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Family and the local community as direct and indirect control agencies in prevention of criminal behavior

Abstract: The text discusses the theory of social control on the example of parental control and local community ways to *conform* its members. Both institutions of socialization enforce the social order by means of two forms of control: direct (external sanctions) and indirect (social bond). The text argues that a moderate level of control is a protective factor for crime.

Key words: parental control, local community, control theory, delinquency.

Introduction

According to the theory of social control, humans are selfish and narcissistic by nature. In their efforts to maximize pleasure and avoid distress, humans keep calculating, using past life experiences and knowledge concerning profitable actions. They are constantly considering which actions may bring them profit and which may result in damage. As Robert Agnew and Timothy Brezina note, the ideas of the control theory overlap to a large extent with the ideas of social learning theory because in both approaches an individual learns the behavior during the processes of modeling and taking beliefs from others (for example the ones concerning the knowledge about what is profitable and what is not because of the unpleasant consequences) that strengthen or weaken the individual's susceptibility to conform (conformism) or to circumvent social norms (deviation)

(Agnew, Brezina 2018, pp. 150–152). The theory of control explores above all conformist behavior and its different level of intensity in individual people, not the criminal tendency itself, which is, according to this theory, equally strong in every person. The deviant tendency immanently present in human nature is after all an axiom of this concept. Likewise, in the theory of social learning, the focus is not on reflection on human tendencies either, since the explanation of social mechanisms of human behavior formation is at the forefront. What makes the two theories differ to the greatest extent is the concept of human nature, which in the theory of control is simply broken and in the theory of social learning resembles John Locke's concept of the *tabula rasa*, i.e., the “clean slate” of the human mind, which is only being filled with content in the course of a human's ontogenetic development and the acquisition of new experiences by an individual. For both theories, which define their axioms so differently, the key mechanism of socialization is the individual's observation of the closest social environment and the quality of the individual's relationship with significant others. The significant other, by definition, has informal control over an individual for whom they are “significant” – as discussed in more detail later in this text – and in the social learning theory, the significant other is a model, also *ex definitione*.

In the theory of control, people differ in the level of manifested conformism towards generally accepted cultural goals. Conformism is a result of the presence and effectiveness of actions of formal and informal institutions enforcing social norms. The low level of social control, which encourages deviant behavior, results either from the absence of factors in the individual's environment that prevent them from violating social norms (absence of institutions guarding the conformist order) or from a low risk of losing an important value for the individual because they are deprived of it anyway (the individual has nothing to lose). The high level of social control is either a function of a strong execution of norms; an inevitable and firm reaction of the broadly defined apparatus of legally used violence (police, municipal police, public prosecutor's office) and informal reactions (social ostracism, gossip, reprimanding somebody), which is legitimized by the individual's violation of important social norms or a high stratification position that the individual occupies in the social structure (the structure of prestige, income, significance), which the individual may lose as a result of deviant behavior.

Referring the forms of control to children and youth (Agnew, Brezina 2018, pp. 152–153; Becker 2009, pp. 63–64) we can distinguish the following manifestations:

1. Direct control, i.e. all human efforts to limit deviant behavior by minors, which can include setting rules for juvenile, monitoring the juvenile's behavior, sanctioning the juvenile for social and legal violations and delinquency and reinforcing the juvenile for conventional behavior. Howard S. Becker defines, in a narrow manner, direct control as a mechanism for the use of power or sanctions.

2. *Self-control*, understood as stopping oneself from violating standards. Its opposite is the high impulsiveness and failure of an individual to think about the potential consequences of their behavior.
3. Social bond with the environment and involvement in the conformist order (*stake in conformity*), which are a result of such phenomena as: emotional attachment to people respecting the social order (*conventional other*) as well as current or planned by the individual activities which confirm their aspirations to take a high place in the traditional social structure (*actual or anticipated investment in conventional activities*).
4. Beliefs about the crime and its moral evaluation. Condemning a crime by an individual reduces their vulnerability to deviant behavior. The individual's beliefs are, of course, derived from social notions – the other, apart from the use of force and sanctions, social control mechanism according to H.S. Becker – concerning activities considered unsavory, inappropriate or immoral in society or other social groups.

