

Week 7 (3/2): SOCIAL CONTROL THEORY AND LIFE-COURSE VARIANTS

Hirschi, Travis. 1969. *Causes of Delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chapter 1

Hirschi sets out to explain the differences between control theory, strain theory, and cultural deviance or differential association theories. He offers several criticisms of strain theory, including the fact that strain theory is often unable to account for the desistance from crime after adolescence/during adulthood, the inability of strain theory to account for crime in the middle and upper economic classes, and strain theory's suggestion that people who accept legitimate goals or whose values conform to those of the larger society are more likely to commit crime (p. 6-10). Hirschi differentiates between control and strain theories by suggesting that control theory "assumes variation in morality" while strain theory assumes that morality/moral values lead to the pressures that result in crime as an attempt to quickly and easily achieve goals (p. 10-11). (Chapter 2 deals exclusively with the definition of control theory). Hirschi also explains "theories of cultural deviance" as similar to differential association. Such theories postulate that while crime or deviance may violate the norms or standards of the majority of society, they also represent a conformity to other norms and standards shared only by a subset of the society. Cultural deviance theory thus explains crime as learned through interactions with specific subsets of the population who have different norms and standards (that accept certain criminal or deviant behaviors shunned by the majority of society). Hirschi points out that while he cannot outright reject cultural deviance theories, they are markedly different in both method and type of findings from social control theories.

Chapter 2

"Control theories assume that delinquent acts result when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken" (p. 16). Based on this statement, Hirschi breaks his explanation of control theory down into two concepts: the individual's bond and society. Control theory does not specify which institutions or elements of society are most important, but does hold that actors' bonds to such institutions are important in determining deviance. Hirschi sees these bonds as comprised of four different elements (outlined below).

- **Elements of the Bond:**

The first element of the social bond is attachment, where a person's relative level of attachment to others determines his/her commitment to commonly held norms and values. In other words, the less attached a person is to others and their opinions, the more free he/she is to deviate. Low levels of attachment to others are often produced through interpersonal conflict and alienation. The second element is commitment, which is understood as a person's level of commitment and investment in legal behavior and the benefits that result from it. Social control theory assumes that people with a low level of commitment to conformity will be more likely to commit crime because, when they rationally weigh the costs and benefits of crime, they have "less to lose". The third element of the social bond in control theory is the actor's involvement in conventional versus deviant or criminal activities. Simply put, actors who are highly involved in conventional activities are less likely to have time for (and possibly the resources for) committing crime. Fourth, unlike cultural deviance theories, social control theory holds that the actor believes in a common value system within his/her society or subgroup. Thus, the motivation to deviate must be sufficiently strong to overcome the individual's belief in these common values and morals. As Hirschi puts it, control theorists thus assume that "there is

variation in the extent to which people believe they should obey the rules of society, and, furthermore, that the less a person believes he should obey the rules, the more likely he is to violate them" (p. 26). Finally, Hirschi explicates the relationships between these four elements. Attachment to "conventional others" and commitment to (instrumental) conformity tend to vary along the same lines, while high levels of commitment to conformity also imply high levels of involvement in legal activities that preclude deviant activity. Attachment to conventional others also appears to be related to belief in common values, although sometimes a high level of one can make up for a low level of the other in preventing deviant behavior.

Sampson, Robert J. and John H. Laub. 1990. "Crime and Deviance over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds." *American Sociological Review* 55:609-627.

Using data collected by the Gluek's between 1925 and 1960) Sampson and Laub seek to demonstrate that while there is often continuity in criminal/deviant behavior over time, criminality over the life course is also mediated by social bonds and ties during adulthood. To do this, Sampson and Laub expand on data collected beginning in 1925 by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, in a sample of approximately 1,000 men who were born between 1924 and 1935. Half of the sample was comprised of "delinquent" boys who were committed to correctional schools as juveniles, while the other half (the control group) was made up of "non-delinquent" boys who were enrolled in Boston public schools and who were one-to-one matched according to age, race/ethnicity, SES and IQ.

