

# Michigan Law Review

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Volume 80 | Issue 4

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1982

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### Recommended Citation

Charles R. Tittle, *A New Theory of Social Control*, 80 MICH. L. REV. 857 (1982).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol80/iss4/39>

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# A NEW THEORY OF SOCIAL CONTROL

*Charles R. Tittle\**

NORMS, DEVIANCE, AND SOCIAL CONTROL: CONCEPTUAL MATTERS. By *Jack P. Gibbs*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press. 1981. Pp. 190. \$25.

A perennial problem for social scientists is that almost everything they study is ill-defined. Everyone knows, for instance, that some individuals have more power than others, that people differ in honesty, and that people reflect various degrees of "tightness" in their associations with each other. Yet, "power," "honesty," "group cohesion," and even "group" defy conceptualizations that simultaneously reflect the essence of social reality, are empirically applicable in research, and can be agreed upon by most practicing social scientists. Indeed, almost every social science concept has been defined in numerous and diverse ways. Moreover, the definitions not only diverge but often turn out to be so vague that they cannot be used in cumulative research or theory building.

Little wonder, then, that so much of the social science literature is devoted to problems of communication. Untold pages of print are wasted arguing about what was said, what was meant by what was said, and what the evidence implies for various vaguely conceived theories. In short, most of the time social scientists do not know what they are talking about because they do not bother to make their conceptualizations clear or to consider all the ramifications of the concepts that they explicitly or implicitly embrace. What is even more distressing is that most social scientists rarely worry about this situation. Probably the only time they truly agonize over the inadequacy of definitions is when someone so convincingly exposes a conceptual muddle that it can simply no longer be ignored.

This is exactly what Professor Jack Gibbs has done in his latest book, *Norms, Deviance, and Social Control*. He shows us by logic and example that all of the currently popular definitions or conceptualizations of social control are either impossibly broad or absurdly narrow, always vague, and usually empirically inapplicable. It is a

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compelling object lesson to see a list of twelve to fifteen definitions of some concept lined up next to each other. In the case of social control, we find definitions ranging from that of E.A. Ross, who thought of social control as practically anything that influences human behavior, all the way to the contemporary conventional conception that identifies social control as "actions that counteract deviance." The conventional conceptualization — which Gibbs calls the prophylactic approach — is imprecise because it does not specify which social actions fall under the rubric of "social control." Nor does it spell out who must initiate such actions. Most scholars simply assume that punishing actions imposed by recognized governmental authorities qualify; however, both "punishing" and "recognized governmental authorities" are subject to varying interpretations. In addition, this conceptualization ignores the question of intent and implies that only successful counteraction of deviance qualifies as social control. But the main problem with the popular prophylactic definition is that it assumes an adequate preexisting conceptualization of "deviance." If social control is supposed to counteract deviance, scholars must be able to identify what is deviant behavior before they can speak of controlling it.

Yet, deviance is itself one of those concepts that has no agreed-upon definition, with conceptualizations ranging from those set forth by proponents of the labeling perspective to those that might be termed "moralistic." If one takes the approach of the labelists, deviance is indicated in particular instances by official negative reaction to some behavior. But applying this definition requires answers to questions about who must react, in what way, and with what results. Social control then becomes little more than a tautology. A more popular way of conceptualizing deviance is by reference to "norms," but this in turn requires an adequate definition of norms. Gibbs demonstrates that typical normative concepts, although less divergent than concepts of deviance or social control, nevertheless require specifications about who must "share evaluations of conduct," and how many group members must agree in order to qualify something as a norm. There are also problems concerning variables (such as age, sex, or circumstances) that influence whether something is acceptable or not, with the result that one has to wonder if there is a general norm about *any* behavior. Moreover, those who set forth definitions of norms in terms of evaluations of conduct fail to indicate how one is to take into account differences in the power of various "evaluators."

From almost any perspective, social control is a vague idea; it is

vaguer still because the component concepts with which it is conventionally defined are themselves vague and imprecise, two steps removed. Clearly, then, social control cries out for reconceptualization.

Having laid this groundwork, Gibbs then goes on to propose a new conceptualization of social control. He believes that it overcomes the definitional problems of other approaches, provides an interesting and largely unexplored subject matter, and has great theoretical potential. Succinctly, the new conceptualization states that social control is any attempt by one party to manipulate the behavior of a second party through a third party by any means other than a normal chain of command. Within this general definition, but without pretense of being exhaustive, he distinguishes five major types of social control, each with numerous subtypes. The five major types are referential, vicarious, allegative, modulative, and preclusive social control. In assessing Gibbs's conceptualization, some detail here becomes unavoidable.

