SOC 3290 Deviance
Lecture 11: Social Control Theory

While the theories we've discussed thus far assume conformity and attempt to explain deviance, social control theory comes at the question from the opposite direction. It argues that it is safer to assume that people will deviate and that it is necessary to explain why so many conform. Essentially, if we can find out what causes conformity, then we will know what causes deviance, for what causes deviance is simply the absence of what causes conformity.

In the eyes of control theorists, then, what causes conformity is social control over the individual, and therefore the absence of social control causes deviance.

Theoretical Images:

If social control is the key to understanding deviance, what do we mean by social control? Much earlier research in this area focused on how socialization leads to conformity or how punishment decreases nonconformity. The deterrence doctrine, for example, focuses on formal social control executed by police, judges, etc. This version of control theory, much like classical criminologists such as Bentham, assumes that people are basically rational, given to calculating the benefit and cost of committing a crime. If they find the cost greater than the potential benefit (pleasure), they will refrain from committing the crime. The cost of crime, according to this perspective, is legal punishment. Thus, the idea is that punishment (a form of social control) deters crime - and lack of punishment encourages it.

There are 3 ways in which such punishment can be carried out - each assumed to impact on the likelihood of an individual committing a crime. First, punishment can be made more or less severe, the idea being that the more severe the punishment, the less likely the crime. Second, punishments can be made more or less certain: the more certain the commission of a crime will result in punishment, the less likely people will be to commit the crime. Finally, punishment can be more or less swift. The more quickly that punishment is carried out, the less likely the crime is to occur. Recent work has indicated that certainty rather than severity of punishment is more important in this regard. Swiftness of punishment is another important factor (although less important when other factors are considered as well).

Whatever the mode of punishment, whether it be severe, certain or swift, it is assumed to achieve two kinds of deterrence: general and specific. In the former, the punishment of a criminal is seen as deterring the general public from committing crimes; in the latter it deters the specific criminal in question from repeating his or her actions.

Despite these classical ideas on social control, punishment and deterrence, researchers soon started calling into question the whole assumption that the law is an important deterrent to criminal conduct. Indeed, many control theorists take the position that the law is too narrow in scope, and argue we have to look at the threat of legal sanction in a broader context. We must

examine its potential impact on the informal networks to which offenders belong (i.e. while an offender may not be afraid of jail, he may be afraid of losing the respect of friends and family, and the effects of legal threats may vary in accordance with the strengths of such attachments).

Such thinking lead to newer versions of control theory that focuses on the positive aspects of socialization. It is important to recognize that the basic logic of social disorganization theory already pointed, at least implicitly, in this direction. It focused on problems in socialization - the process by which one generation of people passes its beliefs, values and normative constraints to another. In a disorganized social environment, this "training to conform" will be interrupted, such that at the individual level many people will fail to develop the self-censoring consciences which regulate behavior. Simply stated, disorganization theorists assume that: (1) the presence of normative chaos results in disrupted socialization (an idea rooted in W.I. Thomas' work on the Polish Peasant); and (2) disrupted socialization results in weakened internal normative constraint. It largely is out of this latter aspect of the social disorganization perspective that contemporary social control theory emerged. Now, not everyone in society is socialized equally, not everyone responds to this training in the same manner, and some trainers are better than others. Thus, individuals who don't conform may be seen as products of poor or inadequate socialization.

Walter Reckless, a student of Robert Park, first elaborated this idea through what he termed *containment theory*. He argued that social structural factors, such as social disorganization, are mediated by social psychological factors surrounding the process of socialization. He conceived of these factors as those of *inner containment* and *outer containment*. Inner containment largely consists of factors such as self-control, good self-concept, ego strength, well-developed superego, high frustration tolerance, high resistance to diversions, high sense of responsibility, goal orientation, an ability to find substitute satisfactions, tension reducing rationalizations, etc. Such inner constraints or containments, once produced in the process of socialization, were said to isolate an individual from pushes or pulls in the direction of deviance. Yet, these also existed in a kind of dynamic tension with the relative presence or absence of a host of outer containment factors - structural buffers in the person's immediate social world (e.g. consistent presentation of moral values, institutional support for belief in and realization of internalized norms, goals and expectations, clear social delineation of roles, rules, and responsibilities, the effective operation of supervision and discipline, the availability of safety valves for letting off steam conventionally, and the opportunity for acceptance, identity and belonging. When strong, these reinforce the control power of inner containments.

