

# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

## Reckless, Walter C.: Containment Theory

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Walter C. Reckless is one of the most recognized criminologists of the past century, though this [p. 777 ↓ ] nearly was not the case for this three-time president of the American Society of Criminology (1964, 1965, and 1966). According to Randy Martin, Robert Mutchnick, and W. Timothy Austin, it was not until an auto accident resulting in permanent injuries ended Reckless's quest for a musical career that he would pursue social science studies at the University of Chicago. While there, Reckless found himself under the tutelage of renowned sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess and, after receiving his bachelor's degree, was offered a graduate assistantship in sociology to study vice in the surrounding area (Martin et al., 1990, p. 180). This exposure to the shadier side of life helped foster an interest and birthed a career. As observed by the scholars, Reckless's association with Park led to his involvement in participant observation research at local Chicago roadhouses and resulted in his dissertation turned book *Vice in Chicago* in 1931.

As Martin and his colleagues note, while serving in his first academic position at Vanderbilt University, Reckless wrote extensively, including the first text ever published on *Juvenile Delinquency* with Mapheus Smith and the second text in *Social Psychology* with Ernest T. Krueger. In 1940, he would continue his distinguished career at Ohio State University where Reckless would eventually retire from in 1969 (Martin et al., 1990, p. 181).

Among his accomplishments, such as the often-cited building of the Criminology-Corrections program, Reckless wrote several influential texts, including his famous work, *The Crime Problem*. The volume published in 1950 was to be the first of seven editions.

According to Randy Martin and his colleagues, Reckless's research while at Ohio State University, with Simon Dinitz and others, would set the stage for containment theory, Reckless's explanation for delinquency and crime. Reckless's research would center on the insulating role that self-concept plays against delinquency, and it was this essential concern about insulating qualities of various personal and social features that became the foundation of containment theory. Containment theory was not formally expressed by Reckless until the third edition of his book *The Crime Problem* and in abbreviated

form in the article “The New Theory of Delinquency and Crime,” which appeared in the journal *Federal Probation* in 1961.

## Containment Theory

Though interdisciplinary in nature, containment theory is considered one of the earliest control theories because it is focused on what stops people from engaging in crime—or rather, what “contains” people (contains or containment essentially being used in place of the term *controls*). As noted by Richard Dodder and Janet Long, containment theory enjoyed much of its popularity in the 1950s and 1960s and has become a staple in the field of criminological theory. While, according to some scholars, the theory has gone out of vogue in recent years, containment theory has kept its foundational place in criminological theory.

The first conceptions of the theory were birthed when Reckless was exploring the shortcomings of other approaches meant to explain delinquency and crime. Early criminological theories were understood in terms of “pushing” and/or “pulling” individuals toward deviance (e.g., differential association theory was recognized as a pull theory; Albert Cohen's subcultural theory represents a combination push and pull theory). According to Reckless, the problem with these approaches was that they failed to account for those youths that did not engage in delinquency in spite of being confronted with pushes and/or pulls toward delinquent ways. This also was the case with the approach promoted by Reckless's mentors, social disorganization theory.

Reckless acknowledged that social disorganization approaches to the study of delinquency and crime enjoyed popularity for a generation. He believed, however, that there was a fundamental oversight with this approach. Although he did believe there was merit to social disorganization theory, Reckless claimed that social disorganization alone was insufficient to completely address the issue of delinquency and crime. He asserted that the largest proportion of people in disorganized or instable areas do not turn out to be delinquent or criminal at all. In fact, most of these people lead lives of relative conformity. This meant that social disorganization approaches, as well as other theories relying on push and/or pull orientations, needed something more if they were to add further to explanations of crime and delinquency.

It was this understanding that brought Reckless to the fundamental questions that gave rise to [p. 778 ↓ ] containment theory: “Why do some persons break through the tottering (social) controls and others do not? Why do rare cases in well-integrated society break through the lines of strong controls?” (1961a, p. 339).

Reckless believed that it was the interplay between inner self-controls and outer social controls that was in part responsible for whether or not an individual would engage in delinquency and criminality. Further, contrary to some other theorists, Reckless thought social disorganization was not about the stress related to social and economic pressures directly. Instead, he believed that where social disorganization played a causal role in delinquency and crime was when social disorganization led specifically to a breakdown in social controls. Important to his line of reasoning was Reckless's prior observations of religious sects. Reckless's observations of these closed and highly controlled groups also contributed to and solidified his beliefs that the community served the express function of external social control.

## The Foundation for Containment Theory

As stated above, Reckless relied upon a collection of earlier observations from his solo and collaborative research in formulating containment theory. Some of this research focused upon the notion of self-concept wherein it was observed that a good self-concept provided a youth with a protective shield and/or insulation against delinquency. A poor self-concept had the opposite effect, rendering an individual susceptible to delinquency. This observation apparently held over time, leading Reckless to assume that good and poor self-concept is a reflection of the internalization of favorable and unfavorable socialization and in that way an important internal buffer against delinquency.

