DEVIANCE & SOCIAL CONTROL
-AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Social Control Theories

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Introduction

We generally play by the rules across the different roles that we occupy in society. This, no doubt, has been made possible by the socialization process which we have and are still passing through. This socialization process has imbued us with the norms and values that guide ideal life patterns in society or in whichever group that we are involved in. This notwithstanding, there are cafeterias of temptation around us. Such cafeterias offer us a lot of goodies that often make deviation attractive. Indeed, there are situations and several occasions in which we have yielded and violated norms. Thus sociologists, who set out to explain human behaviour in the context of social setting, have tried to explain reasons why people deviate. They are equally concerned about those things that keep people in check – How do we explain why people stay under control and do not break rules? What keeps people in control and makes them conform? The answer to these questions will be provided in this chapter.

Generally, social control theories of deviation attribute law-breaking to the weakness, breakdown, or absence of those social bonds or socialization processes that are presumed to encourage law-abiding conduct. The argument is that people's relationships, commitments, values, norms and beliefs encourage them not to break laws specifically through the internalization of moral codes. Such internalization gives the individual a stake in the wider community and creates a voluntary limiting of behaviour and the avoidance of deviant acts. Social control thus deals with the exertion society or its agents impose on its citizens to conform to the norms and values in that society. It is a regulatory mechanism and process that promote social order through good conduct and punishment of bad conduct in a society.

By its emphasis on the socialization process and the attendant social learning, social control theories derive from functionalist theories and comes from Nye's (1958) proposition of four types of control:

- Direct Control: through punishment
- Internal Control: through the conscience or super-ego
- Indirect Control: through the influence of key social persons
- Needs Satisfaction Control: through the satisfaction of needs outside criminality.

In the quest to understand the ways in which this voluntarism emerged, great emphasis is placed on socialization and human nature that is constrained by implicit social contracts. Thus, it is assumed that morality is created in the construction of social order–which assigned costs and consequences to certain choices and defined some as evil, immoral and/or illegal. From the common assumptions discussed above, several versions of the social control theories have emerged and some of them will be briefly discussed below.

Social Control Theorists
The discussions that follow are in no particular chronological order and no rating is done.

(1) Albert J. Reiss
This is often seen as the earliest recorded version of social control theory and emerged as part of the theory of delinquency. For Reiss (1951: 196), delinquency is a "behaviour consequent to the failure of personal and social controls." To him, personal control is "the ability of the individual to refrain from meeting needs in ways which conflict with the norms and rules of the community," while social control is, "the ability of social groups or institutions to make norms or rules effective." Even though Reiss has been criticized for not locating the sources of the abilities for self-control, his position that the primary groups provide reinforcement for non-delinquent roles and values is a clear pointer to the socialization process as one of the likely sources of these abilities.

In this context, one can easily locate the application of positive and negative sanctions of the primary group, especially the family and the likely peer groups, as one of the building blocks for the internal control of the individual.

(2) *Jackson Toby*

For Toby (1957), all adolescents could be tempted to delinquency, but most refuse because they consider that they have too much to lose if they do so. The question here is "What accounts for the refusal by those who do?" To answer this question, Toby (1957) introduced the concept of 'stakes in conformity'. The higher the stakes of the young person to a non-deviant act or group, the lower the tendency to be a candidate for deviant acts or groups. To reduce deviance, efforts should be consciously made to increase the conformity stakes in order that youths can become candidates for gang activities and deviant acts.

(3) *F. Ivan Nye*

Utilizing the outcome, of a self-reporting study of 780 young people in Washington State of the United States of America, Nye (1958) formulated a social control theory which specifies ways to "operationalize" control. Even though a lot of criticisms were made in relation to his sampling techniques, he focused on the family as a source of control and specified three different types of control:

- Direct Control: punishments and rewards which will likely provide constraints and can be imposed by parents. Such constraints, where provided, will limit the opportunity for delinquency. This could also come in part, as a result of anticipation of parental disapproval.
- Indirect Control: affectionate identification with non-criminals: These are constraints that developed as a result of the anticipation of parental disapproval.
- Internal Control: conscience or sense of guilt. This emerged from constraints that are imposed as a result of the development of the conscience or internalization of norms.

Nye focused on the family as a source of control. This was a marked departure from the then emphasis on economic circumstances as a source of criminogenic motivation. Nye acknowledged motivational forces but emphasised that deviant behaviour results from weak and ineffective social control, claiming that, "most delinquent behaviour is the result of insufficient social control".

(4) *Walter Reckless*

In his contribution to social control theory, Reckless (1961) developed containment theory. His own version focused on youth's self-conception or self-image of being a good person as an insulator against peer pressure to engage in delinquency. He developed two types of containment.

