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A THEORY OF SOCIAL CONTROL

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Honors Paper
Mr. Yinger
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A THEORY OF SOCIAL CONTROL

A careful study of the "classics" of sociological theory totally eradicates from any intelligent mind the commonplace criticism that "sociology is the study of the obvious, of what everyone knew all along." For the best thought of this tradition, like great literature or important theories of physical science, is characterized by insight, by perceiving underlying patterns, relationships, processes previously undetected. Good sociological theory is creative; the theorist must restructure his perception of certain aspects of the environment before the underlying relationships can be discovered or understood. Great sociological theory is the product of highly intelligent, creative minds. One cannot read it without acquiring both a tremendous respect for the authors' contributions to knowledge and the discouraging feeling that one's own attempts to evaluate such work are unforgivably presumptuous.

But good sociological theory is also inspiring. It elevates one's level of thinking and prompts the hope that perhaps the reader can also achieve insight into some other aspect of life. One is motivated to examine some of the problems which these great thinkers encountered and the ways in which they attempted to solve them. One is always conscious of oversimplification, misunderstanding, inadequate comprehension, of the need to treat such theories on their own profound level of analysis. Cautiously, hesitantly, but inspired to create and to understand, one proceeds.

The purposes of this paper are limited, or rather concentrated. Rather than summarize or criticize the work of the sociologists which I have studied this semester, I shall attempt to extend my own knowledge of a particular topic which was discussed by several authors whom I read. Where their remarks are appropriate to the discussion, I shall attempt to include them. But my main purpose in writing this paper is to devise a theory-- a theory of social control, or at least some insight as to how the process operates in our society. There will be a minimum of footnotes; the authors whom I read did not discuss the topic extensively. But they gave me a great deal of understanding of how the sociologist thinks, especially how he uses concepts. And they have set standards and guidelines. Thus I hope their influence will be seen indirectly in the structure of this paper, though it will not always be directly visible in the contents.

Any discussion of social control ought to begin with an attempt to adequately define the concept. Like many of the concepts used in sociology, the term social control has had various meanings for different sociologists. Durkheim was one of the first sociologists to emphasize the point that society has the power to control the behavior of its members. He recognized the influence which social structure could have on individual behavior. This is apparent in Durkheim's conception of social facts which he defined as "...ways of thinking, acting, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him."¹ Durkheim has made the important observation that a society can regulate the behavior

1. Emile Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), p.3.

of its members. How is this result achieved? Through two analytically ^{interrelated} distinct but empirically processes--socialization and social control.

Socialization refers to the processes by which the individual internalizes the norms of his society, by which he learns to do what the group expects him to do. If the socialization process is successful, the result will be that the individual willingly does what the group expects him to do. But for a wide variety of reasons which are beyond the scope of this paper, individuals do not always conform to the demands of their group. This calls into existence another set of processes--the processes of social control by which society deals with the problem of the deviant. If the social control process is successful, the deviant will be forced to comply with group expectations.

Talcott Parsons has recognized this distinction. He defines social control as an equilibrating mechanism, "...those processes in the social system which tend to counteract the deviant tendencies and of the conditions under which such processes will operate."² Parsons then goes on to make another revealing statement, whose implications he does not fully develop. "It should immediately be evident from the above discussion that the most fundamental mechanisms of social control are to be found in the normal ~~mechanisms of social control~~ ~~are to be found in the normal~~ processes of interaction in an institutionally integrated system."³ What Parsons ^{implies} ~~has said~~ is that social control, like socialization, is a process whose outcome is partly dependent on the individual ~~being~~ ^{being} "controlled."⁴ ~~The tendencies of the individual influence his behavior.~~

Parsons precedes his discussion of social control with a discussion of the origins of deviant behavior. Socialization is

2. Talcott Parsons, The Social System (New York: The Free Press, 1964), p. 297.

a complex process whose outcome is affected by the individual. We can attempt to account for the existence of conformity and deviation ^{only} by recognizing that socialization is not a one-way process, that culture and personality are interdependent.

