

## Social Structure and Social Control: Building Theory

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**A**lthough always an integral part of sociology, the study of social control has waxed and waned. Originally, the concept was defined broadly as any structure, process, relationship, or act that contributes to the social order; indeed, the concepts of social order and control were indistinguishable. A consensus is now emerging that distinguishes social control from the social order it is meant to explain and that distinguishes among social control processes. One basic distinction is between processes of internal control or socialization and processes of external control. Recently, the study of social control is equated more with the latter than the former.

As stated by John Hagan in the introduction to this symposium, most research on social control has examined microvariation in both the causes and consequences of social control. For example, studies have examined how networks of social ties between people restrain them from acting on deviant motives and how individual characteristics, like class and race, influence the legal system's reaction to individual law violations. Yet, little research has focused on macrovariation in social control processes and structures. We really know very little about the causes and consequences of variation in the strength of social ties between macro units, such as neighborhoods or cities; and we know very little about variation in the organization and operation of control bureaucracies, such as police departments and courts, and how this variation is patterned by the structural characteristics of these units, such as the unemployment rate, the labor market structure, and minority composition of the population. Even less research has framed this variation within

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a general theory of social control and used it to both test and expand such general theories.

### **Social Disorganization**

Over the years some macroresearch on social control has appeared, much of it conceptualized within either the social disorganization perspective or the conflict perspective. The social disorganization perspective argues that economic and ecological conditions—population movements, ethnic heterogeneity, and poverty—weaken community processes of social control, thus leading to high rates of crime and deviance. Perhaps the major problem with this perspective has been that it has failed to measure the disrupted social control processes independent of their causes, such as poverty, and of their consequences, such as crime rates, yielding empirical tautologies. Unable to resolve this issue, the theory withered during the 1960s and 1970s.

Since the 1980s a group of young scholars has reexamined the theory. Robert Bursik, one of the major figures in this revitalization, has adapted the perspective to the nature of contemporary urban life. Whereas the traditional perspective examined the impact of ecological and economic structures on crime rates, emphasizing their stabilities, Bursik (1984) has focused on the impact of changes in those structures on crime rates; and while the traditional perspective focused on the impact of ecological characteristics internal to urban neighborhoods, Bursik has focused on the impact of the ecological characteristics external to urban neighborhood on crime rates.

In their symposium contribution Bursik and Grasmick (1993) explore the linkage between social disorganization theory and Wilson's (1987) thesis that the poor have become concentrated and isolated from the mainstream of society. The theory argues that poverty is important to the study of deviance only to the extent to which it weakens processes of social control. Wilson, however, seems to be suggesting that over the past decade economic deprivation has become so severe and prolonged that it directly affects crime rates. Using Chicago neighborhoods, Bursik and Grasmick test this thesis by estimating economic deprivation's direct effect and indirect effect (i.e., through weakening structures of control) on crime rates. Upon finding a direct effect, they try to integrate it into the social disorganization perspective by expanding the perspective to include forms of control that are not traditionally included in the perspective but that may be weakened by economic deprivation. While they have made an excellent effort to integrate the recent work on the underclass with the traditional disorganiza-

tion perspective on social control, their article raises some critical issues.

First, the meaning of the direct effect of economic deprivation is muted by operationalizing it in part by percentage black. Given three reasonable indicators of economic deprivation (percentage below poverty, unemployment rate, and rate of public assistance), why is percentage black included? They say they included it because it correlates highly with the other measures and thus its effect cannot be disentangled from theirs. Yet, if it is so highly correlated with three other indicators of the same theoretical concept, then deleting it would not reduce estimates of the concept's effect and would certainly clarify its theoretical meaning.

Second, it is not at all clear how absolute poverty affects crime by affecting the process of social control. The idea is certainly not consistent with the low level of crime and high level of absolute poverty in rural America and in much of the underdeveloped world. It is also not clear how absolute poverty affects crime "directly," that is, independent of its effect on processes of social control. Other traditional perspectives, such as anomie theory, have long argued that relative poverty produces stress which leads to crime; yet, Bursik and Grasmick distinctly refer to absolute poverty as consistent with Wilson's thesis. Perhaps it is not absolute poverty at all but the rate at which relative poverty increases that is important.