- Inner containment: positive sense of self: This, to him, is developed within the family and is essentially formed about the age of twelve.
- Outer containment: supervision and discipline. This is formed outside the family with teachers and other sources of conventional socialization agencies within the neighbourhood.

Reckless' basic proposition is that there are "pushes" and "pulls" that will produce delinquent behaviour which exerts pressure on the child. Such pressures have to be counteracted by containment. The motivations to deviate are

- discontent with living conditions and family conflicts;
- aggressiveness and hostility, perhaps owing to biological factors; and
- frustration and boredom, say arising from membership of a minority group or through lack of opportunities to advance in school or find employment.

On the other hand, the pulls are

- Delinquent peers, and
- Delinquent subcultures.

The central issue here is the need to develop a strong self-image of being a good person in youth to mitigate the pull of the delinquent sub-culture. This is another version of the need for self-control and voluntary and inner-directed rejection of the pulls provided by the surrounding environment.

(5) *David Matza*

In their analysis of 'neutralization', Sykes and Matza (1957), submit that there is a thin line between delinquents and non-delinquents. It is just that delinquents engage in non-delinquent behaviour all the time and that most delinquents eventually opt out of the delinquent behaviour as they grow old. The major proposition here is that, the youth are aware of the basic code of morality in place. They know what is right and wrong. Yet, youths deviate by using what is termed 'the techniques of neutralization'. This they do by temporarily suspending the applicability of norms and develop attitudes that are favourable to deviant behaviour. The five common techniques of neutralization are

- denial of responsibility (I couldn't help myself)
- denial of injury (nobody got hurt)
- denial of victim (they had it coming)
- condemnation of the condemners (what right do they have to criticize me?)
- appeal to higher loyalties (I did it for someone else).

David Matza (1964) put forward a variation of control theory in which he introduced two new concepts of 'hard determinism' and 'soft determinism' Challenging the assumption of most positivist theories that delinquents are different from non-delinquents and that factors associated with that difference drive them to commit delinquent acts, Matza argued that, if this were an accurate picture, it would be clear that those youths would indulge in delinquency far more frequently than they actually did. Matza preferred the idea of 'soft determinism,' which viewed most delinquents as standing somewhere between constraint and freedom. Matzer (1964) later developed the theory of 'drift', which proposes that people use neutralization to 'drift' in and out of

conventional behaviour, taking a temporary break from moral restraints. His 'drift' theory rests upon four observations as follows:

- Delinquents express guilt over their criminal acts;
- Delinquents often respect law-abiding individuals;
- A line is drawn between those they can victimize and those they can not; and
- Delinquents are not immune to the demands of conforming.

(6) *Jack P. Gibbs*

In the view of Gibbs (1989), any attempt to get individuals to do or refrain from doing something can be considered as control. He introduced the idea that this process involves three parties. In this context, one or more individuals intend to manipulate the behaviour of another by or through a third party. This third party can be an actual person or a reference to 'society', 'expectations' or 'norms.' For Gibbs (1989), the presence of the third party distinguishes social control from mere external behavioural control, simple interpersonal responses, or issuing orders for someone to do something. Relating his work to homicide, Gibbs argued that it results from control failure (1989: 35), and proposed that the homicide rate in any society is a function not just of the sheer volume of disputes, but also of the frequency of recourse to a third party for peaceful dispute settlement (p37). Thus, murder represents another violent attempt at direct control as people can resort to self-help when forms of social control are unavailable or fail.

(7) *Travis Hirsch*

Often referred to as the most prominent social control theorist in the 20th Century, Travis Hirsch, viewed motivations as so natural to human beings that no special forces are necessary to explain law-breaking. To him, lawbreaking is often the most immediate source of gratification or conflict resolution, and no special motivation is required to explain such behaviour. Human beings are active, flexible organisms who will engage in a wide range of activities, unless the range is limited by processes of socialization and social learning. The theory of Hirsch can be summarized. The

causes of conformity are the social bonds between the individual and the group (Bainbridge 1997). It is the social bonds to positive forces that do not make people to yield to the temptation that abounds in the social environment. This bond results from four elements: **attachments** (degree of interaction); **investment** (stakes built up); **involvement** (participation which results from the first two) and **beliefs** (internalization of norms).

