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Nye, F. Ivan: Family Controls and Delinquency

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In 1958, F. Ivan Nye published *Family Relationships and Delinquent Behavior*, a study of how family structures and parent-child relationships influence the occurrence of juvenile delinquency. Based on a cross-sectional survey of high school students in three small cities in Washington and relying on simple cross-tabular analyses, the study might seem ordinary and limited by modern multivariate standards. However, the book made several important contributions to theory and research on delinquent behavior and still counts as an important milestone of modern criminology.

One contribution was its innovative use of self-report measurement of delinquency in a general survey of ordinary high school students when most delinquency research in 1958 relied on samples of adjudicated delinquents and used police records to measure their illegal behaviors. These “official delinquency” data reported on serious criminal acts committed by mostly lower-class, socially marginal youths from dysfunctional families in poor neighborhoods. Although self-report delinquency measures had been introduced in the 1940s, Nye's work (with James F. Short) provided the first systematic use of this procedure for theoretically meaningful research and showed that self-report measures would yield reliable and valid assessments of illegal behavior. Even though the Nye-Short delinquency scale was noticeably weighted toward minor property crimes and “status offenses,” it established a foundation for later uses of self-reports to measure more serious forms of criminal behaviors.

A second contribution was to modify the available received wisdom about juvenile delinquency based on studies of official delinquents. Nye's self-report data showed that acts of juvenile delinquency were frequent and common occurrences; and these involved mostly ordinary and minor forms of misbehavior committed by a larger, diverse collection of adolescents at all social levels. Such behaviors did not seem to involve any special forms of social learning or pathological motivations, but rather were common actions carried out by most adolescents for ordinary reasons of convenience or fun. While inconsistent with traditional accounts of delinquency as seriously antisocial behaviors, these findings were subsequently confirmed in numerous surveys after Nye.

A third contribution of Nye's book was to criminological theory—namely, its explication of *social control theory*. Although some elemental ideas had been identified by other delinquency researchers—for example, Albert Reiss and Jackson Toby—Nye's book

provided the first full description of social control theory as a systematic theoretical framework for explaining delinquency and crime. In the introductory chapter, Nye provided a brief (barely five pages) but explicit description of the essential concepts and premises of a social control theory, and indicated how this approach differs from the then-dominant theoretical frameworks of [p. 671 ↓] social disorganization, subcultural deviance, strain, culture conflict, and personality maladjustment.

In Nye's formulation, most delinquent behavior involves ordinary acts that do not require unusual forms of specialized learned behaviors or psychotic states. A small amount of delinquency may represent abnormally learned behaviors or express pathological motives, but these are comparatively rare. Most delinquent acts involve behaviors learned from parents, siblings, and peers through the same socialization process by which conforming behaviors are learned. They also are oriented to the satisfaction of common adolescent needs—for example, excitement, fun, recognition, esteem, acceptance, approval, accomplishment. In this view, most delinquency occurs not when adolescents develop abnormal motivations or habits, but when ordinary social controls are weak and fail to inhibit adolescents from seeking their ordinary goals through socially disapproved activities. Nye observed that delinquent behaviors often provide a quicker and easier means to satisfy common adolescent needs than strict adherence to the rules does.

Nye identified four distinctive forms of social control for insuring law-abiding behavior. These included (1) *direct control*, or behavioral compliance gained by punishments, rewards, threats, and bribes—what might also be termed *coercive control*; (2) *indirect control*, or behavioral conformity due to concern about what others think or by adherence to the expectations of valued social memberships—what might also be termed *control by identification*; (3) *internalized control*, or conformity that has been incorporated into a person's own values, attitudes, and habits through education, conditioning, or indoctrination—what might be termed *control by socialization*; (4) *availability of need satisfaction*, or behavior controlled by shaping the behavioral options or alternatives available to people to achieve their personal needs and goals—what today would be called *opportunity control*.

Arguably the most familiar contribution of Nye's 1958 study was its empirical analysis of the impact of family conditions and relationships on juvenile delinquency. Although

Nye's description of social control was quite general in scope, his analysis of the high school delinquency data was a much more limited application of the theory; it singularly focused on the family as the primary institution of adolescent social control. Other relationships, contexts and experiences outside the family (such as schools, peers, jobs, neighborhoods) were not explicitly included in this analysis or in the data collection, although Nye acknowledged that many other non-family factors could be important sources of all forms of social control.

Nye's analysis first examined the impact of family structure on delinquent behaviors, confirming that family locations and configurations do matter but not as much as earlier research on official delinquents has suggested. In Nye's data, family socioeconomic level was not consistently and significantly related to adolescent self-reports of delinquent behavior (in contrast to the strong social class differentials appearing in official delinquency). Also contrary to studies of official delinquents, Nye reported that "broken homes" (i.e., families where a parent is missing due to divorce or loss) were not strongly associated with self-reported delinquent behaviors. For self-reported delinquency, parental absence proved only weakly correlated with children's involvement in delinquency and primarily in "ungovernability" or "acting out" behaviors rather than serious criminal acts. Distinguishing between "legally broken" families (by physical absence of one parent through divorce or death) and "psychologically broken" families (by conflict and animosity between parents), Nye found that delinquent behaviors were significantly more frequent in psychologically broken (but intact) families than in legally broken families. The latter had slightly higher rates of delinquency than intact families (due to some loss of direct control).