Now, during periods of social disorganization, a variety of external containment factors would be lacking. Yet, strong inner containment factors may still operate to shield people from the lure of deviance. Thus, we must always consider the relative strengths and dynamic interplay between these two forces of social control.

A second variant of control theory was postulated by Ivan Nye (1958), which emphasized the role of the family as an agent of socialization. Drawing on Freudian psychology (as does much of social control theory, albeit more implicitly), Nye points to the baser animal instincts

ingrained in the human psyche. The assumption is that all humans are born with the same tendencies toward deviance. However, only a few violate social norms due to four types of social control emanating from the family environment: internal control, indirect control, direct control, and legitimate need satisfaction. Internal control involves conditioning children by rewards and punishments to internalize family and social values as a conscience - something that will make them feel good if they conform and vice versa. Indirect control involves the idea that people do not wish to shame, hurt, or heap disrespect on those for whom they care deeply, so they conform to social values. Direct control involves the efforts of conventional groups like the family and school to restrict the activities of youth, all backed up by the threat of informal and formal sanctions. Finally, if families prepare kids to become successful in school and at work, society enables them to legitimately meet their needs for affection, security and recognition - serving as controls as well. Nye contends that variations in the strengths of these various controls result in variations in conduct ranging from conformity to deviance. Strong controls overcome people's baser instincts and produce obedience to social regulations. Weak controls, in contrast, permit innate animal impulses to surface and to be more freely expressed as deviance.

A third variant of control theory conceptualizes the socialization of social control in terms of the establishment of strong social bonds with others bearing conformist values. When such bonds are effective, they discourage criminal conduct. The best known version of this argument is that of Travis Hirschi (1969). He argues that when our bonds to conformist others are meaningful, we are forced to take their opinions into account when we act. If, however, we are detached from others who hold values of conformity, we are more free to so as we please - and act in a criminal fashion.

Hirschi attempted to further specify several dimensions of the social bonding process which, when underdeveloped or disrupted, increase the likelihood of deviant behavior. This has both inner and outer dimensions. The inner dimensions are characterized by socialization into a set of conventional *beliefs* about how one should act, toward whom, where and when. Yet, these do not always operate successfully to prevent deviation. Hence, he also considers what he refers to as the outer dimensions of social bonding. For Hirschi, these bonds to society is seen as made up of 3 distinct but related bands: (i) *attachment*: the degree to which individuals are sensitive to the expectations of others representing the world of conformity; (ii) *commitment*: investments of time and energy made to conventional lines of activity (which may be put at risk); and (iii) *involvement*: the extent to which time and energy are used up by non-criminal pursuits, limiting time for criminal ones. Taken together, Hirschi's theory permits us to imagine more concretely, in a social psychological fashion, how social disorganization and rapid social change destroys the control power of the normative order by disrupting one or more of the bonds of attachment. Indeed, it suggests that one should attempt to induce conformity by attaching individuals to society with positive bonds, thus making them want to conform.

Hirschi backed up his theory with a survey of 1300 California schoolboys, comparing their admitted delinquent behaviors with a series of questions measuring their social bonding. In general, Hirschi's findings support the central propositions of his theory. While most of the

delinquency was of a minor nature, his data suggest that high levels of attachment, commitment, involvement and belief are related to a low level of delinquency. Hirschi's research was later largely confirmed by work conducted by Michael Hindelang a few years later. Thus, this theory may be viewed as an empirically promising social-psychological extension of basic themes involved in the social disorganization perspective.

A fourth major variant of control theory emerges out of the work of John Braithewaite (1989), which also deals with informal social control (e.g. by relatives, friends) He discusses how society controls us through shaming. This involves expressions of social disapproval designed to invoke remorse in the wrongdoer. According to Braithewaite, there are 2 types of shaming: disintegrative and reintegrative. The former punishes the offender, stigmatizing, rejecting, ostracizing - in effect banishing the person from conventional society. But reintegrative shaming is more positive. It involves making wrongdoers feel guilty while showing them understanding, forgiveness, or even respect. It is the kind of shaming that affectionate parents administer to their misbehaving child - hating the sin but not the sinner. Thus, reintegrative shaming serves to reintegrate - or welcome back - the deviant into conventional society.

