
Comparing the two theories that govern the existence of society: social control versus self control

Social Control Theory vs. Self-Control Theory

In recent years, numerous theorists have attempted to explain why people commit crimes, how to prevent this and how to decrease the recidivism rates. Everyone wants to live in a safe environment but many are not fortunate enough to have this privilege. A lot of people are forced to live in neighborhoods with high crime rates because they cannot afford anything else. These neighborhoods also tend to have poor school systems that prevent children from getting the level of education that they require to succeed in life and to escape the temptation to get involved in delinquent behavior. Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson, two theorists, came up with the General Theory of Crime that includes the Control Theory, where two important theories, Social Control and Self-Control stem from. These two theories are designed to explain all types of crimes as well as the factors that trigger delinquents to commit these crimes. The Social Control and the Self-Control theories contain both differing and corresponding components; ranging from the analysis of the theories, the quality of the theories, and their policy implications.

The Social Control Theory was created to understand crime and theorists “believe that conformity to the rules of society is produced by socialization and maintained by ties to people and institutions—to family members, friends, schools, and jobs” (Schreck 2009, p 305). This theory contains four essential elements—attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. The first element relates to emotional attachment to significant others. This element states how attachment to people affects one’s type of behavior; if the offender feels disapproval from those he or she cares for, they will restrain from committing the crime; but if the attachment is never there, then that is also a cause for crime. If a delinquent never forms any type of bond with a parent and only receives neglect and rejection in return, then this will affect them as an adult since they never knew how to properly handle or act in a relationship. In Christopher Schreck’s (2009) article of “Social Control Theory,” research showed that children who were emotionally attached to their parents had a weaker rate of becoming delinquents. He also stated that attachment to school is an ingrained predictor of delinquency; students who claim they enjoy school and have good relationships with their teachers are less likely to become delinquents. The second element of the theory is commitment, “the idea that conforming behavior protects and preserves capital, whereas crime and delinquency put it at risk” (Schreck 2009, p 306). Before committing a crime, the probable offender measures its consequences and how it may improve some aspect of their lives; if the person is at risk of losing something they truly care about, then it will most likely prevent them from committing the planned crime. The third component of the Social Control theory is involvement, “the idea is that people doing conventional things—working, playing games, watching sporting events or television, doing homework, engaging in hobbies, or talking to parents—are to that extent unable to commit delinquency acts, whatever their delinquent tendencies may be. The fourth factor is beliefs “in conventional values from the moral element of the bond” (Junger, Marshall 1997, p 81).

The Social Control theory contains only four elements, whereas the Self-Control theory upholds six elements of a low-self control characteristic. These six elements are: “(lack of a) future

orientation, self-centeredness, anger/temper, lack of diligence, preference for physical as opposed to mental tasks, and risk preference” (Piquero 2005, p 57). This theory indicates that people with low self-control find themselves in risky social settings, and once they are in those types of situations they act out to induce others to react with violence. The first element, future orientation, states that people without future orientation do not consider the consequences of their actions. The second, self-centeredness, implies that individuals ignore other people’s needs and only care about their own. The third, anger/temper, proposes that they are more likely to provoke anger and frustration from others. The fourth component, lack of diligence, states that those who deprived of determination are less likely to guard themselves from getting personally victimized. The fifth element suggests that those who prefer physical tasks and do not use their reason are more likely to respond to a situation physically rather than mentally. The sixth states that risk-takers place themselves in situations where it is highly likely that they will be victimized (Piquero 2005, p 59). These two theories are extremely compatible and simultaneously valid, as social control and self-control are both central to determining the relationship between an individual and society. Moreover, both theories discuss how a person handles a situation without resorting to violence. If a person grows up in a society filled with violence, however, this will be the only coping mechanism they are familiar with and will cause them to lack self-control.

