

CHAPTER

2

Positivist Theories



Soon after 7 A.M. on April 16, 2007, campus police at Virginia Tech University found two students in a dormitory shot to death. About two hours later, the killer, Cho Seung-Hui, a Virginia Tech senior, arrived at the school's engineering building. First, he chained all the outside doors shut, preventing anyone from entering or leaving the building. He then headed to a German class and peered in as if he was looking for somebody. He left but soon returned. Quiet and purposeful, Cho first shot the German teacher in the head, then methodically went around the room and took out the students one by one, pumping at least three bullets into each victim. He then moved on to three other classrooms to carry out the massacre in about the same way. After killing 32 people, Cho committed suicide by shooting himself in the temple (Gibbs, 2007).

What caused Cho Seung-Hui to perpetrate those horrendous acts? Various theories were reported in the media but the most commonly mentioned were his mental illness and

the easy availability of guns in the United States. Such a focus on the *causes* of deviant behavior like Cho's killing spree and suicide characterizes positivist theories of deviance. There are many positivist, causal theories of deviance. Here we will discuss only the most important ones, namely, anomie-strain theory, social learning theory, and control theory.

Anomie-Strain Theory

In 1938 Robert Merton developed what later became known as anomie theory, attributing deviance to *anomie*, the breakdown of social norms that results from society's urging people to be ambitious but failing to provide them with legitimate opportunities to succeed. Albert Cohen (1955) extended Merton's theory to explain the emergence of delinquent boys and common social factors contributing to their paths of delinquency. Sociologists Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960) further expanded on Merton's theory by adding the concept of differential illegitimate opportunity. Finally, since the early 1990s, other attempts have been made to extend the theory by emphasizing how the *strain* generated in people by anomie or other social conditions causes them to commit deviant acts (Agnew, 1992; Messner and Rosenfeld, 2001). The theory may thus be called anomie-strain theory, and it is explored further in the following section.

Merton: The Goal-Means Gap

Merton found something wrong with Freud's psychoanalytic theory of deviant behavior. The psychoanalytic theory says that criminal, pathological, or socially dangerous behavior represents the free expression of the libido, biological impulses, or animal desires the individual is born with. The defect of this theory, according to Merton, lies in its assumption that "the structure of society primarily restrains the free expression of man's fixed native impulses." That is, society *discourages* the individual from engaging in deviant activities. Merton called this assumption a "fallacious premise," because he believed just the opposite: Society *encourages* the individual to engage in deviant activities. With such a premise, Merton developed his anomie theory.

Many sociologists have long believed that Merton's theory was inspired by Émile Durkheim, who was the first to use the term *anomie* as a sociological concept. Thus they have called it *anomie theory*. If Merton's theory was inspired by Durkheim, it was tangential. The implication of Durkheim's concept of anomie is contrary to the premise of Merton's theory. By *anomie* Durkheim referred to the absence of social norms, which he equated with the failure of a society to successfully integrate and rein in its members' limitless pursuit of material success. Durkheim assumed that the lack of this normative control explains the emergence of deviance. This is similar to Freud's assumption that deviance will break out if society fails to discourage it by restraining individuals' impulses. But Merton's theory assumes just the opposite: Deviance will occur if society encourages it by pressuring individuals to commit it. Precisely how does society do this?

In Merton's view modern, industrialized U.S. society heavily emphasizes the cultural value of success. From kindergarten to college your teachers motivate you to achieve a high scholastic record and to have great ambition for your future. The books, magazines,

newspapers, and online news you read often carry success stories that encourage you to become successful yourself. The games, sports, and athletic events that you watch in the stadium or on television impress you with the supreme importance of winning. If you participate in an athletic event, the coach will prod you to win. If you simply want to enjoy the pleasure of playing the game and sarcastically argue that “winning is not everything,” the coach may argue back even more sarcastically: “Right, winning is not everything—winning is the *only* thing!” This cultural value of success is so pervasive in this society that people of *all* classes are expected to be ambitious, to entertain high aspirations; everyone is expected to have the desire to be a winner, to be somebody. Even poor people are told that their children have the chance of becoming president of the United States if they have as much ambition as the young, poverty-stricken Abraham Lincoln did. In this sense, the cultural goal of success is freely available to all people, regardless of their social class backgrounds.

In contrast, the institutionalized, legitimate *means* of achieving the high success goal, such as getting a good job, are not freely available to all classes of people. The society is structured in such a way that people of the lower social classes, when compared with those of the higher, have less opportunity to realize their success aspirations. Lower-class people thus find themselves trapped in a very difficult situation. They have been encouraged by the society to hold high success aspirations, but they are not given the opportunity to realize those aspirations. To get themselves out of that predicament, many lower-class people resort to the *illegitimate* means of achieving their success aspirations, such as stealing, robbing, and other similar forms of deviant activities. So, lower-class people are more likely to engage in deviant activities.

We have just seen that the *cause* of those lower-class deviant activities is the societal condition marked by the inconsistency between society’s overemphasis on the success goal and its *under* emphasis on the use of legitimate means for achieving that goal. Merton (1938) describes this goal–means disjunction in this way: “Contemporary American culture continues to be characterized by a heavy emphasis on wealth as a basic symbol of success, without a corresponding emphasis upon the legitimate avenues on which to march toward this goal.” With this encouragement of high aspirations and denial of success opportunities, U.S. society produces a great deal of strain that pressures us to commit deviance.

