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Hirschi, Travis: Social Control Theory

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Social control theory was first expounded in its modern form by Travis Hirschi in his 1969 book *Causes of Delinquency*, which is one of the most heavily cited works in the field of criminology. Subjected to hundreds of empirical tests, social control theory is one of the most widely validated explanations of criminal and delinquent behavior. More than 40 years after its publication, it is still widely cited and tested. It continues to be tested in doctoral dissertation, and many of its key elements continue to be included in integrated theories of crime and in empirical inquiries, both in the United States and abroad. Although the theory is not without its critics, it would be difficult to overstate the influence of Hirschi's social control theory on the field of criminology.

The fundamental question addressed with social control theory can be traced back to the work of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes, and later the classical criminologists Jeremy Bentham and Cesare Beccaria, assumed that human nature is fundamentally asocial or selfish. This natural pursuit of self-interest will often result in people committing criminal, delinquent, and deviant behavior, because such behavior often results in quick and easy gratification of desires. For example, stealing something one wants is generally a quicker and easier way of obtaining it than is working for the money to buy it. We are not by nature inclined to consider the potentially negative effects of our behavior on others, nor are we inclined to care what those effects are. For control theory, then, crime is simply the result of the individual's rational calculation. In the absence of obvious negative consequences to the individual, crime is the most logical way to obtain desires. Because crime comes naturally and can fulfill universal desires, Hirschi rejected the question, "Why do they do it?" in favor of the question, "Why don't we do it?" (1969, p. 34). This approach placed control theory in opposition to the most popular theories at the time, strain theory and cultural deviance theory, and throughout *Causes of Delinquency* Hirschi contrasted control theory with these other approaches.

Hirschi's answer to the question, "Why don't we do it?" is that people who are **[p. 452 ↓]** highly socially integrated, or have a strong bond to society, are less willing than those with a weaker bond to risk the negative consequences that might follow criminal behavior. The most important of these negative consequences for control theory are informal punishments rather than the formal punishments that are meted out by the criminal justice system. For example, if we commit crime, we risk facing the disapproval of those whose opinions we value, such as our parents, friends, or spouses. Hirschi

(1969) refers collectively to the informal mechanisms of social control as the social bond, which comprises four interrelated elements presented below.

The Elements of the Social Bond

The first element of the social bond, *attachment*, refers to the individual's level of sensitivity to the opinions of others. To the extent that individuals are emotionally attached to others, such as parents, friends, teachers, and so on, they will be concerned about others' opinions of them, and they will therefore be less likely to commit crime for fear of losing the respect and affection of others. Hirschi (1969, p. 18) quoted Durkheim as stating, "We are moral beings to the extent that we are social beings." Put differently, if we are not tied to a society or members of that society, we are not bound by the rules of that society, and we are free to act in accordance with our own self-interest, which often leads us to commit crime. The second element of the social bond outlined by Hirschi is *commitment* to conventional goals, such as educational or occupational goals. People with occupational or educational goals for the future will be reluctant to risk losing the chance to achieve those goals. Engaging in delinquent behavior, of course, entails such a risk if the person's behavior comes to the attention of law enforcement officials, school authorities, and so on. It is difficult to attend medical school, for example, if one is in prison. To the extent that an individual holds conventional goals, then, he or she will be less likely to commit crime.

Although Hirschi's theory was designed specifically to explain delinquent behavior, commitment can also refer to resources one has accumulated over time and can thus be applied to adults as well. As Hirschi notes, if one has spent years acquiring a good reputation or a well-paying job, one will be less likely to engage in behaviors that could ruin that reputation or cost one his or her job.

The third element of the social bond is *involvement*, or the extent to which the individual's time is consumed by conventional activities. Involvement is perhaps the most "common sense" part of social control theory. The logic is simply that there are only so many hours in a day, and if a great deal of time is spent in activities like schoolwork, sports, hobbies, or a job, there is no time left for delinquency. As the old saying goes, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop."

The final element of the social bond is *belief* in conventional norms. Hirschi argued that there is variation in the extent to which people believe in the moral validity of laws and norms, so some individuals regard the norms of society with more reverence than do others. To the extent that an individual believes in the moral validity of norms, he or she will be less likely to deviate from them.

