. 18).
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 very similar to later, more modern concepts of control theory, which have been consistently supported by empirical research. 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.

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. 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.

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

A year after Toby introduced the stake in conformity, E. Justin Nye proposed a relatively comprehensive control theory that placed a strong focus on the family. Following the assumptions of early control theorists, Nye claimed that

---

These two drives of the subconscious domains of the id and superego are regulated, Freud thought, by the only conscious domain of the psyche: the ego. This ego mediates the battles between our innate drives (id) and our socialized 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.

---

Ibid.
there was no significant positive force that caused delinquency because such antisocial tendencies are universal and would 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 is formed through social interaction. This socialization, he claimed, assists 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 doing what is necessary to protect their interests.

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 Charles Tittle’s control–balance theory, draw heavily on Nye’s idea of having a healthy balance of controls and freedom.13

---

**Figure 8.3 • Nye’s control theory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criminality</th>
<th>Amount of Controls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Criminology:** Not Enough Control (Complete Freedom)  
- **Good Balance of Controls:**  
  - Internal Controls  
  - Direct Controls  
  - Indirect Controls  
- **Too Much Control:**  
  - Complete Control

---


---

**Reckless’ Containment Theory**

Another control theory, known as containment theory, has been proposed by Walter Reckless.15 This theory emphasizes both inner containment and outer containment, which can be viewed as internal and external controls. Reckless broke from traditional assumptions of social control theories by identifying predictive factors that push or pull individuals toward antisocial behavior. However, the focus of his theory remained on the controlling elements, which can be seen in the emphasis placed on containment in the theory’s name.

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 being 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, containment 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 those specifically noted by Reckless.16

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.17 External factors may be more important than internal ones. Furthermore, some studies have noted weaker support for Reckless’ 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.18

One of the problems with containment theory is that it does not go far enough to specify 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 or vague and not specific enough to be of practical value. To Reckless’ credit, however, containment theory has increased the exposure of control

---

16Ibid., 479.
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.\(^2\)

**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 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.\(^2\)

---


\(^2\)Matza, *Delinquency and Drift*.
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.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.

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.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 offend 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 self-determination, 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 Hirschi in 1969.65 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."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 to engaging in crime he or she 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: (1) attachment, (2) commitment, (3) involvement, and (4) moral belief. The stronger or more developed the person is 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 affectionate 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."67 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—attachment, 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.

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

---


64See Bernard et al., *Valdi's Theoretical Criminology*, 205–7.

65Hirschi. *Causes of Delinquency* (see chap. 6, n. 30).


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 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.

[Continued]
description. This resulted in Jesse Pomeroy being arrested and sentenced to the State Reform School at Westborough for the remainder of his minor-status years (e.g., six years). Ruth Ann, however, diligently worked to have her son released earlier; Jesse was released months after.78

In March 1874, nine-year-old Katie Curran disappeared. During the investigation, it was revealed that the last place she had been seen was at the Pomeroy's shop. Jesse was interrogated, but there was no arrest at that time. In April, the body of four-year-old Horace Millen was found on the beach of Dorchester Bay. His throat had been cut and he had been stabbed 15 times; also, one of his eyes had been torn out. The police recalled the beatings of the other children two years earlier and arrested Jesse Pomeroy; he was 14 years old at the time. In July 1874, Jesse confessed to Horace Millen's murder. Jesse Pomeroy also confessed to the murder of Katie Curran. He had lured her into the basement of his mother's dress shop. He had then cut her throat and buried her body under an ash heap. When he was asked why he committed the murders, he stated, "I couldn't help it."79 On September 7, 1876, Jesse Pomeroy was sentenced to death. Subsequently, his sentence was commuted to life in prison—solitary confinement. In 1916, he was released from solitary confinement and was allowed to mix with other prisoners at the Charlestown Prison. On September 29, 1932, he died at the age of 73 years.80

Think About It

1. Why did he do it? As described by the theories presented in this section, specifically various social control theories (such as Hirschi's theory of social bonding) and socialization theories (e.g., differential association theory, differential reinforcement theory), it appears that Jesse Pomeroy never had much of a chance to form strong social bonds with conventional society, nor was he adequately socialized. To clarify, his father was abusive. He was considered a loner at school. He began in life to demonstrate cruel behavior to animals. Thus, do you think Jesse Pomeroy engaged in such behaviors out of selfishness and personal satisfaction, and without any empathy for his victims, because that was what his experience in the world taught him to do?

2. If you maintain that Jesse had low self-control and therefore engaged in these behaviors, why did he have such low self-control?

3. What types of things could have been done to improve Jesse's low self-control?

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 John Braithwaite's shaming 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 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.79

Tittle argued that a person is least likely to offend when he or she has a balance of controlling and being controlled. Furthermore, the likelihood of offending increases when these become unbalanced. If individuals are more controlled (Tittle calls this control deficit), then the theory predicts that they will commit predatory or defiant acts. In contrast, if an individual possesses an excessive level of control (Tittle calls this control surplus), then he or she will be more likely to commit acts of exploitation or decadence. Note that excessive control is not the same as excessive self-control. Tittle argued that people who are controlling—that is, who have excessive control over others—will be predisposed toward inappropriate activities.