Both theories have important key elements within them to help analyze and explain crime among individuals and society. Gottfredson and Hirschi exported their ideas from the Classical Theory and assumed that people are only interested in their own needs and will pursue those needs unless something prevents them from doing so. “They then argued that low self-control, which derives primarily from “ineffective child-rearing,” serves as the central force that affects the probability of offending” (Sullivan 2014, p 449). People are pressured by society to possess every new gadget that comes out, and it is frowned upon if someone does not have the latest form of technology. Everyone wants to fit in and not be the laughing stock of the group, and this makes some people desperate enough to resort to stealing so that they can fit in. However, this action can lead to getting in trouble with the law. These minor offenses can then lead to major offenses because repeating offenders believe that they do not have any other choice but to keep offending. They feel that this is the only way that they will be able to survive and it is the only form of behavior they recognize.

Junger and Marshall wrote an article on their study of “The Interethnic Generalizability of Social Control Theory: An Empirical Test,” and found a strong relationship delinquency of friends and delinquency. “Social Control theory states that youngsters with low stakes in conformity will be free to commit delinquent acts and will, at the same time, associate with delinquent friends. Delinquency and deviant friends both result from the same cause: a lack of social integration in conventional society” (Junger, Marshall 1997, p 84). If children do not receive any form of discipline from their parents or guardians, they will grow to think that they can get away with anything. Associating themselves with others who also lack discipline in their lives can then cause them to think that they are truly invincible and can even get away with breaking the law. These theories show how crime can stem from an individual to a society; the crime committed does not only affect one person, it affects everyone around them. The environment has a major impact on the upbringing of a child and the way it develops. If the child is surrounded by and only witnesses people committing crime, then crime will continue to spread throughout their society as it is an integral part of the environment they inhabit.

Hirschi framed his work on the Social Control theory on the foundation that “delinquent acts

result when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken" (Greenberg 1999, p 67). Greenberg, in his study of "The Weak Strength of Social Control Theory", stated that many of the factors Hirschi believed to have a relationship with social control in fact had nothing to do with it. Hirschi examined the time spent on hobbies, watching television, or working around the house; these examples have nothing to do with delinquent activities. (Greenberg 1999, p 67) Greenberg decided to take tables that Hirschi thought to back the Social Control theory. Greenberg studied attachment to parents, affectional identification with the father, concern for the teacher's opinion, involvement in school activities, and commitment to education. Greenberg found that the support Hirschi thought he had was actually not as strong as he claimed. One reason is that "measurement error is making relationships much weaker than they actually would be in real life. Another explanation would be that Hirschi actually took a summary measure of the participation in offending. "Another possibility is that temporal misspecification is biasing parameter estimates. Control theory states that weak bonding should increase levels of involvement in delinquency...to test, weak bonding should be measured at an earlier time than that at which delinquency is measured...finally, it may be that the present results should be taken at face value" (Greenberg 1999, p 74-75). This means that social control has little effect on delinquency throughout individuals; if Hirschi stopped asking why a few offenders commit less crime than others "conventional lines of action, less involvement in conventional activities, and weaker beliefs in conventional values, he might have been led directly subcultural and structural theories" (Greenberg 1999, p 78).

Another study, "Gender and Crime among Felony Offenders: Assessing the Generality of Social Control and Differential Association Theories," was performed by Leanne Alarid, Velmer Burton, and Francis Cullen. They pointed out that data was based on high school samples and that the Social Control theory barely explains offending by felons. Consequently, they conducted a study to help interpret self-reported offending in relation to the types of crimes and both genders. They found that "Parental attachment is a significantly stronger predictor of female than male participation in violence crime. These results indicate that future studies of criminal behavior risk being misspecified if they do not include measures of "traditional" theories of crime" (Velmer 2000, p 171). The central problem with this Social Control theory is that it does not have enough data on female offenders and only utilizes data on serious offending.