Third, they argue that economic deprivation affects other mechanisms of social control that are usually not considered within disorganization theory. These mechanisms, termed "public social control," refer to networks that link neighborhoods to the organizations and institutions that funnel human and economic resources to neighborhoods. This linking process needs clarification. If external networks are important because they funnel resources to a community, which they probably do, then resources mediate the effects of networks and we are not talking about a social control theory at all.

## Social Conflict

The second major perspective, the conflict perspective, focuses on social control has bureaucracies. Unlike the traditional deterrence perspective, which examines the processes whereby the structure and functioning of the criminal justice system deter crime, the conflict perspective examines the social processes underlying the structure and functioning of social control bureaucracies, especially the criminal justice system. Focusing on the fractures, conflicts, and competing interests within society, the conflict perspective assumes an uneven distribution of self-interests in social control and the power to im-

plement them. It thus assumes that the structure and functioning of social control bureaucracies reflect the interests of the powerful (elites, authorities, and majorities) and that it is part of an overall strategy by them to manage the actions, events, and people that threaten their interests (Blalock 1967; Turk 1969; Jackson 1989; Liska 1992). Much research has focused on identifying structural conditions, especially forms of economic and racial conflict and inequality, that threaten the interests of the powerful and thus lead to increases in social control, especially in the size and functioning of the criminal justice system.

The theory, however, is vague about the causal processes by which economic and racial conflict and inequality affect control bureaucracies. Many distinct processes are assumed that do not always lead to consistent predictions. For example, some research has focused on structural conditions that increase threat to the powerless and thus lead to increases in social control, and other research has focused on conditions that increase the ability of the powerless to resist and thus lead to decreases in social control. Yet, these are often the same conditions. For example, the mobilization, organization, and relative size of the poor or racial minorities are said to increase threat to the powerful, which increases social control, and to increase the ability of the powerless to resist, which decreases social control. Whatever the net affect of these conditions, conflict theory is said to be confirmed. If research shows a positive relationship, then the organization of the poor is assumed to threaten authorities, thereby supporting conflict theory; and if research shows a negative relationship, then the organization of the poor is assumed to increase their ability to resist, thereby supporting conflict theory. Conflict theory explains everything and predicts nothing. Yet, both effects could exist. The organization of threatening populations could well increase their threat to the powerful, which increases social control, and could well increase their ability to resist, which decreases social control. To estimate the effect of one process, the effects of the other must be controlled. In so modeling these causal processes, theoretical inconsistencies become research problems.

In one way or another both Myers (1993) and Sampson and Laub (1993) wrestle with the problems of ambiguity in the logical structure of conflict theory. In extending the conflict theory to the structure and functioning of the criminal justice system in the South, Myers expands the theory and highlights this problem. Over the past decade she has contributed an impressive body of work that links dimensions of social control, ranging from lynching to incarceration, in the South from the Civil War to World War I. Her work is distinctive in two ways: It provides a rigorous quantitative analysis of social control during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and it conceptualizes

incarceration as both a mechanism of control and a mechanism of mobilizing unskilled labor. She has argued (1990) that by influencing both social threat and the need for unskilled labor, racial and economic conditions affect the rate of incarceration for felonies and the rate of lynching.

Her contribution in this symposium extends this work to less serious crimes and misdemeanors. She finds that the social control of misdemeanors is affected by much the same economic and racial conditions as the control of felonies. The control of misdemeanors (both whites and blacks) is affected by economic conditions (price of cotton), racial equality, and racial composition. As these three conditions increase, chain-gang (misdemeanors) rates and penitentiary (felonies) rates for whites and blacks decrease.