Initial empirical tests of control–balance theory have reported mixed results with both surpluses and deficits predicting the same types of deviance.81 In addition, researchers have uncovered differing effects of the control–balance ratio on two types of deviance that are contingent on gender. This finding is consistent with the gender-specific support found for Reckless's containment theory, described earlier in this section.82

Hagan's Power–Control Theory

Power–control theory is an integrated theory that was proposed by John Hagan and his colleagues.83 The primary focus of this theory is on the level of control and patriarchal attitudes, as well as structure in the household, which are influenced by parental positions in the workforce. Power–control theory assumes that mothers will be less likely to exert control on their daughters in households where the mothers and fathers have relatively similar levels of power at work (i.e., balanced households). These balanced households will be less likely to experience gender differences in the criminal offending of the children. However, households in which mothers and fathers have dissimilar levels of power in the workplace (i.e., unbalanced households) are more likely to suppress criminal activity in daughters. In addition, assertiveness and risky activity among the males in the house will be encouraged. This assertiveness and risky activity may be a precursor to crime.

Most empirical tests of power-control have provided moderate support for the theory, while more recent studies have further specified the validity of the theory in different contexts. Another researcher found that differences in perceived threats of embarrassment and formal sanctions varied between more patriarchal and less patriarchal households. Finally, studies have also started measuring the effect of patriarchal attitudes on crime and delinquency. Power-control theory is a good example of a social control theory in that it is consistent with the idea that individuals must be socialized and that the gender differences in such socialization make a difference in how people will act throughout life.

A General Theory of Crime: Low Self-Control

In 1990, 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. 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 only effective child rearing and socialization can create self-control. Without such adequate socialization (i.e., social controls) and reduction of criminal opportunities, individuals will follow their natural tendencies to become selfish predators. Furthermore, the general theory of crime assumes that self-control must be established by age 10. If it has not formed by that time, then, according to the theory, individuals will forever exhibit low self-control.

Although Gottfredson and Hirschi still attribute the formation of controls to the socialization processes, the distinguishing characteristic of this theory is its emphasis on the individual's ability to control himself or herself. That is, the general theory of crime assumes that people can take a degree of control over their own decisions and, within certain limitations, control themselves.

The general theory of crime is accepted as one of the valid theories of crime. This is probably because it identifies only one primary factor that causes criminality—low self-control. But low self-control theory may actually implicate a series of personality traits and behavior, including risk-taking, impulsiveness, self-centeredness, short-term orientation, and quick temper. For example, recent research has supported the idea that inadequate child-rearing practices tend to result in lower levels of self-control among children and that these low levels produce various risky behaviors, including criminal activity. Such propensities toward low self-control can manifest in varying forms across an individual's life. For example, teenagers with low self-control will likely hit or steal from peers, and as they grow older, they will be more likely to gamble or cheat on taxes.

Psychological Aspects of Low Self-Control

Criminologists have recently claimed that low self-control may be due to the emotional disposition 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 oriented toward gaining pleasure and taking advantage of resources and toward avoiding negative emotional feelings (e.g., shame) that are primarily induced through socialization.

Physiological Aspects of Low Self-Control

Low self-control can also be tied to physiological factors. Interestingly, research has shown that chronic offenders show greater arousal toward danger and risk-taking than toward the possibility of punishment. This arousal has been measured by monitoring brain activity in response to certain stimuli. The research suggests that individuals are encouraged to commit risky behavior due to physiological mechanisms that reward their risk-taking activities by releasing pleasure chemicals in their brains.

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. Undoubtedly, a minority of individuals thrive off of risk-taking behaviors significantly more than others. This suggests that physiological 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. So, in summary, a select group of individuals appear to derive physiological and psychological pleasure from engaging in risky behaviors while simultaneously being less likely to be inhibited by internal emotional sanctions. Such a combination, Gottfredson and Hirschi claimed, 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 experience internal emotional sanctioning for offenses they have committed. In other words, there appears to be something intrinsically 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 assumption that humans have an inborn, selfish disposition that must be controlled through socialization distinguishes control theories from other theories of crime. The control perspective's longevity as one of the most popular criminological theories demonstrates its legitimacy as an explanation of behavior. This is likely due to the dedication and efforts of criminologists who are constantly developing new and improved versions of control theory—many of which we have discussed here.

Policy Implications

Numerous policy implications can be taken from the various learning models. Perhaps their most important suggestion 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. 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. 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 show no effect, or actually increase offending among participants, perhaps because they tend to learn more antisocial attitudes from such sessions. 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.

According to the Maryland Report of "What Works" (see previous sections), evidence consistently supports programs that involve long-term, frequent home visitation combined with preschool as well as family therapy by clinical staff for at-risk youth. Furthermore, the Maryland Report stressed the success of school programs that aim to clarify and communicate norms for various behaviors by establishing school rules and consistently enforcing them through positive reinforcement and schoolwide campaigns. Other effective school programs focus on various competency skills, such as developing self-control, stress management, responsible decision making, problem solving, and communication skills. On the other hand, the Maryland Report noted some school programs that do not reduce delinquent behavior, such as those that counsel students in a peer-group context (see reasoning above), as well as substance use programs that simply rely on information dissemination or fear arousal (such as the traditional D.A.R.E. [Drug Abuse Resistance Education] program).

Consistent with the Maryland Report, in a 2017 study that systematically reviewed the extant literature, David Weisburd and his colleagues claimed that there is "good evidence" for the effectiveness of programs designed to strengthen and restore positive social ties with at-risk youth. These researchers also concluded that the most effective programs target specific risk factors and that the key mechanisms underlying effective programs across all dimensions are efforts to enhance supportive and informal social controls and reintegration into the community by repairing social bonds.

Ultimately, programs that teach youths to develop cognitive or thinking skills are beneficial as opposed to those that simply focus on providing information about drugs or criminal offending. The bottom line for successful programs appears to be that they must instruct youths to deal with everyday influences in a healthy way (according to a cognitive behavioral model) as opposed to just giving them information about crime and drugs. 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). 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. 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 only 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.