Similar to many theorists, Reckless also looked to the observations of others when formulating his new explanation of delinquency and, in doing so, weaved together the central tenets of containment theory. Reckless expressly mentioned the work of researchers Albert J. Reiss, F. Ivan Nye, and Fritz Redl when walking readers through the logic of containment theory.

Reiss discussed the predictive value of personal and social controls on delinquent behavior in his influential work with Chicago juveniles. Reiss's observation and assessment of the different dimensions of control were not lost on Reckless. Reckless would incorporate this understanding into his own work, particularly the observation that personal controls were more influential than social controls on recidivism. Also, Reiss's notion of personal controls, such as self-control, would essentially mirror what Reckless would call inner containment.

Nye's research further illuminated the ways in which controls are important to regulating personal behavior. Nye's research specifically highlighted four types of control factors that were discussed by Reckless: direct control, internalized control, indirect control, and the availability of alternative means to goals. All had a place in restraining delinquent behavior. Reckless states that, according to Nye, punishment and discipline are among the features of direct control. Inner control is essentially self-control, and indirect control is a result of not wanting to disappoint meaningful others by deviant behavior. Of course, individuals must have an alternative to deviant behavior, which explains the fourth aspect of control identified by Nye. Hence, Reckless's and Nye's explanations share similar features. Both are similar in scope in that they are only meant to explain general deviance. Also, Nye's notion of direct control can be likened to Reckless's outer containment concept. Internalized control can be seen as mirroring Reckless's concept of inner containment.

Redl and Wineman's formulation of the "behavior control system" was also relied on by Reckless as offering support for containment theory. Redl's work considered inner psychological processes thought to be involved in whether or not an individual would engage in delinquency and crime. Specifically, the concepts identified by Redl were the ego (and its accompanying 22 ego functions) and the superego, which were thought to be central to inner control. The ego functions were seen by Redl as important in managing life situations and included things such as frustration tolerance, temptation resistance, learning from experience, and taking care of possessions. The superego is seen as one's conscience and the incorporation of parental values that serve to regulate behavior. Reckless ultimately included the ego and a well-developed superego as potentially important elements to his concept of inner containment. Reckless's inclusion of these concepts, however, seemed to be as much [p. 779 ↓] about a concern over attracting scholars in other disciplines to use and possibly specify containment theory.

According to Reckless, "It is important to incorporate Redl's thinking on the ego and superego as the behavior control system within the person, so as to indicate that the components of containment theory can be specified by psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts just as readily by sociologists" (1961a, p. 354).

## Inner and Outer Containment

As is the tradition of control theories, containment theory assumes that people are very prone to getting in trouble. The idea is that individuals must be controlled or contained from committing delinquent and criminal acts. The core of the theory is *containment*—that is, personal and social safeguards that shield the individual from committing deviancy. Containment rests on the principles of control. According to Reckless, containment theory "seeks to feret [ferret] out more specifically the inner and outer controls over normative behavior" (1961b, p. 44). To do this, Reckless consolidated the particular characteristics identified in his and others' research into exclusive themes of inner and outer containment. Containment theory, in essence, is Reckless's attempt to ascertain what controls work best at which level to regulate conduct and therefore delinquency and crime.

The principal social control concepts of containment theory are inner and outer containment. Inner containment involves the personal, social controls over behavior. Reckless believed that these included self-control, a good self-concept, ego strength, and so on. In essence, these are the qualities that serve as inner regulators against delinquent behavior. According to Reckless, outer containment dealt with the structural buffers in the youth's proximal, social environment that served to restrain them. These immediate social constraints included such things as "a consistent moral front to the person, institutional reinforcement of his norms, goals, expectations, the existence of a reasonable set of social expectations, effective supervision and discipline (social controls), provision for reasonable scope of activity (including limits and responsibilities) as well as alternatives and safety valves, opportunity for acceptance, belongingness" (1961b, p. 45). To Reckless, these structural factors around the individual served to "contain" the youth against delinquency and crime.

# To Err is Human: “Pulls” and “Pushes” toward Delinquency

According to Reckless, environmental pressures can exact influence over people to the extent that they are not contained and/or protected. In that regard, inner and outer containment serve as a buffer from these external conditions. Environmental conditions that may steer individuals toward deviancy may take various forms, such as poverty or deprivations, conflict and discord, external restraint, minority group status, and limited access to success in an opportunity structure. Reckless further elaborated upon these environmental pressures in describing them as environmental “pulls.” Pulls represent the features of the environment that may serve to attract some individuals toward deviancy. According to Reckless, pulls might be environmental distractions, attractions, temptations, carriers of delinquent and criminal patterns, and subcultures.