However, given this societal pressure toward deviance, not all of us would respond to it in the same way. Many lower-class people, as the previous discussion has implied, may respond to it by accepting the success goal while rejecting the use of legitimate means for realizing that goal. Merton refers to this deviant behavior as *innovation*. It is also the case that many other individuals of various social classes may respond differently to that same social condition. Therefore, along with innovation, Merton presents other types of response, as follows:

1. *Conformity* is the most popular form of response. It involves accepting both the cultural goal of success and the use of legitimate means of working toward that goal. Presumably most of us choose this response.

2. *Innovation* is largely found among lower-class people, who reject the use of legal means in favor of illegal ones in their attempts to achieve the high success goal that they have learned to accept. This form of deviant response is the central subject of strain theory, and Merton discusses it much more than any other.

TABLE 2.1 A Typology of Responses to Goal–Means Gap

In U.S. society, according to Merton, there is too much emphasis on success but too little emphasis on the legitimate means for achieving success. Such inconsistency may cause deviant behavior, yet various people respond to it differently.

Response	Success Goal	Legitimate Means
1. Conformity	+	+
2. Innovation	+	–
3. Ritualism	–	+
4. Retreatism	–	–
5. Rebellion	– +	– +

Note: “+” indicates accepting; “–” signifies rejecting; and “– +” means rejecting the old and introducing the new.
Source: Merton, Robert K. 1938. “Social structure and anomie.” *American Sociological Review*, 3, 672–682.

3. *Ritualism* is common among lower-middle-class people who lower their aspirations or abandon high success goals so that they can more easily realize their aspirations. But in their attempts to realize these modest aspirations, they compulsively—hence, ritualistically—abide by the institutional norm of toiling as conscientious, loyal workers. They tend to be proud of their hard, honest work while shrugging off their modest incomes.

4. *Retreatism* is a withdrawal from society into the shell of one’s self. The retreatist does not care about success, nor does he or she care to work. Examples of such people are psychotics, outcasts, vagrants, vagabonds, tramps, alcoholics, and drug addicts.

5. *Rebellion* involves rejecting the prevailing social expectation that we work hard in the so-called rat race to reach the goal of great success. The rebel also attempts to overthrow the existing system and put in its place a new one with new goals and new means of reaching those goals. Thus, the rebel may abandon both the pursuit of fame and riches and the cutthroat competition needed to achieve this worldly goal. At the same time, the rebel may encourage people to seek goodwill toward others and to cooperate in attaining this heavenly goal.

See Table 2.1 for a summary of these five responses to the gap between the overemphasis on the success goal and the underemphasis on the legitimate means of achieving success.

Cohen: Status Frustration

The version of anomie-strain theory proposed by Cohen (1955) is fundamentally the same as Merton’s. Like Merton, Cohen suggests that industrialized U.S. society encourages all classes of people to achieve status while at the same time making it difficult for lower-class people to really achieve it. As a consequence, lower-class people are compelled to achieve status in their own way—that is, to engage in deviant acts. Although the theme is the same as in Merton’s theory, Cohen tells the story differently, replacing Merton’s word *success* with *status*.

According to Cohen, lower-class boys, like their middle-class peers, want to have status. An important place to achieve status is the school, which they are forced to attend. But the school turns out to be a most unlikely place for lower-class boys, because it ensures their failure. How so? The school is run by middle-class teachers, promotes middle-class values and behavior, and judges the student's achievement by middle-class standards of behavior and performance. The school, then, is a middle-class status system. To achieve the status of a successful, competent, or good student in the middle-class setting, youngsters must possess middle-class values, virtues, and traits, such as verbal fluency, academic intelligence, the ability to delay gratification, courtesy, opposition to fistfights, and respect for property. In this status system, middle-class boys obviously have a good chance of becoming successful. Yet lower-class boys, who have not been socialized in the same way as middle-class boys, are thrown into a status system where they are expected to compete with middle-class boys. The result is not surprising: Lower-class boys fail disastrously. In Cohen's words, "they are caught up in a game in which others are typically the winners and they are the losers and the also-rans."

Being a loser or also-ran is obviously very frustrating. Driven by this frustration, which Cohen calls *status frustration*, lower-class boys go back to their own lower-class neighborhood and set up their own competitive system, which Cohen refers to as a *delinquent subculture*. In that subculture they can compete more fairly among themselves for high status in accordance with their own criteria of achievement. Their criteria of achievement are in direct opposition to the "respectable" middle-class, conventional criteria. They judge as wrong whatever values and behaviors are considered right by conventional standards, and they judge as right whatever values and behaviors are considered wrong by conventional standards. Given this, it is obvious that the lower-class boys' very attempt to achieve status among their peers is—according to conventional standards—delinquent. The so-called delinquent activities include stealing "for the hell of it," fighting, terrorizing "good" children, destroying property, and defying various conventional taboos.

In short, Cohen extends Merton's theory by adding the concept of status frustration. As you may remember, Merton suggests that the goal-means gap (discrepancy between success aspiration and legitimate opportunity) *by itself* creates a lot of strain that pressures lower-class people into deviance: Goal-means gap → deviance. But Cohen's theory suggests that the goal-means gap can lead lower-class boys toward deviant activities only if the boys encounter *status frustration*. In other words, status frustration serves as the third, intervening variable that enables the goal-means gap to produce delinquent subculture: Goal-means gap → *status frustration* → deviance.

Nevertheless, Cohen's theory is basically the same as Merton's. Both assume that lower-class people are more likely than others to engage in deviant activities because society fails to help them fulfill the aspirations (for success or status) that it has induced in these people.