Hirschi was careful to differentiate his arguments about variation in belief in the conventional validity of the law from claims made by Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory and Gresham Sykes and David Matza's neutralization theory. Sutherland and other cultural deviance theorists argue that some groups hold norms or values that differ fundamentally from those of the conventional society, and Sykes and Matza argue that potential delinquents must “neutralize” or rationalize their beliefs that crime is wrong before they will commit crime. In contrast to these ideas, Hirschi argued that human societies are characterized by a single moral order, and discounted the idea that there are groups that positively value crime. Social control theory holds that delinquents violate rules that they believe in, but that those who do violate these rules tend not to believe as strongly as nondelinquents that they *should* follow the rules of society. Just as members of the same church vary in their level of religiosity, then, members of the same society vary in belief.

It is important to note that the elements of the social bond are interrelated. As Hirschi put it, “In general, the more closely a person is tied to conventional society in any of these ways, the more closely he is likely to be tied in the other ways” (1969, p. 27). Although many studies that set out to test social control theory look at separate effects of each element of the bond, social control theory is at [p. 453 ↓] root a general theory of social integration, and the empirical relationships between elements of the bond are well documented. Thus, any discussion of the effects of a single element of the social bond on delinquency should be considered a partial test of the theory rather than a test of the theory as a whole.

The Empirical Research

One aspect of Hirschi's book *Causes of Delinquency* that made it unique at the time was that he both set forth the theory and empirically tested its central claims. He also

contrasted those claims with those of the leading theories of the time, cultural deviance and strain theories. His findings and subsequent research on the theory are discussed below.

The data that Hirschi used for his initial test of the theory were collected from a sample of 4,077 students drawn from 11 junior and senior high schools in the Richmond, California, area in 1964. Although the sample included white and black boys and girls, most of Hirschi's empirical tests used only the white boys in his sample. Unless otherwise noted, Hirschi's findings discussed below refer only to white boys.

Attachment to Parents

Hirschi's test of the attachment hypothesis focused on the child's attachment to parents as being particularly important in reducing the likelihood of delinquency. His original test examined three dimensions of attachment to parents: virtual supervision, intimacy of communication with parents, and affectional identification. Hirschi argued that virtual supervision, or the extent to which parents keep track of the child's whereabouts and companions, should be negatively related to the child's delinquency because this increased the extent to which the parent was "psychologically present" for the child when he or she was faced with a temptation to commit delinquent acts. For the same reason, the child's intimacy of communication with parents, representing how often the parent and child discussed matters of some importance, was expected to be negatively related to delinquency. A third measure of attachment to parents, affectional identification of the child with the parent, referred to whether the child wanted to be the kind of person represented by his or her father and/or mother. Hirschi hypothesized that youths who were more likely to want to be like their father or their mother would be less likely to engage in delinquency because they valued their parents' opinions of them more highly.

On all three counts, Hirschi found strong support for the attachment hypothesis. Children who perceived their parents as aware of their activities, who had higher levels of communication with parents, and who reported greater affectional identification with parents were substantially less likely to report delinquency. Additional analyses showed

that these findings held for both black and white boys, and for children of all social class backgrounds.

In subsequent research, the predicted relationship between attachment to parents and delinquency has been the most frequently tested hypothesis derived from social control theory. This relationship has also received a great deal of empirical support. This finding holds with a variety of different ways of measuring attachment to parents. For example, some studies measure attachment with a single indicator of how well the respondent gets along with his or her parents, others incorporate a number of dimensions of attachment as outlined by Hirschi, and still others combine attachment to parents, peers, and the school in a single measure. The negative relationship between attachment to parents and crime or delinquency has also been obtained in a wide variety of samples selected at different historical periods, including the Gluecks' sample of white males collected in the United States in the 1930s, data collected in the Netherlands from boys in four different ethnic groups in the 1990s, and a sample of male and female high school students in Ankara, Turkey, in 2001. In short, virtually all studies that test Hirschi's hypothesis find the predicted negative relationship between attachment to parents and delinquency.

Attachment to School

While acknowledging the overlap between a youth's attachment to the school and his or her commitment to education and involvement in school-related activities, Hirschi conceptualized attachment to school as an analytically separate element of the social bond. In general, youths who [p. 454 ↓] are more attached to school have a greater concern for losing the respect of teachers and other school personnel. Hirschi measured attachment to the school with measures of academic ability and performance, how much the student reported liking school, concern for teachers' opinions, and acceptance of the school's authority to set rules for behavior. Hirschi argued that students higher in academic ability will perform better in school, will experience the rewards associated with good performance, and will tend to like school more than those who do not do well in school. Those who like school and care what their teachers think of them should accord greater legitimacy to the school's authority and, in turn, should be less likely to be delinquent.