Nye's data analyses confirmed that delinquent behaviors were slightly higher in larger families, among later-born children, in urban families, and in families that moved frequently (as measured by the number of different schools children attended). The effects of mother's employment on children's delinquency were more complex, showing a slight overall correlation with delinquent behaviors. By itself, mother's employment led to a slight loss of direct and indirect control, but this correlation was modified by a number of other factors such as the nature of the mother's job, the reasons for mother's employment, size of the family, rural-urban location, and the socio-economic status of the family. According to these results, the correlation between working mothers and

children's delinquency was [p. 672 ↓] small and non-significant when other social factors were held constant.

The remainder of Nye's analysis focused on interactional, rather than structural, characteristics of families. In contrast to prior studies of parental control, Nye's analysis notably emphasized the two-way nature of the relationships between parents and children, showing that how children perceived and felt about their parents was just as important as parental feelings (i.e., of rejection or approval) toward children. Specifically, children's feelings of respect, attachment, or rejection toward their parents operated as strong moderators of the impact of all forms of parental control efforts. For example, the effectiveness of parents' direct control efforts was contingent on their children's perceptions of fairness and their feelings about their parents' disciplinary efforts. Nye found that social control efforts were most effective (and delinquency rates lowest) when parent-child respect and attachment were mutual.

Noting that prior studies of juvenile delinquency had heavily emphasized strong parental discipline for controlling delinquent behaviors, Nye reported that the relationship was more complicated. When parental efforts at discipline were viewed as excessive, unfair, selective, or rejecting, the impact of discipline were attenuated or reversed. Also, rather than inverse or linear, strictness of parental discipline showed a J-shaped or U-shaped correlation with delinquency, where moderate levels of supervision and punishment exerted the greatest control over delinquent behavior. This also applied to the obverse process of relinquishing control—that is, degree of freedom, autonomy, and responsibility allowed to adolescent children—which also had a J-shaped or U-shaped association with delinquent behavior. Thus, across a variety of different indicators of direct control, moderate (“middle way”) levels of discipline and freedom consistently correlated with the least delinquent behavior.

Beyond the traditional focus on direct control through discipline, Nye's analysis strongly emphasized the various forms of indirect and internalized controls for reducing delinquency. The data confirmed the importance of parents and children doing things together in mutually meaningful activities, including regular church attendance as a family, as well as a variety of recreational activities such as sports, amusements, trips, and picnics. The analysis also considered how a variety of less obvious aspects in parent-child relationships might be correlated with control of juvenile delinquency, such

as children's perceptions of how their parents' looked, dressed, or acted in public, and the accompanying feelings of adolescent embarrassment. Perceptions of parents' general social dispositions (e.g., cheerfulness, nervousness, irritability, fussiness) and their ethical habits (e.g., truthfulness, honesty) were consistently correlated with adolescents' delinquent behaviors, especially for boys. Value agreement between children and parents on a variety of social issues was also consistently and significantly correlated with lower levels of delinquent behavior. Nye noted that such interpersonal connections were much more important for indirect and internalized controls, while their effects on direct control of delinquency by parents were weaker and less consistent.

The final part of the data analysis focused on the importance of parents as practical resources to their children. Generosity with money and allowances to children did not have a consistent linear effect on their delinquent behaviors, but rather was U-shaped or J-shaped. Children who viewed their parents as stingier than most had higher rates of delinquent behavior; at the same time, however, children who received more money than most other adolescents (through higher allowances or jobs) also were more delinquent. In contrast, parents as social and informational resources were consistently and strongly (and linearly) related to delinquent behavior. Children who frequently sought advice, information, or help from parents (including schoolwork, jobs, dating, religion, future plans, or sex) were less likely to commit delinquent behaviors. According to Nye, parental resources influenced children's behavior mostly through indirect and internalized controls, rather than direct or disciplinary controls.

In all, Nye's study of family-based controls over children's delinquent behavior examined 313 different cross-tabular comparisons of a variety of family variables with self-reported delinquent behaviors, each selected to evaluate some predictable pattern of social control theory. Nye reported that all except seven comparisons were consistent with social control theory. Such a "shotgun" methodology did not provide a rigorous test of definitive or comparative hypotheses of social control theory; however, Nye's results did provide a very plausible [p. 673 ↓] empirical demonstration of the overall ability of a social control framework in its ability to make researchable predictions. Later advances in statistical procedures enabled much more sophisticated and multivariate forms of analysis than the simple cross-tabulations used by Nye. Nonetheless, the conclusions from *Family Relations and Delinquent Behaviors* have proven quite durable and, on the

whole, have been substantially replicated by numerous survey studies over the ensuing decades.

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See also

- [Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi: Self-Control Theory](#)
- [Hirschi, Travis: Social Control Theory](#)
- [Reiss, Albert J., Jr.: Personal and Social Controls and Delinquency](#)
- [Toby, Jackson: Stake in Conformity](#)
- [Wells, Edward L., and Joseph H. Rankin: Direct Controls and Delinquency](#)

References and Further Readings

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