Sampson and Laub hypothesize that anti-social behavior during childhood (measured by official delinquency status, self, parent, and teacher reports, and temper tantrums) leads to generally higher deviant and criminal involvement as an adult, but can be mediated by the informal social controls of job stability, commitment to occupational goals, and attachment to spouse. In accordance with social control theory, they argue that strong social bonds in adulthood lead to decreased involvement in crime and deviance, while weak social bonds lead to more crime and deviance.

The initial data (Table 1, p. 615) shows that delinquency and anti-social behavior as a child (regardless of the way its measured) is strongly and significantly linked with adult behavioral outcomes. In addition, job stability, commitment to educational and occupational goals and aspirations, and attachment to spouses (when applicable) all have significant, positive effects on adult behaviors. In both samples, job stability in young adulthood proved to be predictive of alcohol use, general deviance, and arrest later in life. Among ever-married men, the negative influence of job stability on delinquent behavior declined in magnitude, but for all men in the delinquent group the negative effects of job stability on crime increased with age. Among men in the delinquent group who were/are married, at ages 25-32, high attachment to their spouses indicated much lower levels of crime than men with low marital attachment. The effect of commitment levels on crime in the delinquent group is fairly weak.

Among those men who originally belonged to the control group, the general pattern is similar and job instability and weak marital attachment continue to be directly related to adult crime and deviance (p. 622). Variations in reported childhood delinquency within this group of "unofficial delinquents" proved predictive of arrests as a young adult and excessive drinking. Sampson and Laub thus conclude that "independent of juvenile delinquency, the largest significant influence on overall adult crime is job stability...[and] income and commitment are unimportant in the presence of job stability and marital attachment... Furthermore, the largest effect on overall adult criminal and deviant behavior for both groups is [high] marital attachment..." (p. 624). These findings show that both continuity

and change in deviance and criminality can be expected over the life course, and that social bonds modify trajectories of crime and deviance (p.625).

Edin, Kathryn, Timothy J. Nelson, and Rechelle Paranal. 2004. "Fatherhood and Incarceration as Potential Turning Points in the Criminal Careers of Unskilled Men." Pp. 46-75 in *Imprisoning America: The Social Effects of Mass Incarceration*, edited by Mary Pattillo, David Weiman, and Bruce Western. New York: Russell Sage.

Edin et al. use social control theory to investigate whether fatherhood changes the criminal trajectories of non-custodial fathers who are unskilled or semiskilled laborers. Using a dataset composed of 300 in-depth interviews with such men who have at least one child in Philadelphia, PA and Charleston, SC, Edin et al. look for evidence that fatherhood has led to a change or desistance in criminal behaviors, as well as how incarceration affects non-custodial fathers' bonds with their children (and their children's mothers) and their likelihood of desisting from crime. They postulate that "the event of fatherhood can sharply alter how men perceive the risks and rewards of criminal activity" (8). The non-random sample is evenly divided by race/ethnicity as well as age (under 30 or over 30), and was obtained by referral and canvassing in low-income neighborhoods identified through census data.

Although some fathers did say that their lives would be easier without children, the "overwhelming majority of those interviewed" indicated that fatherhood had positively changed their trajectories and that "their present situations would be much worse without the presence of children" because they would be more heavily involved with crime, drugs, or alcohol and their consequences (10). This appears to be true even for fathers who are not highly involved with their children. Many of the fathers interviewed expressed a desire to desist from crime or at least minimize their criminal behaviors so that they could "be there" – financially and emotionally – for their children without the threat of incarceration or other consequences of crime.

Edin et al.'s findings also suggest that incarceration can result in several different trajectories, depending on the father's situation before imprisonment. For offenders who have contact or bonds with their children (and often their children's mothers) before incarceration, incarceration negatively affected these relationships, since they never or infrequently saw their children, missed developmental milestones, and their girlfriend (the mother of at least one of their children) almost always moved on to another romantic relationship. In addition, the mother may use the father's incarceration to justify ending the relationship, "talking trash" to the child or others about the father, or preventing the father from visiting or obtaining custody of his child. Social control theorists speculate that men whose previous family bonds have been broken by incarceration will be more likely to continue their criminal behavior unchanged after their release because of their diminished attachments. However, for offenders whose criminal behavior and lifestyle choices (often related to alcohol or drug abuse) had already severed their child and romantic ties before incarceration, the period of incarceration may prove to be a turning point where the father "gets his priorities straight", gets clean, or recommits himself to his children, their care, and his emotional bond with them, thus decreasing his likelihood of returning to the same level of criminal behavior when released and increasing his likelihood of desisting from crime altogether. Older rather than younger fathers tend to try to repair severed bonds during incarceration, because they have had enough experience at this point to learn that "crime

does not pay" and they plan to desist from crime upon their release. In these cases incarceration can be seen as a "turning point" which offers the opportunity to rebuild severed ties.