Hirschi's findings supported all of these predictions. While the effects of academic ability were weaker compared to the effects of the other variables, all were related to delinquency in the expected direction. For example, boys who reported that they liked school were substantially less likely to report delinquency than those who did not like school, and boys with good grades were also less likely to report delinquency than those with worse grades. Hirschi also found that delinquent boys seemed rather indifferent to the school rather than antagonistic toward school, which cast doubt on explanations of delinquency suggesting that the school engenders rebellion or feelings of hostility.

Other researchers testing Hirschi's hypothesis regarding attachment to the school have often reconceptualized this variable. Most commonly, some aspects of attachment to school are considered to be elements of commitment to conventional goals and/or involvement in school-related activities such as homework, and in some cases attachment to school is viewed as one aspect of overall attachment to others. Most research analyzing the effect of attachment to the school on delinquency—using variables such as liking school, having higher academic ability, being concerned about teachers' opinions, perceptions of teachers' interest, and overall positive attitudes toward school—finds that youths who are more attached to school are less likely to be delinquent, consistent with Hirschi's predictions. Overall, then, the weight of the evidence shows fairly clearly that delinquents are not strongly bonded to the school, and this finding is one of the least disputed in the criminological literature.

Attachment to Friends

Hirschi began his discussion of the role of friends in producing or inhibiting delinquency by noting that the connection between friends' delinquency and the individual's delinquency was already well established in the literature. His analysis of the Richmond data showed the same relationship: Boys with delinquent friends, as measured by police contacts or by reports of teachers' opinions of these friends, were more likely to be delinquent. The key issue for social control theory, however, is the nature of the causal mechanism involved in this relationship. Cultural deviance theories, and to some extent strain theories, posit an important causal role of delinquent peers: Delinquent peer groups are seen as very close-knit groups that teach delinquent norms and values

to their members. Control theory, in contrast, holds that belonging to delinquent peer groups is a result rather than a cause of delinquency, or that the relationship between delinquent peers and delinquency is spurious due to the common effects of a low stake in conformity. The latter argument is seen in the old saying, "Birds of a feather flock together," meaning that people who are already similar in certain ways will tend to come together as friends, but that they do not necessarily influence each other's behavior after they become friends. Control theory is also at odds with the image of the delinquent group or gang as solidary and as capable of exerting great influence over its members. Rather, control theory holds that members of delinquent groups tend to have only weak bonds to each other and to have weak bonds in other respects as well (e.g., to parents and school).

Hirschi first examined the relationship between attachment to friends and other elements of the social bond. Hirschi found that youths who were attached to their parents and who were committed to education were more likely to be attached to their peers as well. Hirschi concluded from these findings that a high level of attachment to peers is not likely to produce the kinds of attitudes that tend to increase the likelihood of delinquency, in that both attachment to parents and [p. 455 ↓] achievement motivation are negatively associated with delinquency.

The direct relationship between attachment to peers and delinquency was assessed using measures of affectional identification with friends, respect for best friends' opinions about important matters, and two measures of delinquency. These tests again supported the predictions of the theory, in that boys with stronger bonds to their friends were less likely to have self-reported delinquent acts and were less likely to perceive themselves as delinquent. Further, being attached even to delinquent friends seemed to reduce the individual's level of delinquency. This finding was at odds with differential association theory, which predicts that the effect of delinquent friends on the individual's delinquency would be stronger when the individual's level of attachment to them was higher.

Hirschi conducted further analyses to assess the relative merits of social control and differential association theories. The two key findings to emerge from these analyses were (1) boys with stronger social bonds were less likely to have delinquent friends, and (2) the stronger the stake in conformity, the lower the correlation between delinquent

friends and delinquency. Thus, despite the finding that having more delinquent friends was correlated with higher levels of delinquency, Hirschi found that the strength of other social bonds reduced both the likelihood of having delinquent friends and the relationship between delinquent friends and delinquency. He concluded from these findings that the likelihood of having delinquent friends is largely dependent on a self-selection process, where similar boys who are already likely to engage in delinquency come together as friends, rather than friends having a bad influence on one another.