Perhaps one of the distinctive qualities of her work—conceptualizing incarceration in the Old South as a vehicle of both control and mobilization of unskilled labor—also generates an additional theoretical burden: integrating these two processes into a model that yields consistent predictions. If they are not clearly linked, logical ambiguities can easily occur. While Myers has certainly tried to interpret the findings consistently, their complexity (chain-gang and penitentiary incarceration of whites and blacks over time) seems to require multiple causal processes. It is, indeed, difficult to resist the temptation to emphasize a process when it seems to fit the data and to ignore it when it does not.

Consider the price of cotton and the percentage black. Both are negatively related to incarceration rates. To explain the former relationship, Myers emphasizes prison as a mechanism of social control; that is, as the price of cotton decreases, the unemployed pose a threat to authorities and prison is used to control them. To explain the latter relationship, she emphasizes prison as a mobilizer of unskilled labor; that is, as the percentage black decreases, the supply of unskilled labor decreases and prison is used to mobilize them. What if the findings had been reversed? Assume for a moment that both the price of cotton and percentage black are positively related to incarceration. To explain the former relationship, we emphasize prison as a mobilizer of unskilled labor; that is, as the price of cotton increases, the demand for unskilled labor increases and prison is used to mobilize it. And to explain the latter, we emphasize prison as a mechanism of social control; that is, as the percentage black increases, blacks become more threatening to authorities (as do the unemployed when the price of cotton decreases) and prison is used to control them.

Hence, when percentage black, for example, positively relates to the rate of social control, such as lynching (Tolnay et al. 1989), the relationship can be said to reflect the social threat

process, supporting conflict theory; and when percentage black negatively relates to the rate of social control, such as incarceration in the Old South, the relationship can be said to reflect the labor mobilization process, supporting conflict theory. Conflict theory explains everything and predicts nothing.

It is not that Myers's interpretations are wrong; indeed, they are probably right. She knows her data. I am less concerned with which process (prison as a mechanism of control or mobilizer of labor) is correct than with integrating the processes. I encourage Myers to take the next step in modeling both processes, suggesting when one or the other might occur and how they might operate simultaneously. For example, might the rate of chain-gang sentences be more responsive to the labor supply and the rate of penitentiary sentences be more responsive to social threat? We should focus on the findings that distinguish between these two processes, and we should be less concerned with the general effects of economic conditions and racial composition than with those that test and expand conflict theory.

Sampson and Laub focus on macrovariation in contemporary criminal justice decisionmaking, especially juvenile court petitions, predisposition detentions, and adjudicated confinements. They correctly remind us that while many studies have examined microvariation, such as the role of individual characteristics on court decisions in one of two specific courts, very few studies have examined macrovariation between a large number of courts and have related it to structural characteristics of courts and the social units in which they function.

In theoretically framing their research, they draw on the threat hypothesis of conflict theory. In many ways they, too, wrestle with the ambiguities of conflict theory regarding the processes by which socioeconomic conditions affect the structure and functioning of social control bureaucracies. Sampson and Laub are particularly concerned with multiple forms of conflict and threat in the 1980s. They argue that while the poor, the underclass, the unemployed, and minorities may threaten economic and political elites, they may also threaten mainstream America and that this threat is symbolized by young black males dealing drugs in poor neighborhoods.

While I applaud Sampson and Laub's effort to extend conflict theory beyond the urban class conflict of the 19th and early 20th centuries, it is not entirely clear that this symbolic threat to the middle class has different implications for the structure and functioning of the criminal justice system than do objective threats to elites as suggested in traditional conflict theory. Do young black males dealing drugs in poor neighborhoods pose an objective threat to the life and property of the middle class or a symbolic threat to their values? Does drug use and dealing

by groups marginal to the economy pose any objective threat to economic elites?

Drawing on Wilson's (1987) argument that the underclass (poor minorities) have become increasingly poor and concentrated in segregated enclaves, Sampson and Laub focus on the effect of this state of affairs for the functioning of juvenile courts. While certainly an interesting issue, it is not clear how it relates to the threat hypothesis specifically or the conflict theory of social control generally. Does concentration or segregation make the poor more threatening? To the contrary, some have argued (Liska 1992) that racial segregation can function as a source of social control, thereby leading to a reduction of more formal styles of control. Perhaps the concentration of the underclass reduces their objective threat to the property and lives of elites but increases their symbolic threat to the middle class.