When these bonds are strong, the individual conforms; when these bonds are weak, the individual deviates. The strength of these bonds can fluctuate over time hence the possible shift from deviance to conformity (and vice versa) over a person's lifetime. The social bond can be generated between an individual and non-deviant or deviant groups.
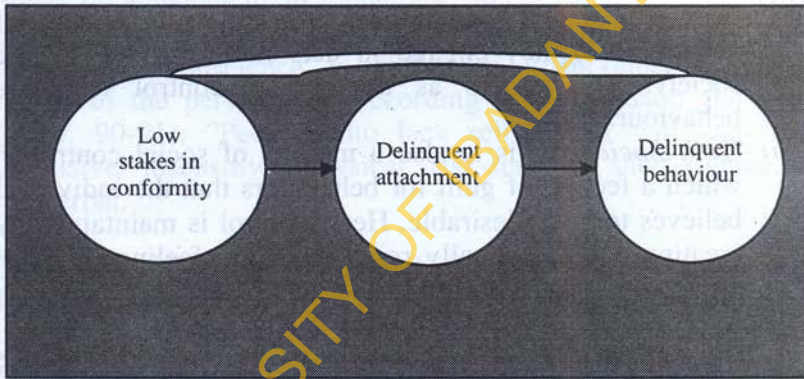

Fig. 11.1: Model combining social control and differential association theories. *Adapted from Rodney, S. (2004), P.201*

This type of theory has roots in the perspectives of human society proposed by the English social philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). In his best-known work, *Leviathan; or, The Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (1651), Hobbes argued that human nature would generate a perennial war of all against all, were choices not constrained by implicit social contracts, agreements and arrangements among people. From such a perspective, there is nothing mysterious about theft and violence when it has no social or political costs. This argument does not

imply that people are 'naturally' evil or "bad". Rather, such moral designations are created in the construction of social order, assigning costs and consequences to certain choices and defining some as evil, immoral and/or illegal.

Other Related Explanations

In rounding off discussions on social control theories, it might be pertinent to mention two related concepts of shame and guilt society.

(a) *Shame Society*: This is a concept that comes from cultural anthropology and used to describe the process of gaining control over children and maintaining social order. This is a process of inculcation of shame and complementary ostracism. In this context, young ones develop a sense of shame when they engage in acts not approved by the society. This serves as a form of control to guide behaviour.

(b) *Guilt Society*: This is also a method of social control in which a feeling of guilt for behaviours that the individual believes to be undesirable. Here, control is maintained by creating and continually reinforcing the feeling of guilt, especially for condemned behaviours.

These two concepts and explanations can be embedded in the social control explanations.

Discussion

Although 'social control theory' is most often associated with the version proposed by Hirsch in his classic work, *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), numerous theorists have introduced ideas reflecting control theory logic. In one of the early control theories, Albert J. Reiss (1951) proposed that delinquency was "behaviour consequent to the failure of personal and social controls." Personal control was defined as "the ability of the individual to refrain from meeting needs in ways which conflict with the norms and rules of the community" while social control was "the ability of social groups or institutions to make norms or rules effective." Reiss did

identify the failure of such primary groups as the family to provide reinforcement for non-delinquent roles and values as crucial to the explanation of delinquency. Contributing to the concept of social control, Jack Gibbs (1981) notes that social control becomes meaningful only in the context of three parties. For Gibbs, social control is an attempt by one or more individuals to manipulate the behaviour of another individual or individuals by or through a third party (by means other than a chain of command). Gibbs' "third party" can be an actual person or a reference to 'society,' 'expectations' or 'norms.' Numerous categories and sub-categories of social control are delineated by Gibbs, but the major point is that the third party distinguishes social control from mere external behavioural control, simple interpersonal responses, or issuing orders for someone to do something. In the control process, Hirsch distinguishes attachment to others from "internal control" by locating the "conscience" in the bond to others rather than making it part of the personality. According to Gottfredson and Hirsch (1990: 90-91); "People who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical, risk-seeking, short-sighted, and nonverbal."

The General Theory of Crime (Self Control Theory)
Hirsch has since moved away from his bonding theory, and, in co-operation with Gottfredson, developed a General Theory or "Self-Control Theory" in 1990. Akers (1991) argues that a major weakness of this new theory was that Gottfredson and Hirsch did not define self-control and the tendency toward criminal behaviour separately. By not deliberately operationalizing self-control traits and criminal behaviour or criminal acts individually, it suggests that the concepts of low self-control and propensity for criminal behaviour are the same. Hirsch and Gottfredson (1993) rebuts Akers argument by suggesting it is actually an indication of the consistency of General Theory. That is, the theory is internally consistent by conceptualizing crime and deriving from that a concept of the offender's traits. The research community remains divided on whether the General Theory is sustainable but there is emerging confirmation of some of its predictions (e.g. LaGrange and Silverman 1999).

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