
The Essence And Contribution Of Control Theory

Control theory is an approach in criminology which attempts to answer the question “why don’t people commit crime?” by highlighting the importance of the relationship between delinquents and their social group- the bond they have with society. The origins of control theory can be linked back to Aristotle who sought to answer the question of “Why do people obey society?”; he believed that “when there is an appearance of profit or pleasure from breaking the laws, that makes men break them” Durkheim later wrote in *Suicide* that boundaries placed on desires of humans depend on the individual, regardless of any external regulation. Meaning that the characteristics of the individual situation are essential when deducing the cause of crimes. Some of the most influential early control theories were neutralization theory and Hirschi’s theories on the causes of delinquency. Most of the early control theories are critical of earlier theories like Robert Merton’s ‘anomie’ or ‘strain’ theory as they predict too much working-class crime and take the role of conformity for granted. Sykes and Matza developed early control theories built upon rejecting the idea, held by many early theorists; that offenders had fundamentally different values from ‘non-offenders’.

Early control theories, like neutralization theory, contributed to our understanding of the causes of crime by offering a functional alternative to subcultural theories by stating all people possess “delinquent principles” that can lead to people committing crime. Sykes and Matza claimed that in society there are ‘formal rules’- which are general rules concerning delinquency that all people tend to follow- and ‘subterranean rules’ which permit short-term hedonism; an example of a subterranean rule is rugby players being allowed to be aggressive on the pitch but not off the pitch. These values can be reinforced by role models- such as parents and teachers- and children observe adults using biases which can demonstrate to a child that what matters most is getting ahead. According to Sykes and Matza all delinquents are doing is exaggerating the ‘subterranean values’ that all of society share in some contexts: all people in society do this sometimes, but delinquents engage in the exaggeration in a more dedicated way.

One of the limitations of this theory is that the majority of the research supporting Sykes and Matza’s theory comes from juvenile delinquents; many criminologists argue that this makes it difficult to generalize the findings to the entire population as this could mean their findings are not representative of delinquency in all of society. However, Matza did find that many people who were delinquent at an early age frequently go on to lead respectable lives as adults. Their ability to conform to social norms when they mature indicates they were socialized into the same principles as those who did not participate in deviant behaviour at a young age.

Sykes and Matza’s theory also stated that the evidence for the existence of subterranean rules comes from people seeking to ‘neutralize’ deviant behaviours, because if offenders actually had a totally different principles then if they behaved defiantly, they would deem the deviant behaviour acceptable. Contrary to this, people regularly seek to rationalize their behaviour or question their culpability in terms of the norms of society; therefore, according to Matza, suggested people use several techniques of neutralization in order to commit crime. Delinquents employ neutralization techniques to break the law whilst remaining integrated into the general norms of society, also neutralization techniques permit children, that are bonded to society, to break the rules temporarily. These delinquents learn a variety of justifications for

delinquent behaviours that allow them to neutralize or explain to preserve their sense of self. Neutralization techniques include: denial of responsibility (e.g. "I didn't mean to do it"- uses the billiard board view of human behaviour; they believe that their behaviour is outside of their control), denial of injury (e.g. "No one was hurt" and "They can afford it"- the person is involved in crime but insists they didn't hurt anyone), denial of the victim (e.g. "They started it"- denial that anyone was a victim of their crime), condemnation of the condemners (e.g. "The other party are just as bad"- they excuse their behaviour by stating that those in positions of authority are corrupt, so why can't they be?), and the final technique is appeal to higher loyalties (e.g. "I was just helping my friends"). These five techniques are important as they give offenders an opportunity to free themselves from social control for a short time by allowing them to justify their actions.

