

5.11: Control Theories

Previously discussed theories asked why people commit crime. The methods used tried to identify the driving forces behind a criminal's behavior. For example, biological and psychological theories sought to identify traits that determined criminality. Strain theories assumed people were good, but bad things happen, which causes many to be pushed into criminal behaviors. Learning theories demonstrated the importance of learning criminal attitudes to commit crimes. These attitudes, especially when reinforced, will prevail in social situations. Control theories differ in their approach. Instead of assuming criminals have "something" or experienced "something" that drives their criminal behavior, control theories ask why *more* people do not engage in illegal behavior. Control theories assume people are naturally selfish, and if left to their own devices, will commit illegal and immoral acts. Control theories try to identify what types of "controls" a person may have that stops them from becoming "uncontrollable."

Early control theorists argued that there are multiple controls on individuals. Personal controls are exercised through reflection and following pro-social normative behavior. Social controls originate in social institutions like family, school, and religious conventions. Toby (1957) introduced the phrase "stakes in conformity," which is how much a person has to lose if he or she engages in criminal behavior.^[1] The more stakes in conformity a person has, the less likely they would be willing to commit crime. For example, a married teacher with kids has quite a bit to lose if he or she decided to start selling drugs. If caught, he could lose his job, get divorced, and possibly lose custody of his children. However, juveniles tend not to have kids nor are they married. They may have a job, but indeed not a career. Since they have fewer stakes in conformity, they would be much more likely to commit crime compared to the teacher.

Travis Hirschi is most associated with control theories. In 1969, he argued that all humans have the propensity to commit crime, but those who have strong bonds and attachment to social groups like family and school are less likely to commit crime.^[2] Often known as social bond theory or social control theory, Hirschi presented four elements of a social bond – attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Attachment refers to affection we have towards others. If we have strong bonds, we are more likely to care about their opinions, expectations, and support. Attachment involves an emotional connectedness to others, especially parents, who provide indirect control.

Parenting Exercise

Parenting can be a challenging responsibility. Parents are supposed to teach children how to behave. Ideally, parents have control over their children in many ways.

- What are ways parents have "direct" control over their children?
- What are ways parents have "indirect" control over their children?

Commitment refers to the rational component of the social bond. If we are committed to conformity, our actions and decisions will mirror our commitment. People invest time, energy, and money into expected behavior like school, sports, career development, or playing a musical instrument. These are examples of Toby's "stakes in conformity." If people started committing a crime, they would risk losing these investments. Involvement and commitment are related. Since our time and energy are limited, Hirschi thought people who were involved in socially accepted activities would have little time to commit a crime. The observational phrase "idle hands are the devil's workshop" fits this component. Belief was the final component of the social bond. Hirschi claimed some juveniles are less likely to obey the law. Although some control theorists believed juveniles are tied to the conventional moral order and "drift" in and out of delinquency by neutralizing controls (Matza, 1964), Hirschi disagreed.^[3] He believed people vary in their beliefs about the rules of society. The essential element of the bond is an attachment. Eventually, Hirschi moved away from his social bond theory into the general theory of crime.

Hirschi Exercise

Hirschi believed strong social bonds made people less likely to commit a crime. The components of a social bond include attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Please describe each of the components of the social bond and explain how each applies to your educational journey. How can you be attached, committed, involved, and believe in higher education?

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) claimed their theory could explain all crime by all people. They argued the lack of self-control was the primary cause of criminal behaviors. They claim most ordinary crimes require few skills to commit and have an immediate payoff.^[4] There is not any long-term planning or goal; crimes are committed for immediate pleasure. Moreover, they claim, people who commit these ordinary crimes tend to be impulsive, insensitive to the suffering of others, short-sighted, and adventuresome. If

true, these traits (low self-control) were established before the person started committing crimes and will continue to manifest throughout a person's life. The root cause of low self-control is ineffective parenting. If parents are not attached to their child, supervise their child, recognize the child's deviant behaviors, or discipline their child, the child will develop low self-control. Gottfredson and Hirschi claim self-control, or the lack thereof, is established by eight years old.

Control theories are vastly different from other criminological theories. They assume people are selfish and would commit crimes if left to their own devices. However, socialization and effective child-rearing can establish direct, indirect, personal, and social controls on people. These are all types of informal controls.

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1. Toby, J. (1957). Social disorganization and stake in conformity: Complementary factors in the predatory behavior of hoodlums. *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science*, 48, 12-17. [↵](#)
 2. Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. [↵](#)
 3. Matza, D. (1964). *Delinquency and drift*. New York, NY: John Wiley. [↵](#)
 4. Gottfredson, M., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. [↵](#)
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