****Page numbers based on photocopy of article (Edin et al. only)****

Costello, Barbara, and Paul Vowell. "Testing Control Theory and Differential Association: A Reanalysis of the Richmond Youth Project Data." *Criminology* 37:815-42.

In 1982, Ross Matsueda conducted a test of control and differential association theories using Hirschi's 1969 Richmond Youth Project Data (a self-report survey of high school students) and concluded that differential association provided a better explanation of delinquency than control theory. Costello and Vowell challenge Matsueda's findings and his conclusion that definitions favorable to law violation (as set out by Sutherland's explication of differential association theory, 1947) completely mediate the effects of social control measures of social bonds and friends' delinquency. Costello and Vowell contend that Matsueda's social control model was incomplete, as it omitted several "crucial constructs", including adequate measures of involvement and attachment and commitment to education and used background variables not usually associated with the control theory perspective. In addition, Costello and Vowell challenged the ordering of the constructs of belief and attachment to friends variables in Matsueda's causal chain. Matsueda's conception of social control theory allowed beliefs to have only an indirect effect on delinquency, while Hirschi's original development of the theory clearly stated that all elements of the social bond have direct effects on delinquency. Matsueda also held that friends' delinquency directly affected beliefs, while original control theory holds that levels of belief should directly influence choices of friends. Finally, Matsueda specifies friends' delinquency as causally prior to attachment to friends, but control theorists actually posit that causation actually occurs the other way around.

Costello and Vowell re-test Matsueda's theory using the same data (1,090 non-black males), but rectify the issues mentioned above. Like Matsueda, Costello and Vowell create three different models (see Figure 1, p. 822) which allow them to test the amount of variation explained by multiple factor theory, differential association theory, and social control theory. After re-analyzing the data according to these changes, Costello and Vowell's results provided much more support for social control than differential association theory – a direct refutation of Matsueda's findings. "The strength of the individual's bond to parents and peers, in combination with the individual's commitment to conventional goals, had the strongest influence on delinquency in [their] test of multiple factor theory" (p. 836). In addition, their analyses showed that the elements of the social bond had a big influence on the choice of friends (delinquent versus non-delinquent), in keeping with social control theory's idea that self-selection can explain part of the relationship between delinquency and friends' delinquency. Although definitions favorable to law violation did mediate the effects of social bonds and friends' delinquency, social bonds and friends' delinquency continued to have significant, direct effects on delinquency. This finding contradicts Matsueda's claim that definitions have stronger direct effects on delinquency than social bonds and friends' delinquency, and allows Costello and Vowell to conclude that control theory provides a better explanation of delinquency than differential association theory.

Heimer, Karen, and Ross L. Matsueda. 1994. "Role-Taking, Role Commitment, and Delinquency: A Theory of Differential Social Control." *American Sociological Review* 59:365-390.

Heimer and Matsueda create a symbolic interactionist theory of delinquency that, while based on social control theory, puts the locus of social control in the process of role-taking – the individual's ability to take the role of the other in evaluating his or her actions and others' reactions to them. Youths who associate with delinquent peers, hold delinquent attitudes, and who receive "delinquent reflected appraisals" (feedback from others that positively rewards or at least does not condemn delinquent behaviors) are more likely to self-identify as delinquent and to commit delinquent acts. Social disorganization, attachment and commitment have only indirect effects on delinquency through this process of role-taking.

In the role-taking process, the self consists of a set of "reflected appraisals" or others' opinions and reactions to the individual's actions and decisions. When the individual is faced with a problem, she "views herself from the standpoint of others, considers alternative solutions to the [problem], and appraises potential justifications and reactions of significant others to those alternatives" (p. 366). Role-taking includes five major processes that affect delinquent behavior, together termed "Differential Social Control"*.