Direct control is primarily formal control (exercised by the institutions set up for this purpose par excellence), although some of the manifestations of informal control (e.g. telling somebody off for littering the street) can also be considered forms of direct control over the maintenance of social order. However, the next forms of control specified are already clearly informal in nature. According to Jan M. Stanik, self-control is the ability to act rationally, contain states of frustration, solve internal conflicts, which an individual acquires in the course of constructive cognitive-evaluation development of personality structures. The individual's assimilation of mechanisms of self-control that are important from the point of view of conformism (inhibition at the drive and emotional level, adequate image of the Self, internalization of values) takes place in the course of socialization. It is the educational aspect (family, school, peer) and its inefficiency (the process of desocialization) that leads to the formation of anti-social personality that is much more important in the process of effective formation of proper self-control than the type of personality treated as genetic equipment of the individual (Stanik)¹. Self-control therefore appears to be the result of properly functioning direct control (formal and informal), as a set of prohibitions and orders installed inside the personality of an individual who experiences external social training. We can treat self-control as a result of the process of internalizing the world of values and principles guarded by external agencies of formal and informal social control.

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¹ It is worth noting that in the cited book there are many original theses concerning mechanisms of behavioral regulation. Jan M. Stanik criticizes, among others, the concept of mental resilience of an individual, which is extremely popular in Poland today, and which he considers unnecessary theoretical construct because its scope of meaning is exhausted by the notion of self-control that has been established for decades.

The next two forms of social control, which Robert Agnew and Timothy Brezina describe, are also informal. At the same time, this is an indirect control par excellence. It should be understood primarily as emotional relationships, mutual attachment between children and parents, or between an adult and the social groups which they voluntarily join. One of the more important concepts of informal control (or more precisely, indirect control) is Travis Hirschi's theory, for whom criminal involvement is the result of a lack of bonding to conventional society. In the theory of this eminent representative of the control trend, social bond has four components: attachment to friends, family, teachers, commitment to conventional cultural goals, involvement in ordinary family, school and church activities, as well as belief or respect for the police and the law (Burton et al. 1995). For Hirschi, the fundamental bond protecting children and youth against crime is their attachment to their parents, the strength of which determines the likelihood of crime in the life of the young person (*if the bond to the parent is weakened, the probability of delinquent behavior increases, if this bond is strengthened, the probability of delinquent behavior decreases*) (Hirschi 1969, p. 88). In the optics of this concept, the rule of law is a function of the quality of social bond and not an effect of efficient institutions of formal (direct) control; institutions which, thanks to their monopoly on violence, more or less firmly suppress all manifestations of non-conformism.

The following part of the text describes the role of two socialization agencies, i.e. parental control and local community. Since both institutions are the executors of both direct and indirect control, it is impossible to reduce the description of their functioning to one dimension without taking into account the diverse range of techniques of conformism used by these institutions in relation to their members.

Parental control

The institutions that exercise formal social control are not only the courts, the prosecutor's office, the police or institutions of social rehabilitation, but in the case of children and youth they also include parents, who are authorized by the statutory prerogative called parental authority (in England and Wales this prerogative is called parental responsibility) as well as the teachers. The latter, as public officers, have a formal obligation² to respond in a situation of threat to the welfare of a child (e.g. threat of demoralization).

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² In accordance with the disposition of the Penal Code – as Daniel Jakimiec notes – public officers, including judges, probation officers, government and a local government employees, i.e. teachers or social workers who exceed their competences or fail to fulfill their duties, act to the detriment of public or private interests, are liable to a punishment of up to 3 years (Idem, 2016, p. 63).

In the light of Polish law, children should obey their parents, and in matters where they can make independent decisions and make declarations of intent on their own, they should listen to their parents' opinions and recommendations formulated for their own good (Article 95, § 2 of the Act of 25 February 1964, Family and Guardianship Code, as amended), while parents should exercise custody of the child with respect to their dignity and rights (Jakimiec 2016, p. 195).

Parental control can have the following nature:

- direct monitoring when a parent personally “looks after” their child and ensures that the child complies with certain rules of behavior;
- indirect monitoring, when a parent asks where their child was, how school was, calls the child to ask what is going on, asks third parties about their child's behavior (Agnew, Brezina, 2018, p. 154);

Although research indicates that a higher level of parental control (establishing rules and monitoring children) is associated with a lower probability of deviant behavior, including criminal behavior (Kierkus, Hewitt 2009; Eitle 2006; Anderson 2002; Burton et al. 1995), too restrictive parental behavior (*strict parents*), however, can be counterproductive and even generate pathological behavior in children (Agnew, Brezina 2018, p. 154). This applies especially to the use of physical punishment and verbal violence.