Cloward and Ohlin: Differential Illegitimate Opportunity

You may recall the way Merton formulates his theory: The lower classes tend to engage in deviance because they, like the middle and upper classes, have been encouraged to hold high success goals but, unlike the higher classes, are denied the *legitimate* means or opportunity of achieving the success goals. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) accept this

general idea. At the same time, however, they want to extend it by introducing the concept of differential *illegitimate* opportunity.

First, Cloward and Ohlin point out that Merton correctly directs our attention to the problem of differential legitimate opportunity—that the lower classes have less opportunity than other classes for achieving success in a legitimate, conforming manner. But Merton wrongly assumes that the lower classes, when confronted with the lack of opportunity, would automatically and successfully engage in deviant activities. In other words, Merton fails to recognize the fact that the lower classes, after being confronted with the problem of differential *legitimate* opportunity, are further confronted with the additional problem of differential *illegitimate* opportunity. The fact is that some members of the lower classes have less opportunity than others of the same classes for achieving success in an *illegitimate, deviant* manner. What Cloward and Ohlin want to emphasize is that while all lower-class people suffer from the same lack of opportunity for engaging in legitimate and conforming activities, they do not have the same opportunity for participating in illegitimate and deviant activities. Thus, when some lower-class persons are pressured toward committing a deviant act such as theft or robbery, there is no guarantee that they will actually do it. Whether or not they will actually do it depends on whether they have access to illegitimate opportunity in the lower-class neighborhood.

There are three types of illegitimate opportunity, each provided by a deviant subculture. The *criminal* subculture offers illegitimate opportunities for achieving success goals. If lower-class youngsters are integrated into this subculture, they are able to achieve success by stealing, robbing, and fencing. This is the kind of deviant activity to which Merton assumes all lower-class youngsters will turn when they are denied conventional opportunities in the larger society. But, according to Cloward and Ohlin, many of these lower-class youths are not part of the criminal subculture and therefore do not enjoy criminal opportunities.

Yet some of those youths may find themselves in another neighborhood where the *conflict* subculture flourishes. In this subculture, a youngster has the opportunity to achieve “rep” or status within a violent delinquent gang. But that opportunity is available only to those youngsters who can meet such requirements as possessing great fighting skill and demonstrating enthusiasm for risking injury or death in gang warfare. Some lower-class adolescents fail to meet these requirements and are therefore denied the opportunity for achieving status within the conflict subculture.

There is, finally, a third, *retreatist* subculture, in which the only requirement for membership is the willingness to enjoy the use of drugs. Persons who are recruited into the retreatist subculture are likely to be those who have failed to achieve success in the criminal subculture or to attain status in the conflict subculture. Because of their failure to achieve success or status in *both* the delinquent underworld and the conventional upper-world, the retreatists have been called “double failures.”

In brief, Cloward and Ohlin extend Merton’s anomie-strain theory by introducing differential illegitimate opportunity as the third, intervening variable through which the goal-means gap leads to three different kinds of deviant activities: Goal-means gap → *differential illegitimate opportunity* → different deviant activities. (Table 2.2 shows how this version of anomie-strain theory by Cloward and Ohlin compares with the versions by Merton and Cohen.) Nevertheless, Cloward and Ohlin basically agree with Merton that

TABLE 2.2 Three Versions of Anomie-Strain Theory

Merton: Goal-means gap → deviance

Cohen: Goal-means gap → status frustration → deviance

Cloward and Ohlin: Goal-means gap → differential illegitimate opportunity → different deviant activities

Note: The sign “→” indicates “antecedes or causes,” as in “A antecedes or causes B.”

lower-class people are more inclined than others toward deviance because they are more likely to experience the discrepancy between success aspirations and the opportunity for realizing those aspirations.

Recent Developments

Over the last decade a number of sociologists have moved anomie-strain theory in new directions. Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld (2001), for example, argue that Merton focused too much on the “inequality in access to the legitimate means for success” as the source of the strain that leads to deviance. It is not so much the relative lack of opportunity that causes people to resort to the illegal means of achieving success, Messner and Rosenfeld contend, rather it is the overwhelming culture of the American Dream that causes deviance by encouraging people to adopt an “anything goes” mentality in the pursuit of success. According to Mark Konty (2005), the pursuit of the American Dream or economic success can cause deviance because it reflects a strong *self*-interest with little or no *social* interest. Self-interests focus on personal success or dominance over others, while social interests emphasize concern for the welfare of others. Research has suggested that people tend to engage in deviance if they have strong self-interests while lacking social interests.

Robert Agnew (1992) has also found Merton inadequate for focusing only on failure to achieve economic success goals as the strain that directly causes deviance. There are two other kinds of strain that are noneconomic in nature, Agnew theorizes. One is what he calls the “removal of positively valued stimuli,” such as “the loss of a boyfriend/girlfriend, the death or serious illness of a friend, moving to a new school district, the divorce/separation of one’s parents, and suspension from school.” The other form of strain involves the “presentation of negative stimuli,” which includes such unpleasant experiences as child abuse and neglect, criminal victimization, physical punishment, and problems with parents or peers. These strains are said to cause frustration, fear, and anger, which in turn lead to deviant actions such as theft, aggression, and drug use. Certain factors, however, may strengthen the influence of strain on deviance. When experiencing strain, for example, men tend to commit a greater amount of violent crime than do women, and college students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are more likely than other students to get involved in crime (Baron, 2007; Johnson and Kercher, 2007).