In order to account for the origin of deviant behavior, we must conceive of socialization as an interaction process. Likewise, in order to account for the persistence of deviant behavior we must conceive of social control as a process of interaction between the deviant and the institutions of social control. This is the central thesis of my paper. Even in Parson's elaborate analysis, social control is depicted as a one-way process. It cannot account for a basic empirical fact: Society does not compel conformity from all its members, and it does not compel conformity to all norms. Social control, like socialization is a matter of degree. An adequate theory of social control must be a field theory. We must be able to state under what conditions deviance will be controlled and under what conditions it will be permitted.

This is a highly complex question involving multiple factors. But I will attempt to delineate some of the factors involved by considering not the usual question, How does society compel the deviant to conform? but instead, How does the deviant influence the process of social control?

In our society there are many institutions whose function is the control of deviant behavior. The most obvious example is the institution of law enforcement. The people who occupy positions in this institution are given power to compel conformity to certain norms (laws) by the members of society. But the agents of social control are not the only members of the society with coercive power.

In fact, by comparing American society with a more totalitarian form of government (the police state) we get an idea of the relative powerlessness of this particular institution in our society. The degree of social control in our society is limited by certain cultural beliefs regarding individual rights and the concentration of power. In American society the value system prescribes a low degree of coercive power for the law enforcement institution. The present increase in deviant behavior in this country has also been accompanied by a decrease in the coercive power of the law enforcement institution, as seen in recent Supreme Court decisions. We attempt to control deviance in other ways, and ^{some of} these other mechanisms will be discussed further on in the paper.

Deviant

~~The types of sanctions which the law enforcement institution can use to control behavior are defined by law. But there are non-legal and illegal means of coercion which are also employed by this institution. Conversely, there are non-legal, illegal, and legal countersanctions which the deviant can apply to influence the process of social control.~~ The types of countersanctions which the deviant can apply vary according to his position in society. One of the most important factors influencing the degree of social control which can be exerted on a particular individual is the availability of countersanctions which the deviant can exert upon the forces of social control. It is one of the most important factors in the explanation of the various degrees of social control exerted by the law enforcement institution upon various classes of society.

*Deviant
social control
police
for example?*

The concept of social control as an interaction process in which both the deviants and the agents of social control attempt to control one another's behavior can be seen in the following incident which occurred last summer in Chicago. It illustrates the growth in the power of the delinquent gangs in urban slums, a factor which present-day theories of delinquency need to take into account.

There are two major gangs on the South Side of Chicago's Negro ghetto. One is the Blackstone Rangers, the other is the Devil's Disciples. Each gang is a federation of smaller gangs; the total organizations are quite large as each contains about two thousand members. This increase in gang size, largely the result of the growth of population in the Negro ghetto, has increased the power of the gangs and altered their relationships with law enforcement authorities. Social control of these gangs has taken on the characteristics of a bargaining process with the use of powerful sanctions on both sides.

The Blackstone Rangers and the Disciples had been engaged in a gang war in which several members had been killed during the months of June and July. In an attempt to stop the fighting, the police arrested the head of the Blackstone Rangers, Eugene Hairston, for possession of illegal weapons. While Eugene was in jail, his war counselor, Jeff Ward, arranged for Eugene's release on the condition that he would negotiate a truce with the Disciples. Eugene was released; the next day he appeared on television with the head of the Disciples, promising to reveal the location of several weapon arsenals and to call a halt to the fighting. The Chief of Police appeared also. He shook hands with the boys and promised to cooperate with them in cleaning up the neighborhood. Three days later two Rangers were shot in the back when they

*See
Yablonsky
on the
New Grove*

in practice. The therapeutic process is a social control mechanism designed to counteract deviant behavior by resocializing the person who deviates. The therapeutic process is largely concerned with making changes in the tendencies of the individual rather than in the situation in which the deviant behavior occurred. The person who deviates is placed in ^a new environment in which it is presumably possible for him to learn new ways of behaving.