An important element of introducing children into conflict-free coexistence with the social environment, in addition to sanctions, monitoring and setting limits by parents is – as noted by R. Agnew, T. Brezina (2018, p. 154) – reinforcing conventional behavior. The authors give an example of parents' support for the child's behavior in such a way that in the future they will be able to use the strength of arguments instead of physical strength in a dispute with their peers. However, we can look for similar exemplifications for strategies of strengthening conventional behavior in many other situations that parents use on a daily basis, such as praising a child in front of their grandparents for diligent study and getting a good grade, a hugging gesture when the child has given up some kind of delicacy for the benefit of younger siblings, common prayer and religious practices that bring children into the world of moral norms, etc.

The discourse of social prevention, which aims at reducing risky behaviors, emphasizes the high effectiveness of the so-called alternative strategy, i.e. promoting and popularizing alternative behaviors to risky behaviors. Such actions can also be considered as a strategy to strengthen conventional behavior. The involvement of children and youth in sports, art, music, etc. redirects their effort and attention – their energy, natural potential for expression – from the areas of danger (alcohol, abuse of digital technologies, association in criminal subcultures) to general development activities. Parents are crucial in shaping correct leisure habits in children. This trivial conclusion expresses a profound truth about the nature and role of parents in shaping their children's way of life, which is very often a direct reflection of their lifestyle.

Howar S. Becker notes that enforcing rules requires a resourceful attitude. "Someone – a resourceful person – must show initiative to punish the culprit" (2009, p. 126). Is a modern parent resourceful in the area of responding to "misbehavior" or social attitudes revealed by a child? It seems that in cases where we do not observe this resourcefulness – an attitude of passivity and parental helplessness – may be determined by a number of different reasons:

- cultural: in postmodern times, it is prohibited to prohibit because many modern people are deeply convinced that there is no objective pattern of correct and reprehensible behavior;
- cognitive: resulting from the deficit in the parent's knowledge, both in relation to the lack of awareness of the threats to which the modern young generation is subject (e.g. in the area of digital threats such as smartphone addiction, cyberbullying) and the lack of educational awareness in general, i.e. knowledge of pedagogical significance (awareness of one's own exemplary role, the significance of physical and emotional presence in the life of a child, the role of conversations, etc.);
- developmental: indifferent or immature attitude of parents who are too busy with themselves and for various reasons are not interested in their child (work and other absorbing activities); sometimes they are too infantile in their attitudes as a result of developmental fixation, due to which they do not feel the need for generativeness³), and sometimes they simply do not care about their own child, the extreme manifestation of which can be simply hostility towards their own offspring.

An extreme form of parental control disorder is the physical absence of one or both parents. The separation or lack of a parent in a child's life is a frequently studied predictor of criminal behavior. The absence of a parent does not have to be physical (death, imprisonment, abandonment of the family), but it may also apply to a parent who backs out, emotionally neglects their children, is not interested in their child, sometimes to the extent that there is a judicial intervention and termination of parental rights, as a result of which their child is placed in a care and educational facility. When considering relations between a parent(s) with their child, attention is paid to the following elements that determine the quality of this contact: how accessible they are to their children (and therefore not only whether they are present but also accessible), how they engage in a direct relationship with their children and to what extent they are responsible for the child, i.e., whether they are involved in the child's education, health care, hygiene and parental supervision (Dennison, Smallbone, Stewart, Freiberg, Teague, 2014, p. 1092).

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³ Generativeness – as noted by Barbara Harwas-Napierała – means the ability of an adult to take care, understood also as caring for the welfare of the younger generation, which in the realities of the family community concerns primarily one's own children (quoted from Wąsiński 2015, p. 85).

In the Peterborough study (hereinafter PADS+), areas with a high concentration of single-parent families were conducive to (strong correlation) high rates of social disorder (littering the streets, children without parental supervision sitting on the street, drunken people who misbehave in public space, vandalism, etc.). The large number of such families clearly correlated also with the high crime rate in that area (Wikström et al., p. 197). It is proven that growing up in a full family is a protective factor in relation to crime. Two cooperating parents can better perform control function (*supervision, enforcement*) than a single parent (Free 1991, pp. 109–167; Kierkus, Hewitt, 2009, p. 123). PADS+ research on space-time budget of young people's activities has shown that it is in the family environment that crimes are the least frequent. People between 13 and 17 years of age spend nearly 90% of their time – not including the time for sleep – in four environments: with family, at school, with peers and at work; the most criminally conducive impact on young people have peer environments, while the family and work environment have a very pro-social impact. 99.7% of parents agreed that it is very important for them to ensure that their child never comes into conflict with the law. In this way, parents, through the supervision of their children, have an impact on their children's behavior.