Heimer and Matsueda point out that the generalized other whose reactions both shape the individual and his/her actions, "can vary in scope and depth, ranging from small informal groups to informal communities" with varying behavioral regulations and varying effectiveness in controlling their members' actions (p. 368). This process, where delinquent behavior is controlled by organized groups, is termed "differential organizational control" (p. 369). Differential organizational control is exercised by families, peer groups, communities, and schools.

Heimer and Matsueda test their theory using data on 918 male respondents collected in three waves by the National Youth Survey between 1976 and 1981. The sample is "reasonably representative of all youths ages 11 to 17 in the United States in 1976" (p. 372) and uses six types of variables, including background variables, prior delinquency, measures of commitments to conventional roles and goals, parents' attitudes to delinquency, delinquent peer associations, measures of role-taking, and subsequent delinquent behavior. Heimer and Matsueda test the ability of differential social control, social disorganization, control theories, labeling theory, and differential association to account for the effects of the variables described above on delinquency. Their results include five main findings that provide support for differential social control theory over the other classical theories, although parts of the classical theories are supported as well. First, they find that delinquency results mainly from the variables used to measure role-taking: self-appraisal as "rule violator" from the standpoint of others, delinquent peers, attitudes favorable to delinquency, and prior delinquent behavior. Second, delinquency is indirectly affected by commitments to conventional roles, residential characteristics, and structural locations. This is consistent with symbolic interaction theory. Third, consistent with differential association theory, learned attitudes toward crime and associating with delinquent peers partially account for delinquency. Fourth, similar to labeling theory, there is some support for the fact that once labeled deviant by others (especially parents), an individual is more likely to actually commit deviant behaviors. Fifth, while strong ties to conventional institutions do significantly affect delinquency (as predicted by control theory), these effects are mediated by role-taking (p. 382-383).

* The inclusion of this explanation of role-taking is too long for a regular précis, but is definitely helpful in understanding the concept: First, since the meaning of the self is a set of reflected appraisals, appraisals that label the individual as a delinquent or trouble maker

(whether accurate or not), make him or her more likely to engage in delinquent acts. Second, the attitudes toward behavior that are held by the surrounding group or community (termed the generalized other) are incorporated into the self, and the individual experiences discontinuity when these attitudes do not allow successful resolutions of problems. As a result, the individual may change her attitude from that of the original generalized other to one that is consistent with a behavior that will solve the problem (in this case, delinquent behavior). In order to provide continuity between the new and old attitudes, the individual is forced to either join a new group where the delinquent behavior is acceptable or to create justifications for engaging in delinquent behavior without rejecting the attitudes of the generalized other group they currently belong to. When attitudes favoring delinquent behavior are used continually over time, either because of the success of the justification or because the individual joined a new group which promotes attitudes conducive to such behavior, the attitudes become incorporated into the self and grow stronger and more stable over time. Third, in deciding which action to take and what attitudes to accept or reject, the individual must anticipate the reactions of significant others (i.e. parents, teachers, friends) and consider the consequences of their actions in terms of their self-image, their reputation with others, and other consequences. The more negative reactions that are anticipated, the less likely the individual is to engage in delinquent behavior. Fourth, role taking implies that associating with delinquent peers positively influences delinquency both by providing a generalized other group with pro-delinquent attitudes and justifications and by providing opportunities for delinquency. Fifth, when delinquent behavior is repeatedly used to solve problems, delinquency can become habitual and is no longer used as a "last resort".

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you take issue with any of Hirschi's criticisms of strain or cultural deviance theories? If so, how? Explain why one or both of these theories might be better fitted to explaining crime in general or certain types of crime. Can these three theories somehow be combined to create a more accurate approach to explaining crime and deviance or are they too different from each other?
2. Explain how Sampson and Laub and Edin et al's studies and findings build on what Hirschi outlines in his explanation of control theory. (i.e., both articles appear to add life-course elements in with control theory in explaining variation in crime and desistance.) Is control theory better suited to certain types of methods?
3. How is strain different from low levels of attachment, commitment, and belief?
4. How would Merton critique social control theory? What would he say is missing from the explanations and studies we read? How might the concept of strain affect these conceptions of crime and deviance?
5. How might social control theory explain the issues you're looking at in your own research?