Evaluating Anomie-Strain Theory

This theory has at least two problems. First, there is no reliable evidence to support its claim that people of the lower classes are more likely than those of other classes to engage in deviant activities. It is true that the official statistics on crime and delinquency, which anomie-strain theorists rely on, do support the theory. But the official statistics are largely unreliable and invalid. They are unreliable because law enforcers are much more likely to catch lower-class criminals and delinquents than higher-class ones. They are invalid because they do not reflect the total picture of deviance—they measure instead a very small portion of the totality of deviance, namely, the relatively serious types. If we modify the theory and say that lower-class people are more likely to commit what society considers *serious* types of deviance, then the theory does have adequate empirical support from both the official and unofficial reports on criminality and delinquency.

Second, there is no evidence to support the assumption of anomie-strain theory that lower-class people tend to hold the same level of success aspirations as do upper- and middle-class people. On the contrary, both theoretical analysis and empirical data show that lower-class people hold a significantly lower level of success aspirations. It is true, as anomie-strain theorists claim, that U.S. society *encourages* lower-class people to embrace high success goals. But it is *not* necessarily true, as anomie-strain theorists assume, that lower-class people will end up embracing high success goals. Merton and other anomie-strain theorists appear to have ignored the fact that while the manifest, intended function of U.S. success ideology is to get all social classes to entertain high aspirations, its latent, unintended, and real consequence turns out to be the higher social classes holding far higher aspirations than the lower classes.

Whatever its shortcomings, anomie-strain theory does have important redeeming value, aside from its being considered by many sociologists as highly interesting. Foremost to consider is that the theory has contributed greatly to the sociological idea that the society, not the individual, causes deviant behavior. Before the theory was first published in 1938, many sociologists tended to seek the causes of deviance within the individual rather than without. The fact that today many sociologists take for granted the notion of deviance as caused by society is a testament to the contribution of anomie-strain theory.

Further, the theory seems to have a valid premise: The discrepancy between aspirations and the opportunity to realize these aspirations produces pressures toward deviation. This premise suggests that anybody, regardless of their social class backgrounds, tends to engage in deviance if they experience a significant gap between aspiration and opportunity. Indeed, much research has shown that wherever the aspiration–opportunity gap strikes, it tends to generate deviation (Menard, 1995; Parnaby and Sacco, 2004; Passas and Agnew, 1997).

Social Learning Theory

According to social learning theory, the brainchild of Edwin Sutherland (1939), deviant behavior is learned through one's interaction with others. More specifically, Sutherland developed the theory of differential association to explain how the learning of deviance comes about. Later, other sociologists presented different versions of the same theory.

Sutherland: Differential Association

More than 60 years ago—at about the same time that Merton proposed strain theory—Sutherland (1939) introduced the theory of differential association. The heart of the theory is this: If an individual associates with people who hold deviant (or criminal) ideas more than with people who embrace conventional ideas, the individual is likely to become deviant.

We should note two things about the meaning of this statement. First, although deviants typically hold deviant ideas, the people who hold deviant ideas do not have to be deviants—they can be anybody, even those who have not committed any deviance. What counts is the *idea* of committing deviance. If a father tells his children that it's all right to steal when you are poor, he is giving them an idea of committing a deviant act. On the other hand, if the father tells his children that it's wrong to steal, he is giving them an antideviant idea. The emphasis here is on whether the father gives his children deviant or antideviant ideas, not whether the father himself is a deviant or nondeviant. Therefore, if people are given more ideas of committing deviant acts than ideas of performing conventional acts, they are likely to engage in deviance.

Second, the theory does *not* refer to only one type of association, that is, deviant association or exposure to deviant ideas. The theory does not suggest that, if individuals have a lot of contacts with deviant ideas, they will become deviant. Lawyers, for example, may have a lot of contacts with their criminal clients, but they will not necessarily become criminals themselves. The theory instead refers to both deviant and conventional contacts or, more precisely, to the *excess* of deviant over conventional contacts. This means that it is all right to have both kinds of contacts; only if we have a *greater* number of deviant contacts than conventional ones are we likely to become deviant. This is suggested by the term *differential association*, which refers to the fact that deviants' *association* with deviant individuals and ideas *differs* from (or, more precisely, occurs more often than) their association with conventional ones. Defined in this way, differential association is theorized to be the cause of deviance: Differential association → deviant behavior.

Glaser: Differential Identification

According to Daniel Glaser (1956), Sutherland's theory actually conveys a “mechanistic image” of deviance. Such an image shows the individual as being mechanically pushed into deviant involvement by an association with deviants. It ignores the individual's role-taking and choice-making ability. Glaser, then, tries to correct this mechanistic image by suggesting that the experience of associating with deviants is harmless unless the individual *identifies* with them.

Glaser's theory may be taken to suggest that it is all right for us to associate with deviants in real life or get to know them in books and movies, as long as we do not take them so seriously that we identify with them, treating them as our heroes. But if we do identify with them, or more precisely, if we identify with them more than with nondeviants, we are likely to become deviants ourselves. In effect, Glaser suggests that deviance is likely to occur if differential identification intervenes between differential association and deviant behavior: Differential association → *differential identification* → deviant behavior.

Burgess and Akers: Differential Reinforcement

According to Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers (1966), Sutherland merely suggested, in very broad terms, that people with differential association must go through a learning process before they become deviant. Sutherland failed, they contend, to specify what that learning process entails. In trying to correct this failure, Burgess and Akers offer the idea of *differential reinforcement* as the substance of that learning process.

