

# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

## Tittle, Charles R.: Control Balance Theory

Contributors: Nicole Leeper Piquero  
Editors: Francis T. Cullen & Pamela Wilcox  
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After reviewing and critiquing extant criminological theories, Charles R. Tittle concluded that most fail as general theories of crime and deviance because they do not offer breadth, comprehensiveness, precision, or depth. These limitations do not mean that these theories are inadequate explanations of crime phenomena. In fact, each adds to the understanding of deviant and criminal behavior by focusing on a particular causal factor, and more importantly, each has generated at least modest support. This sentiment, however, does imply that existing theories are both restricted and incomplete. Tittle proposed an integrated criminological theory drawing from learning, anomie, conflict, social control, labeling, utilitarian, and routine activities theories. As such, control balance theory is a general theory that not only is designed to explain all forms of deviant behavior but also to account for conforming behaviors.

## Original Theory

In the original formulation of control balance theory, deviance is defined as “any behavior that the majority of a given group regards as unacceptable or that typically evokes a collective response of a negative type” (Tittle, 1995, p. 124). Deviance can be divided into six different categories: predation, exploitation, defiance, plunder, decadence, and submission. Predation involves direct acts of physical violence, manipulation, or property theft, which benefit the perpetrator and have no regard for the well-being of the victim. Exploitation is indirect predation where others or the situational context is used to coerce, manipulate, or steal from a victim for the benefit of the exploiter. Defiance refers to the indifference of individuals toward an individual, a group, or norms and values of a designated individual or group. Plunder is the pursuit of one's own goals with little regard for the effects of one's own actions on others and is considered especially heinous. Decadence deals with unpredictable [p. 958 ↓] and impulsive acts that have no rational motivation but instead deal with the whims of the moment. Submission is passive obedience toward others.

Control balance theory centers on the concept of control, or more specifically a control balance ratio, which is the ratio of the amount of control exercised relative to the amount of control experienced. Much like other social control theories, control balance theory contends that controls operate in some individuals by inducing conforming behavior;

however, the theory also suggests that controls can serve as the motivating factor for deviant behavior in others. Thus, everybody is assumed to have both a global and a situational control ratio. The general control ratio reflects one's typical ability to exercise control relative to being the object of control, while the situational control ratio represents an individual's ability in a specific situation or circumstance to exercise control relative to being controlled. As such, "an individual's control ratio is not fixed; it varies from place to place, from time to time, and from situation to situation" (Tittle, 2001, p. 317).

Control imbalances become the most important concept in the theory not only by motivating an individual toward deviance generally but also by relating it to the specific type of deviance that an individual will engage in. Control imbalances can manifest as either surpluses or deficits. Control surpluses result when an individual exercises more control than he or she is subject to, while control deficits emerge when an individual is subject to more control than he or she exercises. Deviance becomes one possible avenue for individuals to balance the control in their lives. When control is balanced, individuals exercise an equal amount of control to the amount to which they are subjected. Therefore, the central causal process focuses on the cognitive balancing of control in an individual's life.

Tittle originally argued that control imbalances are related to specific forms of deviance. Control surpluses, it was argued, are most related to autonomous forms of behavior, while control deficits relate to repressive acts. Autonomous forms of deviance are utilized when actors wish to expand their reach of control and involve more indirect actions on the part of the actor. These actions "do not require direct confrontation with victims or other objects of deviant action nor does it require the perpetrators to openly associate with actions or the behaviors" (Tittle, 2004, p. 399). The theory suggested that minimal surpluses would relate to acts of exploitation, moderate surpluses would lead to acts of plunder, and large surpluses would be expressed by acts of decadence. Repressive forms of deviance are employed when an individual seeks to gain more control and involve "directly confrontational actions that are openly associated with the person doing them" (Tittle, 2004, p. 399). The theory suggested that minimal deficits would lead to acts of predation, moderate deficits would relate to acts of defiance, and large deficits would be expressed through acts of submission. As such, the theory proposes a curvilinear or U-shaped relationship between one's control balance ratio and

deviance. In other words, those wielding the most control and those who have the least control are proposed to be the ones most likely to engage in deviant acts.