The reduction in the tendency of young people to violate legal norms thanks to the presence of an adult guardian is also visible in the relatively low level of crime that occurs in the school environment (Wikström et al., pp. 271–279). Research also shows that the parental tendency to supervise their children is quite universal, i.e. independent of class affiliation, parents' education or income. The level of parental control did not significantly correlate with the socioeconomic resources and status mentioned. However, risky behaviors of children appeared with different intensity depending on the socioeconomic characteristics of the parents. The frequency of truancy in the Peterborough research was significantly higher among children from families with lower material status and lower education of parents (Wikström et al., pp. 304–306).

Local community control

The level of crime is the most obvious indicator of a local community's ability to control the social behavior of individuals being its residents or those staying there temporarily. The latter, i.e. individuals appearing only periodically in a given space have a greater tendency to criminal behavior than the locals. PADS+ research on young people's behavior has shown that they spend 50% of their time away from home and the neighborhood, and it is in this "away" space that they commit as many as 90% of the crimes that we can attribute to the 13–17 years of age category (Wikström et al. 2013, p. 68). It usually happens in city centers, shopping malls, parks and on the street. This is a space where people can remain

anonymous. However, the controlling glance of a neighbor (informal control) is replaced there by being tracked by camera lenses, hence these spaces have long since become the place where (formal) control is present.

Individuals with low individual propensity for crime, i.e., those who have a high level of self-control and who agree with the need to respect the legal order are situationally resistant to criminogenic features, i.e., a set of conditions that encourage crime, such as a low level of monitoring (no adults or police nearby) and the presence of provocations (e.g. “quarrels” or even aggressive behavior on the part of peers). On the other hand, those who show a high level of personal susceptibility to crime, declare that they would use violence, even in case of a low level of provocation, and the level of monitoring and deterrence is indifferent for them – however, the higher the level, the lower the propensity for aggression (Wikström et al. pp. 390–392).

In addition to formal enforcement of law, informal control (direct and indirect) plays an important role in local communities. The key to maintaining the rule of law and conformism is the readiness of people to respond to all deviations from the norms of behavior. Criminology even makes attempts to measure the effectiveness of the local community to control the behavior of its members. Indicators of poor skills in controlling criminal behaviors (poor collective efficacy) are low social cohesion and weak informal social control (Wikström et al. 2013, p. 143). Communities where people do not trust each other, have different values, where there is no intimacy between people, i.e. where we observe a low level of social cohesion, we often observe great indifference of individuals to non-conformist behavior of other individuals (including crimes and violations of moral norms). A phenomenon that further reduces the community’s readiness to respond to crime and anti-social behavior, in addition to low social cohesion, is the low level of informal control. Researchers of this phenomenon have operationalized the concept of informal control, indicating the failure of neighbors to react to children sitting on the street, the toleration of truancy, the failure of the local community to act when someone is painting walls of buildings, and further the lack of reaction when someone is in danger, and finally the lack of willingness to tell off and scold a child when they show a lack of respect for an adult (Wikström et al., 2013, s. 144). Both components (social cohesion and informal control) are indicators of the level of morality of the local community and its social capital (Wikström et al. 2013, p. 143; Piotrowski, 2011, pp. 93–94).

The described ability of the local community to control criminal behavior (collective efficacy) is weakened by such phenomena as ethnic diversity, social rotation (instability of residence), pathological phenomena in a district (unemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction, health problems affecting residents), the accumulation of which results in such areas of the city being described as disadvantage areas, as well as family breakdown. All four reasons correlate with a weak level of so-called collective efficacy, an indicator of which is assumed to

be social cohesion and the ability of the community to exercise informal control over its members (see Wikström et al. 2013, pp. 176–185).

Final thoughts

Regardless of whether or not we share the enthusiasm of the supporters of improving social engineering methods by means of an increasingly dense network of monitoring of cities, surveillance of Internet users with the use of big data, gathering information obtained from various information systems on all aspects of the functioning of people under probation supervision (see Jachimczyk 2010), point economy in juvenile rehabilitation centers, methods of programmed impact in penitentiary facilities, where conformist behavior is rewarded by better conditions of imprisonment, we must agree that social control, at the family and community level, has always been and will be something desirable. Interest in the activities of one's own child outside the home is, after all, an indicator of parental love, and the attention (vigilance) shown to neighbors is a sign of civic responsibility. As with any activity, however, social control can also take on a degenerate form and thus develop into a mechanism of oppression and even terror. However, a modest level of direct and informal control is a clear factor protecting against crime, as evidenced by numerous studies, which are also referred to in the presented text.

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