Burgess and Akers derive their idea from a well-known theory in psychology, which has been variously referred to as *social learning theory*, *behaviorist theory*, *operant behavior theory*, *operant conditioning theory*, and *reinforcement theory*. Generally, the theory says that we are motivated to continue behaving in a certain way if we have been rewarded for doing so, or to discontinue the behavior if we have been punished for it. You are, for example, likely to continue studying hard if you have been rewarded by good grades for studying hard in the past. When applied to deviant behavior, reinforcement theory says that people will continue to engage in deviant activities if they have been rewarded for doing so. Robbers, for example, will continue to rob if they have made much money from their robberies or if they have not been caught for their crimes.

One aspect of reinforcement theory that is most relevant to the Burgess–Akers reformulation of Sutherland’s differential association theory is the *law of differential reinforcement*. This law can be expressed in simple terms as follows: If you are given several options, such as studying hard, going to the movies, drinking in a tavern, and attending a wild party the night before an exam, you will most likely choose the option that has been most satisfying to you in the past. When applied to deviant behavior, the law of differential reinforcement would explain that individuals will choose deviance over conventionality if they find deviance more satisfying than conventionality. However, this is likely to occur if they have been exposed to deviant ideas more than to conventional ideas. In short, Burgess and Akers’s theory can be expressed as follows: Differential association → *differential reinforcement* → deviant behavior. Table 2.3 summarizes how this version of differential theory differs from the other two discussed earlier.

Evaluating Social Learning Theory

First, it is difficult to determine precisely what “differential association” in Sutherland’s theory is in real-life situations. As Sutherland and Donald Cressey (1978) admit, people often cannot identify the persons from whom they have learned deviant and antideviant ideas. Although it is difficult to determine the exact, empirical meaning of differential

TABLE 2.3 Three Versions of Social Learning Theory

Sutherland: Differential association → criminal behavior

Glaser: Differential association → differential identification → criminal behavior

Burgess and Akers: Differential association → differential reinforcement → criminal behavior

Note: The sign “→” indicates “antecedes or causes,” as in “A antecedes or causes B.”

association, many sociologists have claimed that their research data appear to support Sutherland's theory. But this need not be surprising. Actually, those sociologists have not found any empirical support for Sutherland's theory, but only for their *own* interpretations of the theory. As James Short (1960), who has done considerable research to test the theory, observed, "Much support has been found for the principle of differential association *if* the liberties taken in the process of its operationalization [translation into empirical or testable terms] are granted." One study, for example, treats the concept of "differential association" as if it had to do with "association" only—and nothing to do with "differential." The concept is thus operationalized as a perception of friends' deviant attitudes and behaviors alone, not the friends' *excess of deviant over conventional* attitudes and behaviors (Hochstetler, Copes, and DeLisi, 2002).

Second, Glaser's differential identification theory appears to have received some support from empirical data. It has been found, for example, that high school boys who identified with delinquent friends were likely to become delinquent themselves. But there is no conclusive evidence that identification with delinquent friends is the cause of delinquency or occurs before a person becomes delinquent. It is quite possible that youngsters may identify with delinquent friends only after—not before—having become delinquent themselves.

Third, the Burgess–Akers differential reinforcement theory cannot explain why a person *initially* commits a deviant act. The theory is useful, however, for explaining repeated deviance, namely, why some people *continue* to get involved in deviance after committing a deviant act for the first time. The reason, according to differential reinforcement theory, is that they have in the past been rewarded more than punished for their deviance, whereas others do not repeat a deviant act because they have been punished more than rewarded for the act. This formulation has indeed been borne out by many studies (see, for example, Akers and Lee, 1999; Chappell and Piquero, 2004; Sellers, Cochran, and Branch, 2005).

Control Theory

Control theory differs in at least two ways from the other major theories discussed above. First, both anomie-strain and learning theorists approach the problem of explaining deviant behavior head-on and ask, What causes deviance? Control theorists approach the problem in a roundabout way: What, they ask, causes conformity? They assume, in other words, that if they find out what causes conformity, they will know what causes deviance, for what causes deviance is simply the *absence* of what causes conformity. Second, both anomie-strain and learning theorists reject the Freudian idea that deviance can naturally, or by itself, burst forth from our inborn animal impulses. Instead, anomie-strain and learning theories maintain that deviance originates from certain social conditions, namely, the discrepancy between goals and means in society and the experience of learning from others. In contrast, control theorists seem to accept the Freudian idea because they assume that people are naturally inclined to commit deviant acts and will do so *unless* they are properly controlled.

In the eyes of control theorists, then, what causes conformity is social control over the individual, and therefore the *absence of social control causes deviance*. There are, however, many different theories about the specific nature of social control. We will focus on only three of the more important ones.

Hirschi, Gottfredson, and Tittle: Social Bond, Self-Control, and Control Balance

Travis Hirschi (1969) assumes that all of us are endowed like animals with the ability to commit deviant acts. But most of us do not take advantage of this ability, Hirschi suggests, because of our *strong bond* to society. In other words, our strong bond to society ensures our conformity. Conversely, if our social bond is weak, we will commit deviant acts.

According to Hirschi, there are four ways for individuals to bond themselves to society. The first is by *attachment* to conventional people and institutions. In the case of juveniles, they may show this attachment by loving and respecting their parents, making friends with conventional peers, liking school, and working hard to develop intellectual skills. A *commitment* to conformity is the second way. Individuals invest their time and energy in conventional types of action, such as getting an education, holding a job, developing an occupational skill, improving a professional status, building up a business, or acquiring a reputation for virtue. At the same time, people show a commitment to achievement through these activities. The third way is *involvement* in conventional activities. People simply keep themselves so busy doing conventional things that they do not have time for partaking in deviant activities or even thinking about deviant acts. A *belief* in the moral validity of social rules is the fourth way in which people bond themselves to society. Individuals have a strong moral belief that they should obey the rules of conventional society. A young person may show such moral belief through a respect for the police or through a positive attitude toward the law.