Referential social control is said to involve attempts by one party to manipulate a second party's behavior by referring to a third party. Gibbs identifies eight subtypes of referential social control, and illustrates each with concrete examples. For instance, commensalistic social control occurs when a child attempts to retrieve his candy from a sibling by threatening to tell their mother. The reference to a third party here assumes common respect for, or fear of, the third party. In the case of juridical social control, someone (such as an attorney) tries to manipulate the behavior of a judge by referring to the behavior of other judges in previous cases. Similarly, a politician may practice associational social control to garner votes by implying that he agrees with a popular president. And even whole groups of people may qualify as practitioners (first party participants) or recipients (second party participants) of social control, as in the example of authoritative social control where the officials of a government agency try to influence the population of smokers or potential smokers by referring to the surgeon general's report on the hazards of cigarette smoking.

Vicarious social control occurs when a first party tries to influence the behavior of a second party by punishing, rewarding, or rectifying a third party's behavior. Gibbs mentions four subtypes: deterrent, hypocritical, advancive, and placative social control. For instance, a judge (first party) practices deterrent social control when he sentences somebody (third party) to prison in the belief that this will generally deter the population of potential offenders (second

party). The same judge may exhibit hypocritical social control by sentencing an unpopular defendant to a long prison term in order to win public support for an election campaign. Or he might engage in placative social control by sentencing a person to be hanged to satisfy the demands of a mob. In all such instances of vicarious social control, action is taken against one party for the purpose of influencing somebody not directly involved in the action.

The third subtype, called allegative social control, occurs when a first party alleges something to a third party about a second party in the expectation that the third party will influence the second party's behavior. Gibbs illustrates seven subtypes of allegative social control. Examples include: (1) appellative social control, when a child tattles to his mother that his brother has taken some candy in the hope that she will punish the brother or at least get the candy back; (2) adversarial social control, when a plaintiff testifies that a defendant has been negligent, expecting the court to order payment of damages; and (3) ameliorative social control, when a father tells a psychiatrist that his daughter attempted suicide in order to get the psychiatrist to employ therapy.

Modulative social control is a subtype that involves attempts by a first party to influence a second party by using the presumed influence of a third party on the second but without exclusive reliance on allegations about the second party or references to the third in communications with the second. Five subtypes are identified, but they are somewhat more difficult to understand than the previous examples. Identificational social control occurs when a youth director arranges a visit by a popular athlete on the assumption that, as a result, young people in that area will participate more fully in the program. In this instance, the youth director is trying to manipulate the youths through the popular athlete, but he neither makes allegations about the youths to the athlete nor exhorts the youths by directly referring to the athlete. A second example is isolative social control, where a judge incarcerates a youth to neutralize his bad influence on other youths in the area. Here the judge (first party) tries to influence the behavior of the area youths (second party) through a third party (incarcerated youth) without directly referring to the incarcerated youth in communications with the other youths and without making allegations to the incarcerated youth about the area youths.

The final type of social control that Gibbs identifies is preclusive social control, a type that is even more complex than modulative social control, particularly since it functions much as a residual category. Preclusive social control is said to involve using a third party

to gather information about a second party, directing a third party to use coercion to limit the behavior of the second party to certain contexts, or taking any action that can facilitate manipulation of the second party through the third. One subtype, informative social control, occurs when a police official encourages an informant to provide information about subversive activity that can later be used for manipulating the behavior of the subversives. Preemptive social control occurs when a company owner inquires into the background of an applicant for employment so that employment can be refused if the applicant is found dishonest or unreliable. Exclusionary social control is practiced by legislators when they enact laws excluding communists from the country. In all of these examples, the first party may be planning to exercise social control but is not actually doing so since there is no immediate intent to manipulate the behavior of the second party through the use of the third. Yet, Gibbs classifies such actions as fitting his definition of social control because they are taken with an eye to eventually altering behavior.

The new conceptualization identifies human conduct that is clearly social because it always involves at least three social entities. It qualifies as a form of control because it involves attempts to impose the will of one social entity upon another. Furthermore, social control is set in a general classification of control that allows it to be distinguished from material control as well as from other forms of biological control. Indeed, social control here comes to be a subtype of externalistic, human, animate control to be definitely separated from internalistic or directorial control. Thus, Gibbs hopes to avoid many problems of other conceptualizations, which ignore the existence of a general scheme of control phenomena. In particular, his definition bypasses definitional difficulties encountered by others who have tried to think of social control with reference to norms or deviance.