Braithewaite feels that such reintegrative shaming is more common in communitarian societies marked by strong social relationships but weak individualism (e.g. Japan). Conversely, he feels that disintegrative shaming is more common in more individualistic societies, such as in North America. Still, his view is that reintegrative shaming is more likely to discourage further deviance, while disintegrative shaming - or stigmatization - encourages it. This may explain why crime rates are much higher in the U.S. than Japan.

Braithewaite thus argues that we, as a society, can significantly reduce our crime rates by adopting policies emphasizing reintegrative shaming rather than stigmatization in dealing with criminals. Since the early 1990's reintegrative shaming has appeared in North America as "shaming penalties" (e.g. "John's" being identified in newspapers, drunk drivers being ordered to display "DUI" bumper stickers, etc.) It is also a major plank in the current push for restorative justice approaches in criminology and criminal justice circles.

Aside from the four major variants of control theory discussed thus far, we can add several more. For example, there is the work of David Matza (1964), who argues that the bond to society and delinquent behavior should be understood more in situational terms. In order to commit delinquent acts, youths must be able to rationalize their behavior to be released from the moral constraints that would normally prohibit such acts. This rationalization he terms neutralization, and functions to temporarily and sporadically deprive delinquents of moral constraints to transgress them (e.g. that the deviant acts are not really important, that people act that way all the time, and/or that adults are allowed to get away with similar acts so why can't they). Recent empirical work suggests that neutralization processes are important in the facilitation of crime, and over time "harden" the behavior by reinforcing it.

More recently, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) have proposed a general theory of crime

that builds on earlier formulations. Defining crime generally as the use of force or fraud undertaken in the pursuit of self-interest, these authors argue that the key to criminal involvement is the concept of low self-control. Individuals lacking in self-control will be attracted to crime because such behaviors often require little skill or planning, promise immediate gratification, and are risky or thrilling. They are also likely to be involved in other activities that have similar characteristics (drug use, skipping classes). Such low self-control is rooted in childhood reflecting the influence of family contexts where parents don't monitor or punish their children effectively. So far, this theory has accumulated limited, mixed empirical support.

Finally, Sampson and Laub (1993) have proposed a variant termed life course theory. This distinguishes between trajectories and transitions in life. The former refers to the pathways on which people are located or the general directions in which their lives seem to be heading. Transitions, however, are specific life events (e.g. divorce) that may alter personal trajectories. For example, an abusive childhood may set someone on a criminal trajectory, but this may be diverted by settling down with a nurturing relationship. Trajectories may change when transitions alter the number and nature of social connections that help ensure conformity. A more recent example would consider how, over the past several decades, young males were more likely to leave home earlier, wait longer to marry and become parents. The net effect was to delay or prevent young males from connecting with those social networks that would have controlled criminal behavior.

Whatever variants of control theory we are speaking of, however, all suggest that some form of control prevents people from committing deviant acts, and the lack of control prompts the commission of such acts. The various theories differ largely in regard to what type of control can prevent deviance.

Social Control Theory and Social Policy:

Policy based on more traditional notions of deterrence simply suggest increasing the severity, certainty and swiftness of criminal sanctions. Needless to say, while publicly popular, these would be criticized by more recent control theorists as too narrowly focused

Since more recent variants of social control theory based on the idea of inadequate socialization generally call for the strengthening of inner and outer informal controls, social policy interventions in this vein have included things like individual, group and family counseling (i.e. to increase intra-family unity and instill a deeper sense of right and wrong in youth). Social service agencies have also promoted education and work projects designed to involve youth in conventional activities, thereby fostering greater conformity in them. Such initiatives are popular because they fit nicely with commonsense notions that delinquency and crime result from poor upbringing and the idea that "idle hands are the devil's work".

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Assessment of Social Control Theory:

The body of evidence that has accumulated in support of the general logic of control theory varies considerably depending on which variant of the theory is in question. For example, the formal deterrence doctrine has only received conflicting support in research. Various studies, for example, show that arresting wife-beaters deters violence more than less severe forms of punishment, such as ordering them to stay away for a few hours. However, studies on released prisoners show just the opposite: the more severe their sentence, the more likely they will be to commit crimes again (high rates of recidivism aren't good publicity for specific deterrence, given the "crime school" environment of prisons & stigma of being an "ex-con").