If these four elements of the individual's bond to conventional society are strong, the individual is likely to get stuck in conformity. If these elements are weak, the individual is likely to slide into deviance. In more recent publications, Hirschi, along with Michael Gottfredson, argues that *weak self-control* is more useful for explaining deviance. People with weak self-control are said to be highly impulsive, reckless, and insensitive. They are a product of inadequate socialization. Their parents have often failed, for example, to discipline them in childhood for wrongful behavior. Such people then are likely to commit deviant acts (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1994; Langton, Piquero, and Hollinger, 2006; Love, 2006).

According to Charles Tittle (1995, 2004), however, it is the *lack of control balance* that causes deviance. Individuals with a lack of control balance are said to have either a "control surplus" (such as the control we have over others being greater than the control others have over us) or a "control deficit" (the control others have over us being greater than the control we have over them). They are likely to engage in any kind of deviance, which may include such widely different deviances as exploitation of others, theft, vandalism, child molestation, and sexual harassment.

Braithwaite: Reintegrative Shaming

While Hirschi sees how society controls us through bonding, John Braithwaite (1989, 2000) looks at how society controls us through shaming. Shaming involves an expression of social disapproval designed to invoke remorse in the wrongdoer. There are two types

of shaming: disintegrative and reintegrative. In *disintegrative shaming*, the wrongdoer is punished in such a way as to be stigmatized, rejected, or ostracized—in effect, banished from conventional society. It is the same as stigmatization. *Reintegrative shaming* is more positive; it involves making wrongdoers feel guilty while showing them understanding, forgiveness, or even respect. It is the kind of shaming that affectionate parents administer to their misbehaving child. It is equivalent to “hating the sin but loving the sinner.” Thus, reintegrative shaming serves to reintegrate—or welcome back—the wrongdoer into conventional society.

According to Braithwaite, reintegrative shaming is more common in communitarian societies (marked by strong social relationships but weak individualism), such as Japan, whereas disintegrative shaming is more prevalent in less communitarian societies (characterized by weaker social relationships but stronger individualism), such as the United States. At the same time, reintegrative shaming usually discourages further deviance, whereas disintegrative shaming or stigmatization encourages it. This is taken to explain why crime rates are higher in the United States than in Japan.

Braithwaite concludes by arguing that the United States can significantly reduce its crime rates if it emphasizes reintegrative shaming rather than stigmatization in dealing with criminals, as Japanese society does. Since the early 1990s reintegrative shaming has appeared in the United States as “shaming penalties.” They involve judges forcing drunk drivers to display “DUI” bumper stickers, ordering people convicted of public urination to sweep city streets, and using newspapers, billboards, and radio shows to identify men who solicit prostitutes. Dan Kahan (1997), a law professor at the University of Chicago, argues that these shaming penalties effectively deter deviance.

The Deterrence Doctrine

While Braithwaite’s theory deals largely with shaming as an *informal* social control (carried out by relatives, friends, neighbors, and the like), the deterrence doctrine focuses on formal social control (executed by judges and other law-enforcement agents). This version of control theory assumes that humans are basically rational, given to calculating the benefit and cost of committing a crime. If they find the cost greater than the benefit, they will refrain from committing the crime. The cost of crime, according to deterrence doctrine, is legal punishment, such as arrest, prosecution, imprisonment, or execution. Thus, the doctrine assumes that punishment (a form of social control) deters crime—and lack of punishment encourages it.

There are three ways in which punishment can be carried out, each being assumed to affect the likelihood of committing crime. First, punishment can be made more or less *severe*. According to deterrence doctrine, the more severe the punishment, the less likely the crime. Murder rates, for example, are expected to be lower in societies where convicted murderers are executed than in societies where the murderers are given a 20-year sentence. Second, punishment can be made more or less *certain*. Deterrence doctrine assumes that the more certain the commission of a crime will result in punishment, the less likely people will be to commit the crime. Shoplifting, for example, is expected to become less common if the chances of getting arrested for it go up from 50–50 to 100. Third, punishment can be made more or less *swift*. The more swiftly punishment is carried out, the less likely the

crime is to occur. If it takes only several days for robbers to be arrested in a given city, the robbery rate in this city is likely to be lower than in another city where it takes longer to arrest robbers.

Whatever the mode of punishment, whether it be severe, certain, or swift, it is assumed to achieve two kinds of deterrence: general and specific. In *general deterrence* the punishment of a criminal deters the general public from committing crimes; in *specific deterrence* the punishment of a criminal deters the criminal alone from committing more crimes.

In sum, the three control theories suggest that some form of control prevents people from committing deviant acts, and the lack of controls prompts the commission of such acts. The theories differ largely in regard to what type of control can prevent deviance. Thus, they present various types of control, which include bond to society, self-control, reintegrative shaming, and legal punishment.