Hirschi's findings of a negative relationship between attachment to peers and delinquency have been perhaps the least often replicated of any of his findings. Contrary to Hirschi's predictions, a number of studies show that attachment to friends is weakly but positively related to delinquent behavior. Other studies find no relationship between attachment to friends and delinquency. Peggy Giordano, Stephen Cernkovich, and M. D. Pugh's study of the nature of youths' friendships and delinquent behavior found that in many respects, delinquents' friendships were similar to those of nondelinquents or of less serious delinquents. However, they also found that delinquents were more likely than nondelinquents to report higher levels of conflict, jealousy, and competition with friends, which provides some support for the control theory characterization of delinquents' friendships. Another in-depth study of friendships among adult drug users by Denise Kandel and Mark Davies obtained similar findings, in that the overall patterns of friendship were similar between drug users and nonusers.

The nature of delinquents' and nondelinquents' friendships and the reasons for the relationship between delinquent friends and delinquency remain controversial issues in criminology, particularly in debates between proponents of control theories and cultural deviance theories (Warr, 2002).

Commitment to Conventional Lines of Action

Hirschi focused on two aspects of commitment to goals likely to be particularly relevant for the explanation of delinquency—commitment to educational and occupational goals. Hirschi's tests of the commitment hypotheses focused on the competing predictions

made by social control theory and strain theory. For strain theory, boys with high aspirations for occupational success but who have limited ability to achieve those goals will experience frustration, and may turn to delinquency as a way to achieve their goals illegally. For social control theory, however, boys with high aspirations should be less likely to be delinquent because of their commitment to achieving their goals.

Hirschi found that a measure of educational aspirations was negatively associated with delinquency, and that this relationship held for both white and black boys. Contrary to the predictions of strain theory, high aspirations are not conducive to delinquency, even among boys who would find it more difficult to successfully achieve these goals: blacks in the mid-1960s. An analysis of the African American boys in the sample showed that those who perceived their occupational chances as being limited by racial discrimination despite their self-assessed ability to achieve these goals were not more likely to be delinquent than those who perceived high ability and no potential blockage to goal achievement.

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Overall, then, Hirschi's findings provided strong support for the notion that those who desire to achieve some occupational or educational goal, and those who are actively working toward their goals, are less likely to be delinquent. Hirschi concluded that the strain theory image of the delinquent as a striver with frustrated ambitions is false, and that the control theory portrayal of the delinquent as one with little investment in either present or future endeavors is more consistent with the data.

Most studies examining the relationship between commitment to conventional goals and delinquency have found evidence in support of Hirschi's predictions; those who have high aspirations and who work hard in school are less likely to be delinquent. Commitment has typically been measured with indicators of occupational and educational aspirations, education-related variables like the perceived importance of getting good grades, and working hard in school. Overall, there is a great deal of support for Hirschi's predictions about the relationship between commitment and delinquency, and at the same time there is little support for the strain theory claim that frustrated aspirations are an important cause of delinquency.

Involvement in Conventional Activities

Ironically, the least controversial hypothesis derived from social control theory was the only hypothesis that was resoundingly disproved by Hirschi's analysis. The “virtually tautological” idea that boys who spend more time in conventional activities will simply be too busy to commit crime was not supported by the data (Hirschi, 1969, p. 190). Measures of time spent in sports, hobbies, watching television, reading, working around the house, and working at paid jobs were not associated with delinquency. The exception to this overall pattern was that boys who spent more time on homework were less likely to be delinquent—likely because more time spent on homework indicates a stronger commitment to conventional goals. Hirschi explained the overall lack of support for his involvement hypothesis by pointing out that most delinquent acts require very little time to complete. In fact, some of the boys who scored highest on the delinquency scale had probably spent only a few hours actively engaged in delinquency during the past year.

Despite Hirschi's failure to find support for his hypothesis that involvement in conventional activities is negatively associated with delinquency, some subsequent research has supported the hypothesis. Researchers have found relationships between deviance and free time, feelings of boredom, involvement in sports and youth clubs, and involvement in school-based activities. In contrast, some studies find no relationship between delinquency and extracurricular activities at school, community activities, hobbies and recreational activities, and even involvement with school work.