Reckless also observed what he considered to be “ordinary” pushes. Pushes are based in individual psychology and are considered to be internal motivators toward deviancy. Pushes may include internal drives and frustrations, feelings of restlessness, disappointments, hostility, inferiority, and rebellion. Reckless acknowledged that there are some extreme internal motivations (pushes) that cannot be contained such as those derived from mental illness (i.e., compulsions). According to Reckless, such pathological compulsions were beyond the abilities of normal, ordinary containment.

Again, containment theory posits that normative behavior is brought about by “resisting” deviancy and directing youth toward legitimate social expectations. According to Reckless, both inner and outer containment are core between the pressures and pulls of the external environment and inner drives and pushes.

## Scope of Containment Theory

As stated earlier, Reckless argues that containment theory is a general theory of crime, explaining the wide range of behaviors between the extremes of deviancy. According to Reckless, at one end of the continuum is individual pathology. This group [p. 780 ↓ ]



includes behaviors caused by mental illness, among other things (e.g., compulsions; behavior as the result of organic brain damage). The opposite extreme of behaviors, though deviant, would essentially be considered “normal” given the circumstances and fall beyond those behaviors that containment theory means to explain. Individuals at this extreme, explains Reckless, have been socialized by family or some affiliate and/or marginalized group to behave as societal deviants (e.g., criminal tribes of India, gypsies).

## The Recognized Limitations and Validity of Containment Theory

To Reckless, one of the strengths of containment theory was the ability to tailor the theory to the different disciplines that engage in the study of deviancy. Arguably, containment theory can be used by psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, and practitioners equally, as the theory reportedly explains delinquency from an interdisciplinary perspective. According to Reckless, “All of these experts look for dimensions of inner and outer strength and can specify these strengths in their terms” (1961b, p. 46). However, there are problems with containment theory specifically and control theories generally.

Richard Dodder and Janet Long have observed that there is a general lack of testable statements in relation to containment and the proposed relationship with deviant behavior. Ironically, one could argue that this in part was intended by Reckless when making his statement of the theory. Reckless offered that research would have to identify the “one or two” essential elements of inner and outer containment that act as the regulators of normative behavior. He further states that research, ultimately, would have to sort out which of the inner and outer regulatory systems operated together. Problematically, a theory written in this way may lead to more speculation than answers.

Dodder and Long further scrutinize the limited ability of containment theory to explain female deviance, considering socialization processes arguably differ between the sexes in respect to self-concept. Recall that, according to containment theory, a good self-concept is supposed to insulate individuals from deviancy. If the processes are different

depending on sex, one would expect that containment theory might not apply to females. This criticism is reasonable, particularly since Reckless relied on observations of boys for his theory. Another criticism of containment theory is recognized by Thomas Kelley and rests in the idea that many of the inner motivations and environmental conditions identified by Reckless tend to be highly transient even over short time periods. Given that many of these conditions are evanescent, it is difficult to isolate the mechanisms identified by containment theory leading to deviancy.

Reckless and Dinitz tested elements of containment theory with little success. As noted by Randy Martin and his colleagues, these studies have been referred to collectively as “the Good Boy–Bad Boy” series and ran from circa 1956 to 1972. Although failing to initially support containment theory, others, such as Don Gibbons and Marvin Krohn, have noted methodological flaws that would give pause to these initial results. It also has been observed by these scholars that later empirical assessments found more varied results beyond what could be accounted for by the theory. There is still contention as to whether containment theory, whether original, revised, or specified, can be revived.

## Conclusion

Containment theory is considered one of the earliest control theories of crime. With its “personality-oriented” slant, the theory is credited by some with laying the foundation of contemporary theoretical approaches to explaining delinquency and crime (Martin et al., 1990, p. 198). Randy Martin, Robert Mutchnick, and W. Timothy Austin (and others) are explicit in their claim that Reckless's containment theory is the “cornerstone in the foundation of contemporary control theory” and “that the work of Travis Hirschi, which has become synonymous with control theory, constitutes an extension of Reckless’ ideas into broader social contexts” (p. 198).

However, there are some detractors of this position that have noted that containment theory, as well as other theories of its time, are nothing more than extensions or reformulations of previous works. For instance, Don Gibbons and Marvin Krohn assert that containment theory consists of [p. 781 ↓] “old wine in a new bottle” (1991, p. 107). Although one can see the merit in both positions on containment theory, it is undeniable

that Reckless's approach has had an impact and has served as a foundation from which others' work was formed.

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*See also*

- [Durkheim, Émile: Anomie and Suicide](#)
- [Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi: Self-Control Theory](#)
- [Hirschi, Travis: Social Control Theory](#)
- [Nye, F. Ivan: Family Controls and Delinquency](#)
- [Reiss, Albert J., Jr.: Personal and Social Controls and Delinquency](#)
- [Sampson, Robert J., and John H. Laub: Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control](#)
- [Shaw, Clifford R., and Henry D. McKay: Social Disorganization Theory](#)

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