One of the major impacts of this theory is that it led to an abundance of research supporting neutralization theory and many building on Sykes and Matza's ideas to form more complex theories. Jacobs et al. conducted research into criminal commitment amongst persistent offenders using interviews with carjackers. The results were consistent with traditional neutralization theory as many of the offenders who were interviewed presumed: "I am not bad, in fact, I'm good and here's why I did what I did". One of the interviewed offenders claimed they were not in control of their behaviour due to the influence of drugs; he said, "it was the drugs, it wasn't me that did it. It was the drugs that was doing it". There is also lots of real-life evidence supporting the use of neutralisation techniques to assuage guilt, i.e. they are used by perpetrators, witnesses and governments to deny organised atrocities like genocide, torture and inequalities in daily life. Despite this the findings of neutralization theories have been used to help prevent crime, create new policies and support the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders. One of the critics of neutralization theory was Travis Hirschi who didn't believe neutralization techniques were relevant when describing juvenile delinquency; Hirschi believed that deviant behaviour was a result of the conformity towards societal norms.

Another influential control theorist was Travis Hirschi who wrote 'Causes of Delinquency' in which he hypothesises 'delinquent acts are a result of an individual having a weak or broken bond with society'. Hirschi believes that offenders are not that different from non-offenders as well as that he believed earlier strain theories took deviance for granted and that conformity must be explained. There are four essential factors that can cause delinquency according to Hirschi's theory: attachment, commitment, involvement and beliefs. Attachment is the strong social and psychological attachments that people develop with other people and institutions in their community, socially bonded adolescents are less likely to become attached to delinquents and among those who do those who are socially bonded are less likely to commit delinquent acts. The second factor in Hirschi's theory is 'commitment' in which he states that those considering deviant behaviour risk losing the investment made into conventional behaviour. Another factor is involvement in conventional activities which can reduce the likelihood of delinquency. Hirschi final component is 'belief', which states our impressions and judgements are highly dependent upon social reinforcement, i.e. acceptance of social norms and respect for the moral legitimacy of the law.

A key strength of Hirschi's theory is that its supported by empirical evidence from self-report questionnaires which asked over four-thousand school children a series of questions to measure delinquency; the questions were designed to measure attachment, commitment, involvement and beliefs. Hirschi found that there was no strong correlation between class, ethnicity and offending. Furthermore, the data found minimal variation between children of white-

collar and manual workers in terms of involvement in crime. According to official crime statistics forty-two percent of black and eighteen percent of white boys had police records, however when self-report techniques were used forty-nine percent of black and forty-four percent of white boys reported having committed a delinquent act during the previous year. Overall, the evidence for a correlation between 'involvement' and conformity and between 'belief' and conformity was not too convincing. Despite this Hirschi did find strong support for a correlation between absence of attachment and delinquency; as the mother's supervision of the child increases the number of self-reported acts of crime decreases.

Control Theory, despite its broad acceptance, has received several criticisms; some of the opponents of the theory state it is over-simplified and that on its own lack of proper socialisation during childhood cannot explain deviant behaviours. Some also argue that control theory places too much importance on the attachments between the individual and society, as every society has norms which attempt to gain some control over the individual and this does not mean deeper bonds between the two will lead to lesser deviance. Control theory views individuals and society as separate and therefore it neglects problems like free-will and outside influences like media. This means control theory provides a limited view of societies social structure.

Elliot et., criticised control theories for not adequately explaining crimes of those in power; they instead suggested that integrated control theories would be more appropriate. In their integrated theory they state that poverty leads to poor socialization, which leads to associations with delinquent peers; association between having delinquent peers and involvement in crime. However, Hirschi argues that separate but unequal theories are better.

Control theories have contributed significantly to our understanding of why people commit crime by highlighting the ties between the individual and their society and the idea that this causes delinquent behaviour. Control theories have helped the development of policies to reduce delinquency; for example, Hirschi's theory can be seen in policies such as curfew laws, after-school programmes, parenting classes, and job placement programs. Hirschi explains delinquent behaviours are reduced when individuals have a positive influence as they tend to respond positively to bonds and controls and are less likely to deviate. Thus, while some aspects of control theory are oversimplified, it still provides insight into individual-society attachments; and emphasizes the idea that bonds are important but they do not necessarily dictate behaviour.