Evaluating Control Theory

First, many studies have supported Hirschi's social bond and self-control theory. Deviants such as juvenile delinquents, drug users, and drunk drivers have been found to have a weaker social bond or self-control than nondeviants (see, for example, Drapela, 2005; Pratt and Cullen, 2000). More recently, Japanese college students have been found to engage in significantly less deviance than their American counterparts, because the Japanese have stronger social bonds due to the collectivist nature of their society as contrasted with the individualist nature of U.S. society (Fukushima et al., 2009). But most of these studies, being cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, could not have controlled for (canceled out) the reciprocal effect of deviance on social bond or self-control. Often, it is the deviant experience that causes people to have a weaker social bond and self-control rather than the other way around. Also, many studies that supposedly support the theory turn out to be tautological, using deviant acts (such as smoking, using drugs, speeding, and drunk driving) as the empirical indicators of weak self-control. These studies effectively suggest that deviance causes deviance (Burton et al., 1998; Kempf, 1993; Li, 2004; Stylianou, 2002).

Second, Braithwaite is only partly convincing in his argument that the United States can reduce crime with reintegrative shaming—by treating criminals in the same lenient, compassionate way as Japan does. This treatment may work if applied to first-time offenders who have committed relatively minor crimes and still retain a sense of shame for their crimes. But it can hardly have the same positive impact on hardened criminals who have lost their sense of shame for their crimes. Moreover, since reintegrative shaming is part and parcel of a communitarian society, it seems to be the pervasiveness of such society's strong social relationships rather than reintegrative shaming that largely keeps the crime rate low. This may explain why reintegrative shaming is less likely to deter deviance in Russia and other less communitarian societies marked by weak social relationships (Botchkovar and Tittle, 2005).

Third, the deterrence doctrine has received only conflicting support from research. Various studies show, for example, that arresting wife-beaters deters further violence more than less severe forms of punishment such as ordering the offender to leave the

victim for eight hours. However, studies on released prisoners suggest just the opposite: The more severe their punishment (e.g., the longer the sentence), the more likely former inmates will commit crimes again (Berk and Newton, 1985; Heckert and Gondolf, 2000; Wright et al., 2004).

Finally, various control theorists share a simplistic view of social control, regarding it as only a *preventer* of deviance. They fail to see control as a possible *cause* of deviance. Contrary to the deterrence doctrine, for example, the very process of law enforcement to deter crime may trigger lawbreaking acts. This often occurs when a police officer takes action against a suspect, thereby causing the suspect to commit such criminal acts as resisting arrest or assaulting an officer (Marx, 1981).

Table 2.4 presents the major points of all the theories discussed in this chapter.

TABLE 2.4 Positivist Theories of Deviance

Anomie-strain theory: Social strain causes deviance.

Merton's goal-means gap: Deviance is prevalent in society because the society encourages people to achieve success without providing equal opportunity for achieving it.

Cohen's status frustration: Deviance is prevalent among lower-class youths because they fail to achieve status in a middle-class school environment.

Cloward and Ohlin's differential illegitimate opportunity: Lower-class youths are likely to engage in delinquent activities if they have access to illegitimate opportunity.

Latest versions of the theory: The American Dream contributes to deviance by directly encouraging the use of illegal means to achieve success, while various social strains cause deviance by producing such emotions as frustration and anger.

Social learning theory: Deviance is learned through social interaction.

Sutherland's differential association: People are likely to become deviant if they associate with people holding deviant ideas more than with people holding antideviant ideas.

Glaser's differential identification: People are likely to become deviant if they identify themselves more with deviants than with nondeviants.

Burgess and Akers's differential reinforcement: Deviants are likely to continue engaging in deviant activities if they have been rewarded more than punished for their past deviance.

Control theory: Lack of social control causes deviance.

Social bond, self-control, and control balance: People are likely to become deviant if their bond to society and their self-control are weak or if they have a control surplus or deficit.

Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming: People are likely to become deviant if they are not made to feel ashamed for their wrongdoing or to feel they are an integral part of society.

The deterrence doctrine: People are likely to become deviant if they know their deviant acts are not punished with severity, certainty, or swiftness.

Summary

1. How does anomie-strain theory explain the causation of deviant behavior? According to Merton's anomie-strain theory, lower-class people are more likely to get involved in deviant activities because the society has encouraged them to pursue a high success goal without providing them with the means of achieving it. Cohen extends this theory by proposing that when their aspirations for status are frustrated in the middle-class milieu, lower-class youths are driven to achieve status among themselves by engaging in delinquency. Cloward and Ohlin extend Merton's theory by suggesting that whether potentially delinquent lower-class youth will actually become delinquent depends on whether they have access to illegitimate opportunity. Other sociologists extend Merton's theory by attributing deviance to the American Dream and forms of strain ignored by Merton. **How good is anomie-strain theory?** There is no reliable evidence for its assumption that, compared with middle and upper classes, the lower classes are more prone to deviance while holding the same level of success aspirations. Nevertheless, the theory has been valuable for replacing the psychological with the sociological explanation of deviance and for offering the valid premise that the aspiration–opportunity gap causes deviance.

2. According to various versions of social learning theory, why do some people become deviant? Sutherland's differential association theory states that people will likely become deviant if they associate more with individuals who hold deviant ideas than with those who embrace

antideviant ideas. Glaser extends this theory by suggesting that the determining factor for turning the differential association into criminal action is differential identification, while Burgess and Akers designate differential reinforcement the determining factor. **Are Sutherland's theory and its extended versions any good?** Sutherland's theory has been criticized for lacking a precise, empirical meaning of “differential association,” but many researchers claim to have found data supporting the theory. As for Glaser's theory, it has received some, though not conclusive, empirical support. The Burgess–Akers theory cannot explain initial acts of deviance but is useful for explaining repeated deviance.