The control balance ratio is one part of the deviance-generating process which Tittle (2001, p. 323) describes as “complicated and highly conditional.” As a general theory, it is believed that the process will be the same for all individuals, but because everyone has different sets of contingencies or conditions, the outcomes involved—conformity or different varieties of deviance—will vary across persons. Overall, there are a number of necessary elements involved in the control balancing process that must come together for deviance to result.

First, there must be some motivation or a predisposition toward deviance. This is where the control balance ratio and its related control imbalances come into play. As has been noted, control imbalances provide the needed push for corrective action or rebalancing of one's cognitive control. However, there are additional elements also at work under motivation for deviance. Most notably, the theory assumes that there is a desire for autonomy for all persons. According to Tittle (1995, p. 145), the desire for autonomy or “escaping control over oneself and exercising more control over the social and physical world than one experiences” is almost universal among humans.

Second, the theory assumes that most people become intermittently aware of their control circumstances so there must be a provocation or a situational stimulus that makes the individual aware of the control imbalance. It is this provocation that signals to the individual that a corrective action, such as deviance, must occur to rebalance his or her control ratio. However, for the provocation to illicit a deviant response, the event must [p. 959 ↓ ] make the individual experience some sort of feelings of discomfort, such as debasement or humiliation. Thus, much like theories of anomie and strain, it is the feelings of negative emotion generated by some stimulus that promote the necessary action to correct the control balance to which in the individual is now aware.

Motivation alone is not enough for deviance to occur. Next, the individual must have the opportunity to commit an act of deviance. Opportunity is defined as “a circumstance where that behavior is possible” (Tittle, 1995, p. 169). Thus, the concept of opportunity is very much in line with other criminological theories, especially those that argue that opportunities for deviance are plentiful and readily available, such as routine activity

theory. Finally, given the presence of motivation and the plethora of opportunities available, who turns to deviance and what types? This depends on the number of contingencies or constraints present for any one individual. Contingencies refer to any aspect of an individual, social relationship, organizational structure, or the physical environment that may influence how the control balancing process operates (Tittle, 1995, p. 201).

Control balance theory, much like deterrence or rational choice theories, suggests that constraints will factor into the choice of behavior. Constraints are defined as “the probability, or perceived probability, that potential control will actually be exercised” (Tittle, 1995, p. 167). For example, situational constraints will influence how individuals will choose which behavior is best suited to restore their control balance by considering the counter controls that will likely be used against them. Since more serious forms of deviance are more likely to generate a counter control more often than not, these types of deviance will not be utilized by most people to restore the balance. Instead, most individuals will turn to less serious forms of deviance that will re-establish their balance without jeopardizing other aspects of their life. Who then engages in serious deviance? According to the theory, serious deviance is reserved for those who can overcome or negate the counter controls—namely those with small control deficits or those with the greatest control surpluses.

In sum, the original version of control balance theory suggests a contingent balancing process that (1) takes into account an individual's motivations toward deviance, or control imbalances, (2) suggests when these motivations may be acted upon such as when they are made cognizant to an individual by means of a situational provocation and that when coupled with negative emotions (such as debasement or humiliation), and (3) contends with numerous different contingencies that must be managed by the individual that either promote or prohibit deviance.

## Control Balance Theory Revised

Since control balance theory was first introduced in 1995, the theory has been both criticized and subjected to empirical testing. Some have criticized the theory for being overwhelming or hard to understand because of the level of complexity employed,

for proffering vague if not confusing concepts and definitions, and for unduly limiting categories of behaviors. Empirical tests of the theory have primarily been conducted with student samples and have found support for the theory's major premises as well as evidence contrary to the theoretical arguments. For example, empirical tests have found that both types of control imbalances, deficits and surpluses, predict both repressive and autonomous forms of deviant behavior. In "Refining Control Balance" Tittle responded to the criticisms as well as addressed some of the unexpected findings by revising the theory. In the refined version of the theory, he addresses the inconsistencies and conceptual ambiguities that emerged as well as proposes a new categorization of deviant acts.