The therapeutic processes of resocialization, like the more coercive attempts at law enforcement, are processes of interaction. They emphasize rewards rather than punishments, ^{however} in order for the deviant behavior to change, the person who deviates must see the rewards which conforming behavior brings. But deviant behavior also has rewards, which the deviant may be reluctant to relinquish. Resocialization is an enormously complicated process because the individual tendencies of the deviant have such an important influence on the outcome. Many individuals show high degrees of resistance to resocialization. The therapeutic process usually contains some elements of coercion, both overt and covert. For example, if the therapeutic process is to be successful, the deviant person must be kept in the therapeutic situation.

What are some of the ways in which the deviant influences attempts to resocialize him? If there is a low degree of coercion in the therapeutic situation, he can leave. If forced to remain, he can attempt to deceive the "therapist" concerning his behavior. He can also attempt to change the therapist's attitudes and behavior. The degree of control which the deviant has over the outcome of the attempted resocialization varies with the situation, and we need to study the characteristics of situations in which various degrees of resocialization of both the deviant and the

agent of social control. ^{occur} We cannot understand the process of social control, in action, as it operates, without recognizing that the outcome is a process of mutual adjustment between the both parties in the interaction.

There is another mechanism of social control which needs to be discussed. It is the mechanism which, I believe, has the greatest potential for dealing with the widespread deviance characteristic of our present heterogeneous, pluralistic society. This is the growth of knowledge as produced in and distributed in society by the educational institution. There seem to be two important ways in which our increased knowledge of deviant behavior can be used as a mechanism of social control.

If we interpret social control in the traditional sense of a one-way process involving elements of coercion, then we can conclude that increased knowledge of deviant behavior in the hands of agents of social control will give these agents a much greater ability to get persons to change their deviant behavior in the direction of conformity. In this sense, knowledge can be used by the therapeutic institution for more effective resocialization.

The next question, if we think of social control in terms of interaction, is How will deviant groups and individuals respond to this situation? Will they perceive resocialization as an attempt to bring greater rewards to both themselves and society? Or, placed in a situation in which they have little control over the outcome, will they perceive the therapeutic process as containing high elements of coercion? It is possible that they will attempt to improve their control in the situation by developing a policy of increased non-cooperation with social scientists attempting to observe their behavior.

But the educational institution distributes knowledge as well as accumulating it. At present the knowledge is differentially distributed, but there are at present forces in society working to make the distribution more equal.

The educational institution with its function of producing and distributing knowledge has the potential for being the most effective social control mechanism in our society. Socialization in the primary group alone is ineffective in maintaining some sort of working order in our heterogeneous, pluralistic society. In America today, widespread deviance from a wide variety of norms, and disagreement as to what the proper norms and values are is a fact of life. Total conformity is not necessary for effective social interaction. We do not know what minimal degree of conformity is necessary in order to maintain a social system. But it is possible that with the increasing knowledge of human behavior, a social system can tolerate a greater amount of deviation. The problem for modern society may not only be the generation of conformity, although some agreement on particular norms must be maintained. The problem of modern society is to find ways in which persons with different norms and values each learn to understand the behavior of the other and so form some workable plan of interaction. Education aids in this process by increasing our knowledge of the wide variety of norms and values and of the various ^{other} factors which influence their behavior. The educational institution is an effective mechanism of social control ^{only} not in the sense of coercion, resocialization, or any other one-way attempt to induce conformity and eliminate deviance, but also in the sense that the increased knowledge of human behavior can facilitate social control, the process whereby individuals and individuals, groups and groups, societies and

groups, societies and individuals mutually adjust. This is not the traditional interpretation of the concept of social control, but I believe that this revision, this shift in perspective, makes the concept more useful and has extensive possibilities for further research.

Past controls have been rigid — then broken — a cyclical pattern. The speed of change no longer permits the stable traditions cannot be built up. The need is for a moving equilibrium that is where knowledge of society becomes crucial.

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