Sampson and Laub are sensitive to this type of issue, but it is not always their focus. For example, to disentangle the effects of threat to elites from threat to the middle class, they argue that to the extent that poor minorities and racial polarization represent a threat to the middle class, inequality and underclass poverty should show the major effects on court decisions, and to the extent that upper income elites are threatened, the wealth of the county should show the major effect on court decisions. Why should elites be more threatened than the middle class as the mean level of the county wealth increases?

In the analysis Sampson and Laub link measures of the underclass and racial inequality with threat and include a host of control variables (e.g., residential mobility and urbanism) that also affect court decisionmaking. They admirably attempt to find patterns in the effects of these variables across three judicial decisions and four crimes by race, but it is difficult. For example, the underclass variable has no effect on the petitioning of blacks for any crimes but a strong effect on the judicial confinement of blacks for two of four crimes. What does this mean? More important, what do the findings mean for a conflict theory of social control? For example, the underclass variable shows a negative effect on the petitioning of whites for two of four crimes and on the judicial confinement of whites for one of four crimes. Is this negative effect consistent with any version of conflict theory?

I realize that Sampson and Laub's contribution here is among the first to come from a major project and thus the findings are still preliminary. Nonetheless, I encourage them to ponder the generalities and patterns that emerge and then relate them to the theory that frames their work. While it is important to note that structural conditions make a difference, it

is even more important to note that structural theories make a consistent difference.

## Conclusion

The study of the macrovariation in social control (its causes and consequences) has witnessed a resurgence during the 1980s. Much of the new work has been framed within social disorganization and conflict theories. Bursik has played a major role in rejuvenating social disorganization theory and in adopting it to recent changes in the organization of urban life. Bursik and Grasmick's contribution here reflects this thrust by exploring the implications of the concentration of poverty for social disorganization theory. Myers has played a major role in expanding conflict theory to understand the relationship between economic and racial structures and social control in rural agricultural societies, and her article here extends this work to the control of misdemeanors. While Sampson (Sampson & Groves 1989) has also played a major role in the rejuvenation of social disorganization theory, Sampson and Laub's contribution here places them in the forefront of those who are adapting conflict theory to the new urban realities.

While all three articles focus our attention on macrovariation in social control and try to incorporate their findings within theories of social control, they also try to extend and further develop these theories. Myers extends conflict theory to a society (rural South) where prisons function both as a mechanism of control and of mobilizing labor. Bursik and Grasmick extend social disorganization theory to explain the effects of prolonged and concentrated poverty on informal and semiformal forms of social control. And Sampson and Laub extend conflict theory to explain the effects of race, drugs, and concentrated poverty on control bureaucracies.

While applauding these new directions, I have raised issues about theoretical development and rigor. Both social disorganization and conflict theories have never been clearly conceptualized, making rigorous testing problematic. In extending these theories, all three articles highlight these issues. Concerning Myers, if incarceration functions as a mechanism of both control and mobilizing labor, then both must be simultaneously considered in explaining the relationship between economic structures (price of cotton) and imprisonment rates. Concerning Bursik and Grasmick, it is not clear how concentrated poverty directly affects crime rates and indirectly affects them through public social control. Concerning Sampson and Laub, it is not clear if threat to the middle class is theoretically distinct from threats to elites and it is not clear how the concentration of poverty is uniquely threatening to anyone. I am not dis-



puting the findings of these fine articles. They are excellent pieces of work. Indeed, if the issues I have raised are at all worth addressing, then these are the type of scholars I would want to address them. I encourage them to further sharpen the links between their findings and general theories of social control, that is, to build theory. To reiterate, we should be less interested in the effects of structural variables than in the integrity of structural theories.

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