

# Control Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of control theory, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Travis Hirschi and Control Theory
2. Hirschi's Four Mechanisms of Control Theory

## 1. TRAVIS HIRSCHI AND CONTROL THEORY

Sociologist **Travis Hirschi** developed a theory to explain why people engage in deviant behavior, called control theory. **Control theory** focuses on how people's social ties, connections, opportunities, and involvement in society at large control and restrain their propensities for deviance.

Control theory holds that people are socialized to anticipate the consequences of their actions in the eyes of others. They're constantly putting themselves in the place of others in order to reflexively look back at themselves to see how their actions might be perceived. According to control theory, if you know that your actions are going to be perceived negatively by those whom you care about, this is enough to control your deviant behavior.

### IN CONTEXT

If you are deeply enmeshed in society, have a family, a paying job, and participate in civic life, you're much less likely to act out deviantly because societal forces constrain and control your behavior, channeling it towards the positive. On the other hand, someone who lacks a lot of social connections, has weak social ties, doesn't have a good stable job, is much more likely to engage in deviant behavior because the temptation is stronger, due to the lack of mechanisms of social control.

Suppose in addition to your 'regular' job, you also work at a clothing store selling nice, expensive clothes. Naturally, you want them even though you can't necessarily pay for them all. However, you're not going to simply steal them because you anticipate how you would lose face and honor in front of your friends, family, coworkers, etc. Knowing this is enough to control your behavior.



### TERM TO KNOW

## Control Theory

A sociological theory of deviance that argues that our social ties, connections, opportunities, and involvement in society, control and restrain our propensities towards deviance.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### Travis Hirschi

An influential criminologist who made important contributions to the development of control theory.

## 2. HIRSCHI'S FOUR MECHANISMS OF CONTROL THEORY

Hirschi theorized that there are four mechanisms of control theory:

- **Attachment:** People with many strong attachments to family, friends, and people in society are much less likely to act out deviantly, the theory states, because they reflect on how their actions are going to be perceived in the eyes of others. This reflection stops deviant action most of the time before it even occurs.

➦ **EXAMPLE** In a relationship, you're less likely to cheat on your partner if you have a strong connection with them because you've learned to put yourself in his or her shoes. You learn to develop and control your potential deviance in response to looking at how others will see you, so your attachments are constitutive of social good behavior.

### IN CONTEXT

Think about the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, who mailed bombs to people as an indictment of technological society. He lived alone in the woods for many years, had few social connections, few strong ties to family, etc. He was much more likely to act out deviantly, according to control theory.

This attachment mechanism is why people are suspicious of others who are loners in society, those who always keep to themselves. It's typical to think, "What are they doing? They must be up to something. Why do they want to be alone? Why don't they have attachments?" In this way, control theory manifests in everyone's day to day interactions.

- **Opportunity:** The brighter your future seems to be, and the more opportunities you have for conventional success in life, the less likely you are to want to compromise your future and act out deviantly.



### THINK ABOUT IT

If you're in high school and you know you have a ready path to college, and from there your future prospects to employment look decent, how likely are you to act out deviantly? Not very likely, because you're much less likely to want to compromise this rosy future by doing so.

This theory relates to Merton's strain theory because the converse is true--when someone has no opportunities for future success, the strain makes them more likely to act out deviantly.



#### BRAINSTORM

The multiple theories of deviance are not always right or always wrong. There are elements of all theories of deviance in every deviant act, which is why it is so powerful to think about all the deviance theories together. Try reviewing the multiple theories of deviance side by side, so that you can compare and contrast each one against the others.

- **Involvement:** Involvement states that the more involved you are in social life--the more socially active you are, the more social groups you belong to, etc.--the less likely you are to act out deviantly because you have many potential sources of control. Have you ever heard the phrase, "The devil will find work for idle hands to do?" This means that idle hands are much more likely to engage in deviant behavior because they're not as involved. They don't have all of the constraints of group participation weighing them down.



**EXAMPLE** If you're a member of a church, have an active civic life in politics, belong to various social groups or clubs, engage in sports, or simply live an active life, you're much less likely to engage in deviant behavior, according to this theory.

- **Belief:** People who have strong moral convictions and subscribe to the authorities of society are much more likely to follow the rules. Quite simply, if you believe the authority is legitimate, why wouldn't you follow its rules? Conversely, if you believe the authority is illegitimate, you're more likely not to respect that authority and the rules of the games. You're more likely to act out defiantly.

The force of control and belief dovetails with the social conflict theory of deviance. The power structure in society sets up what is deviant and what's not. If you live in sync with the power structure, you're less likely to be labeled deviant.



#### HINT

Hirschi's control theory provides a micro level complement to Merton's macro level strain theory of deviance.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about sociologist **Travis Hirschi and his control theory of deviance**. You also learned about his theories on the **four mechanisms of control theory**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

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involvement in society, control and restrain our propensities towards deviance.



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### **Travis Hirschi**

An influential criminologist who made important contributions to the development of control theory.