Research shows a significant relationship between low-self control and breaking the law and delinquent behavior. (Evans 1997, p 475) T. Evans and other researchers extended the study to measure the effects of low self-control on crime and corresponding behavior and used two different measures of self-control that involved measuring offenders' attitudes and the analogous behavior/scale. Evans also stated that they examined a part of the theory that is neglected: "the claim that low self control has effects not only on crime but also on life chances, life quality, and other social consequences" (p 475). The study portrayed that both measures of low self-control have effects on crime and their analysis supported the predictions in the theory that negative relationships exist between low self-control and communal penalties besides crime. Alex Piquero and other researchers studied how self-control is related to violent offending and homicide victimization where results showed that self-control is related to both of them, but so are other dangerous considerations. Violent offending and homicide victimization are produced not only by the individual but the environment surrounding him or her. Piquero brought up the "Code of Streets," by Elijah Anderson, which is a silent rule that situations must be handled through violence. Piquero suggests that in order to prevent chronic serious offenders, it is important to establish programs to help prevent crime and recidivism because many of the offenders were never enlightened of the consequences of offending. All studies

split their samples into four categories: data collection, sample characteristics, dependent variables, and independent variables. Out of all the research studied, Self-control seems to have more empirical support than the Social Control theory because researchers found many errors within the Social Control theory and how it was being tested and miscalculated. The Self-control theory, on the other hand, only neglected to study female offenders and based most of their studies on serious offences.

In T. Evans's article on "The Social Consequences of Self Control," the author discusses the policy implications of the Self-Control theory and how Hirschi and Gottfredson disagree with the previous notion of "social causation in favor of social selection" that is embedded in individual differences (p 479). In their work they state that: "The traits composing low self-control...are also not conducive to the achievement of long-term individual goals...they impede educational and occupational achievement, destroy interpersonal relations, and undermine the physical health and economic well-being" (p 479). In their opinion, low self-control is not something that can be learned by others, but they believe that it is caused from "ineffective child rearing" and not being able to control or monitor the behavior of a child and not punishing misbehavior. Also, they thought that economic and educational failure was a sign of low self-control and that a person exposed to these factors would not be able to succeed in life.

On the other hand, some policy implications for the Social Control theory explained by Schreck in "The Social Control Theory," are that the system only gathers people after they have committed a crime-- so whichever punishment they receive will not have any affect on them and their behavior before the arrest. He states that thinking that crime can be avoided by providing rehabilitation programs does not correlate with the Social Control theory. This theory identifies crime as a choice not caused by a lack of judgment by the offender, but by the logistics of the crime. To prevent crime and lower recidivism rates, the number one place to start would be the environment. The environment can explain a lot about an individual; if there is a clean, safe and friendly environment, then everybody will act correspondingly to it. With a healthy environment also comes a strong school system that cares about its students and whether they will be able to succeed in life. A teacher is supposed to care about the child's needs and it is their duty to help the child fulfill those needs. However, in crime-filled environments teachers easily lose their patience and therefore do not care if a child will succeed in life or go to college. Addressing social environments would thus be a major step to reducing crime altogether. Both of these policy implications make great points and strongly affect how a child develops; "Self Control" states how self-control cannot be taught but can be prevented with child-rearing. Social Control, similarly states that trying to prevent crime by placing delinquents in rehabilitation programs will not work if they were never taught about the consequences of committing crime at an early age. It is important to teach a child about the fundamental concepts of right from wrong during their developmental stage. Moreover, young children should be taught how to appropriately act within society and how to deal with challenging situations without resorting violence.

An examination of these two theories shows how significant it is for a child to receive the proper care, love and guidance from their parents. If a child is neglected and does not have that form of attachment to their parents, then it will have long-term effects on them when they are older because they will not know how to form any type of relationship with anyone. This will lead them to have low self-esteem and to believe that they are not good enough for anything. They will consequently think of themselves as "failures" and that there is no point in accomplishing anything. If no one is there to care for the person's needs and to push them to try their best in life-- and all they witness is corruption in society—they begin to think this is normal. These

theories hold important policy implications, careful analysis, and components that will help guide criminologists to avoid delinquency by making sure children grow up in secure communities with solid opportunities for education that will pave out the right path for them in life.

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