Not only that, many crimes are not rationally calculated or well thought through, so it is harder to deter them than rationally planned actions. Moreover, many people are unaware of what the penalty is for a specific offence, so it is hard for them to calculate the cost vs.benefit prior to acting. Finally in this respect, the real world conditions of punishment in our justice system mean that punishment will certainly not be swift, certain, nor very severe.

Just as the findings from studies of specific deterrence are inconsistent, so are the data from studies that deal with general deterrence. Early studies, for example, noted that the stronger the punishment for homicide (the death penalty), the lower the rate of homicide, and the same pattern follows for other offences. Other studies, however, have found the opposite, or that this pattern only holds for economic crimes such as robbery and auto theft, not traditional violent crimes such as homicide and assault. At the very least, not all crimes are equally affected by deterrence. In addition, it may be that manipulating severity of sanction may not be as significant as changing the relative certainty or swiftness of sanction. Of course, to do either would require a fundamental restructuring of our criminal justice system in ways that might not appeal to our constitutional values and ideals of human rights.

Aside from the social control aspects of deterrence, critics have pointed out that the more informal theories of Reckless, Nye and Hirschi have their own problems. For example, it has been argued that they contain concepts that are vague and overlap conceptually (e.g. some of Hirschi's components of the social bond could apply to the same thing, like lots of study/homework). It is also argued that the relative importance of the various forms of inner and outer controls remain largely undetermined, nor have their interactive effects.

Nevertheless, researchers have extensively tested containment, family ties and social bond explanations of deviance with adolescent data, and generally support the hypothesis that strong controls foster conformity and that weak or nonexistent controls unleash deviant impulses. With regard to Hirshi's social bond approach, many studies have been supportive. For example, deviants such as juvenile delinquents, drug users and drunk drivers have been found to have a weaker social bond or self control than non-deviants. Still, many of the studies were cross-sectional, and as such couldn't have controlled for the possible reciprocal effect of deviance on social bonding and self-control. Maybe it is the deviance that causes people to have a weaker

social bond, not the other way around. Given these difficulties, the restraining effect of the social bond or self-control on deviance may not be as strong as Hirschi and his colleagues think.

It has also been pointed out that theories emphasizing informal controls have not been carefully tested with adults and the utility of such theories in explaining adult deviance is dubious (i.e. the adult world is far more complicated - as is what is right and wrong - than in the simple world presented to children: think of people who are "caught in the middle" in messy family disputes where close attachments to each group suggest actions that would be moral to one, "selling out" to the other. Also, it has been convincingly argued that corporate crime may in fact result from too great an attachment or bonding with a corporation - or occupational group - that encourages illegal activity, etc).

Third, with regard to Braithewaite's work on shaming, he is only partly convincing that we in North America can reduce crime with reintegrative shaming - by treating criminals in the same lenient, compassionate way that Japan does. This treatment may work when applied to first time offenders who have committed relatively minor crimes and still retain a sense of shame for their crimes. But it can hardly have the same positive impact on hardened criminals who have lost their sense of shame for their crimes. Moreover, since reintegrative shaming is part and parcel of a communitarian society, it could be pervasiveness of such a society's strong social relationships rather than reintegrative shaming that largely keeps the crime rate low. Whether it could be transplanted here with similar success is a tough call.

Fourth, other questions remain. Some question the distinction between deviants and conformists as an oversimplification in our complex society. Some doubt that such arguments can be generalized beyond the adolescents studied. But perhaps the most frequent criticism is that the various control theories share a simplistic view of social control, regarding it as only a preventer of deviance. They fail to see it as a possible cause of deviance in its own right (e.g. social bonds to corporations may actually encourage corporate crimes, reintegrative shaming may encourage officials to presume the accused guilty, aggressive law enforcement may trigger lawbreaking acts, such as resisting arrest, and "sting" operations may encourage/entrap individuals who would have otherwise conformed).

Finally, there has not been enough research on the relative effects of formal and informal social controls. Do they interact? How? Which are more important in deterring deviant behavior? What levels of informal control must exist for formal controls to deter deviance? Research on these, and other questions above is needed before we can ultimately assess the utility of social control theory for explaining - and possibly for controlling - deviant behavior.