Given the number of different measures of involvement cited in the literature and the mixed findings noted above, it is difficult to make any generalizations about the empirical status of this element of the social bond. One problem with the concept of involvement, noted by Hirschi, is that different types of conventional activities are likely to be selected by people who differ in other elements of the social bond. For example, one would expect youths who are more attached to their parents to score higher on measures of involvement in conventional activities likely to be carried out in the presence of parents, such as watching television or working around the house. In this case, the time spent in the activity itself may not be sufficient to reduce the opportunity for delinquency, but the fact that the child engages in these activities cannot

necessarily be said to be irrelevant to delinquency causation. It is also possible that some conventional activities provide youths with greater opportunities to be delinquent by bringing them together with other youths in settings that may not be well supervised by adults.

Belief

To test the hypothesis of a negative relationship between belief in conventional norms and delinquency, Hirschi analyzed the relationship between a variety of attitudes toward delinquency and the legal system and delinquent behavior. He found that boys reporting respect for the police were less likely to be delinquent, and that there was a strong relationship between reporting that “it is alright to get around the law if you can get away with it” and delinquency. Further evidence in support of Hirschi's predictions was found in the negative relationship between respect for the legal system and achievement [p. 457 ↓] orientation, intimacy of communication with father, and liking school. Hirschi concluded that lack of respect for the legal system was the result of overall weak social bonds, and that both belief itself and the other elements of the social bond influenced the likelihood of delinquency.

The notion that belief in conventional morality decreases the likelihood of crime has gained very widespread support in tests of control theory. Despite these virtually undisputed findings, the element of belief in control theory is not without controversy. The issue is contentious on both theoretical and empirical grounds. On the theoretical level, control theory holds that one's belief in conventional morality can be weak or strong, while cultural deviance and learning theories claim that norms *favorable* to law violation lead to crime or delinquency. Thus control theory argues that a lack of social integration is likely to be associated with weak belief in conventional morality and delinquency, while cultural deviance theories hold that integration into deviant groups should be associated with norms promoting deviance, and with deviant behavior. These distinctions between the two theories have been extensively questioned and debated by proponents of the two theoretical traditions, with control theorists arguing that the cultural deviance position on the issue is logically untenable and cultural theorists arguing that control theorists misinterpret cultural and learning theories on these issues. Empirically, perhaps the major problem in testing predictions derived from control and

cultural deviance theories is that “definitions favorable to violation of law” (Sutherland, 1939) have not been clearly distinguished from a low level of belief in conventional morality (Costello, 1997).

Conclusion

Overall, social control theory's major predictions have received substantial empirical support. It is probably safe to say that control theory has uncovered several clear facts of delinquency: Delinquent youths have lower levels of attachment to parents and school, and lower levels of commitment to conventional goals. Delinquent youths are not academically oriented, nor are they actively striving to achieve long-term goals. Delinquents also tend to have a low level of belief in the moral validity of laws and norms, so that youths with attitudes more tolerant of crime are more likely to engage in criminal behavior.

The hypotheses that have received less support are those dealing with attachment to friends and involvement in conventional activities. In particular, the support for Hirschi's prediction of a negative association between attachment to friends and delinquency is scant, with most studies finding either no relationship or a weak positive relationship between the two variables. The relationship between involvement in conventional activities and delinquency has been documented in some studies, but a good number of studies find either no relationship or a positive relationship between these variables, leading us to conclude that this is still an open question.

Social control theory has successfully pointed out specific elements of the social bond important in delinquency causation, but it is perhaps better thought of as a general theory pointing to the lack of social integration as the major cause of crime and delinquency. As Hirschi put it, “Behavior is a function of one's connection to society. Those inside society are controlled by it; those outside society are free to follow their own impulses” (Hirschi, 2002, p. xiv). This fundamental idea was carried over into Hirschi's later work with Michael Gottfredson in *A General Theory of Crime*, and has been tremendously influential in our understanding of the causes of crime and delinquency.

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See also

- [Beccaria, Cesare: Classical School](#)
- [Bentham, Jeremy: Classical School](#)
- [Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi: Self-Control Theory](#)
- [Kornhauser, Ruth Rosner: Social Sources of Delinquency](#)
- [Prenatal Influences and Crime](#)
- [Sampson, Robert J., and John H. Laub: Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control](#)
- [Stinchcombe, Arthur L.: Rebellion in a High School](#)

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