3. How does control theory explain deviance? According to the theory, what causes conformity is control, and, therefore, the lack of control causes deviance. Hirschi refers to this causal factor of conformity as our *bond to society*, or *self-control*. Braithwaite calls it *reintegrative shaming*, and proponents of deterrence doctrine refer to it as *legal punishment*. **What are the strengths and weaknesses of various control theories?** Hirschi's theory has received a lot of support from research data, but weak social bond or self-control may be the effect rather than the cause of deviance. Braithwaite's theory about reintegrative shaming being able to reduce crime in the United States may work for first-time offenders but not hardened criminals. The deterrence doctrine has received support from some studies but has been refuted by others.

FURTHER READING

Adler, Freda, and William S. Laufer (eds.). 1995. *The Legacy of Anomie Theory*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction. A series of essays that discuss the contribution of Merton's theory to the sociological research on and understanding of deviance.

Agnew, Robert. 1992. “Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency.” *Criminology*, 30, 47–87. A revision of Merton's anomie-strain theory that takes into account many forms of strain that lead to deviance.

- Akers, Ronald L. 1998. *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance*. Boston: Northeastern University Press. A clear presentation of his social learning theory as well as research data supporting the theory.
- Braithwaite, John. 1989. *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*. New York: Cambridge University Press. A theory about how society deters crime through the imposition of a social control called "reintegrative shaming."
- Cullen, Francis T. 1988. "Were Cloward and Ohlin strain theorists? Delinquency and opportunity revisited." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 25, 214–241. Shows why Cloward and Ohlin are more opportunity theorists than strain theorists.
- Fukushima, Miyuki, Susan F. Sharp, and Emiko Kobayashi. 2009. "Bond to society, collectivism, and conformity: A comparative study of Japanese and American college students." *Deviant Behavior*, 30, 434–466. Demonstrates how the strong bond to their collectivist society makes Japanese students less deviant than American students.
- Goode, Erich (ed.). 2008. *Out of Control: Assessing the General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press. Leading criminology theorists contributed 15 essays assessing Hirschi and Gottfredson's general theory in a variety of substantive areas.
- Hawdon, James, John Ryan, and Laura Agnich. 2010. "Crime as a source of solidarity: A research note testing Durkheim's assertion." *Deviant Behavior*, 31, 679–703. Solidarity significantly increased among Virginia Tech students following the horrendous school shootings.
- Higgins, George E., and Rebecca J. Boyd. 2008. "Low self-control and deviance: Examining the moderation of social support from parents." *Deviant Behavior*, 29, 388–410. Shows the finding that parental support can reduce the influence of weak self-control on deviant behavior.
- Hirschi, Travis, and Michael R. Gottfredson (eds.). 1994. *The Generality of Deviance*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction. A collection of articles about the editors' theory of self-control, which essentially shows how a lack of self-control can result from ineffective child rearing and then cause deviance.
- Johnson, Matthew C., and Glen A. Kercher. 2007. "ADHD, strain, and criminal behavior: A test of general strain theory." *Deviant Behavior*, 28, 131–152. An empirical study of how college students with self-reported ADHD symptoms are more likely than other students to participate in criminal behavior when experiencing strain.
- Langton, Lynn, Nicole Leeper Piquero, and Richard C. Hollinger. 2006. "An empirical test of the relationship between employee theft and low self-control." *Deviant Behavior*, 27, 537–565. An exploratory study of how college students with low self-control are more likely than others to lie on their job applications and commit employee theft.
- Love, Sharon RedHawk. 2006. "Illicit sexual behavior: A test of self-control theory." *Deviant Behavior*, 27, 505–536. Offers data to show how low self-control seems to contribute to sexual deviance such as masturbation, using pornography, and cross-dressing.
- Messner, Steven F., and Richard Rosenfeld. 2001. *Crime and the American Dream*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth. Shows how the culture of the American Dream causes deviance by encouraging people to pursue success in any way possible.
- Passas, Nikos, and Robert Agnew (eds.). 1997. *The Future of Anomie Theory*. Boston: Northeastern University Press. A collection of articles analyzing, modifying, and expanding Merton's strain theory.
- Stylianou, Stelios. 2002. "The relationship between elements and manifestations of low self-control in a general theory of crime: Two comments and a test." *Deviant Behavior*, 23, 531–557. Discusses the tautological problem with low self-control theory and shows the proper way of testing the theory.
- Tittle, Charles R. 1995. *Control Balance: Toward a General Theory of Deviance*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview. Presents a complicated theory of how the interaction among deviant motivation, opportunity, and constraint determines the probability of deviance.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Which of the positivist theories makes the most sense to you and why?
2. What should the government's role be in fighting crime, based on one or more of the positivist theories discussed in this chapter?

INTERNET RESOURCES

The FBI's UCR (Uniform Crime Reports) (<http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>) lists official arrests compiled annually by the FBI from arrest data reported by all criminal justice agencies in the United States (which number close to 17,000). Through this site, you can track all forms of violent and property crime.

Theoretical Criminology (<http://tcr.sagepub.com/>) is an international journal dedicated to research that advances theoretical knowledge in the areas of crime and deviant behavior.

The U.S. Department of Justice Houses the Official Bureau of Justice Statistics Reports (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/>.) A variety of reports and statistics on homicide trends, drug crimes, intimate partner violence, and other forms of violent crime for both adults and juveniles can be navigated from this link. The topics covered include a wide range of information pertaining to specific crimes, criminals, and victims. If you have any interest in topics pertaining to serious forms of deviant behavior and violence, you will find this site informative.