One of the primary issues Tittle addressed was the inconsistent conceptualizing of seriousness. In this regard, there are two points of clarification needed. First, he notes that throughout the original version of the theory, statements about the concept of seriousness were unclear and created difficulty in distinguishing between it, deviance, and constraint. This was particularly the case when seriousness was presented as a constraint. Constraint and seriousness were never intended to be the same thing and, in fact, are separate concepts. He clarifies seriousness as "a feature of deviant acts implying their potential for arousing counter control; it is not simply a collective cognitive judgment about the wrongness of particular acts or the damage they might cause" (Tittle, 2004, p. 403). Second, the qualitative distinctions of seriousness (i.e., minimal, moderate, or large surplus or deficits) originally used were [p. 960 ↓ ] based on speculation and not actual data, and thus they have been abandoned in the revised theory.

Tittle also calls for the discontinuation of the use of predictions regarding repressive and autonomous categories of deviant behavior. Since empirical findings suggest that there is significant overlap in these two concepts, control imbalances are now predicted to explain all forms of deviant behaviors, such that those experiencing control surpluses may engage in either repressive or autonomous forms of deviant behavior and not just autonomous forms of deviance as previously predicted. In addition to doing away with categories of deviance, the revised theory reconceptualizes submissive acts. While no longer classifying submissive behavior as a deviant act, it is also not considered conforming behavior; rather, submissive acts are in a category of their own. The refined theory now "attempts to explain conformity and deviance as products of control

balancing and it attempts to explain submission as a failure of control balancing” (Tittle, 2004, p. 404).

Finally, Tittle (2004, p. 405) departs from the original presentation of a deviance typology in favor of a single continuum of deviance, which he refers to as control balance desirability and defines as “a quality possessed in different degrees by various potential deviant acts.” Control balance desirability is viewed as a composite variable with two indicators: (1) the long-term effectiveness of the deviant act for altering a control imbalance and (2) the impersonality of the act. The latter refers to the “extent to which a given form of misbehavior requires the perpetrator to be directly and personally involved with a victim or object that is affected by the deviance” (Tittle, 2004, p. 405). Therefore, the type of deviance that will be used by individuals to rebalance their control will be based on their perceptions of the control balance desirability. Acts that are deemed high on the desirability continuum most likely will be employed because they will provide long-term relief from the control imbalance and because the selected acts are impersonal, and thus offer a lower likelihood of counter control.

For the most part, control balance theory still operates as originally proposed. That is, a situational provocation brings to an individual's attention his or her control imbalance that, coupled with debasement or humiliation, requires some sort of corrective or rebalancing behavior, normally a deviant act. However, now the theory proposes that the type of deviance employed will depend on the control balance desirability of the act. The actual selection will be influenced by a person's control ratio, the opportunity to commit the deviant act, constraints that are in place, and a person's level of self-control. A person's control ratio is important, as before, for providing the motivation toward deviance—that is, the imbalance creates the need for a corrective action. Opportunity is also carried over from the original formulation in that there must be an opportunity to engage in a behavior for an individual to carry it out. Constraint reflects the possible magnitude of the counter controlling consequences or the seriousness of the act as well as the situational risk present or the actual chances of experiences counter controls. Finally, newly added into the decision-making process is the individual's level of self-control. The original theory implied that control balancing is a rational process, whereas the revised theory recognizes that not everyone is rational. Therefore, “the outcomes expected from the theory will vary with the self-control of a person” (Tittle, 2004, p. 416).

Nicole LeeperPiquero

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*See also*

- [Braithwaite, John: Reintegrative Shaming Theory](#)
- [Colvin, Mark: Coercion Theory](#)
- [Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi: Self-Control Theory](#)
- [Hirschi, Travis: Social Control Theory](#)
- [Regoli, Robert M., and John D. Hewitt: Differential Oppression Theory](#)
- [Sherman, Lawrence W.: Defiance Theory](#)

#### References and Further Readings

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