The new conceptualization is justified as being freer from definitional ambiguities than previous ones and as identifying a unique subject matter. Nevertheless, one of its strengths is that many of the phenomena typically studied by students of "social control" are subsumed within the scheme. For instance, most proponents of the prophylactic approach to social control show particular interest in the work of agents of the law and in the legal machinery of sanctioning. Within Gibb's scheme, much of the work of legal agents also qualifies as social control, especially those acts aimed at general deterrence. Curiously, however, this conceptualization does not treat direct actions by police or judges aimed at specific deterrence as so-

cial control. When one party uses coercion or imposes a sanction on another party, it qualifies as proximate, not social, control. Hence, many criminologists are going to be surprised to learn that all their work concerning sanctions really has little to do with the new approach to social control. This is unfortunate and a little confusing. In addition, it points up one of several potential difficulties in applying the definition.

The most important difficulty is that social control networks may be contained within other social control networks so that activities or actions may qualify or not qualify as social control, depending upon where one chooses to make a cutting point. Consider the case of a judge who sentences a felon on the assumption that the felon will be deterred from future crime. Presumably this is proximate rather than social control, but the sentence may be regarded as an instruction to prison officials (or even to the general public), which directs them to do something to influence the felon. This would qualify it as modulative social control. On the other hand, action by prison officials designed to manipulate the future behavior of the felon may be only proximate control, even though it is the continuation of a sequence of social control in which the instructions of a judge are implemented. More confusing still, the judge's sentence may be excluded as an instance of social control if his action is interpreted as an instruction to prison officials but is regarded as a simple resort to a chain of command.

In my mind, there is no reason why all instances of sanctioning by legal agents could not qualify as a special kind of social control in the Gibbsian scheme since they always involve at least a general effort by a first party (such as a legislature) to influence conduct of a population by the use of a third party (police, judges, prison officials). Yet, to broaden the scope of definition, as I have suggested is possible, opens the door to the very kind of generality that has made previous definitions of social control imprecise. Still, the new conceptualization, even in its narrowed form, does handle most of what has popularly become known as social control, even those things that Gibbs demonstrates are hopelessly mired in definitional imprecision. All efforts to control deviance may be social control, provided the first party acts on the assumption that the behavior to be manipulated is deviant. Similarly, behaviors that particular actors try to manipulate may have a normative quality and the methods used in manipulation may acquire normative characteristics. Most of the things sociologists call informal social control — gossip, status denigration, and the like — are also subsumable under Gibb's model.

But the new approach goes far beyond conventional ideas, particularly by encompassing activities like advertising, propaganda, and administrative actions.

In the end, of course, definitions are arbitrary and essentially useless unless they point the way to an understanding of some interesting realm of human behavior. The crucial vehicle for that understanding is theory. A definition only identifies a subject matter; it does not explain it. Because Gibbs is fully aware of this, he attempts to spell out some theoretical postulates and to set his approach within the theoretical parameters that have most often characterized the field of "social control." In particular, he formulates hypotheses about the sociocultural conditions under which one type of social control will prevail over other types, and attempts to justify them theoretically. Unfortunately, this is the weakest part of the book. Several of the arguments simply do not ring true (Is it really the case, for example, that in situations of high normative consensus all requests by one member to another will be honored?).

In my opinion, Gibbs has sold his own product short. Although his suggested theoretical guideposts are unexciting, the scheme he has formulated is a veritable gold mine of provocative questions. I, for one, can hardly think about the examples he discusses without finding hypotheses and rudimentary explanations running through my head. For instance, the question of when social control will be more effective than proximate control jumps right out, suggesting the hypothesis that social control will *always* be more effective because it minimizes the necessity for social and psychological face-saving defense mechanisms. From this beginning one could begin to formulate a theory of social influence. Moreover, the invitation to discover and explain the conditions under which one form of social control dominates another is powerful.

In short, although the scheme may not live up to the author's description of it as "the final definition of social control," it does have much potential. In fact, I suspect that of all the intellectual contributions Gibbs has made (and there have been many), this one will be the most significant. This is not to say that there are no problems with the conceptualization. The confusion and definitional ambiguity surrounding the so-called preclusive types of social control, the difficulty in measuring or inferring intent, the exclusion of chains of command, the inability easily to incorporate direct acts of sanctioning, the failure to deal with situations where control is effected through third parties but not intended, the neglect of distinctions between institutionalized and spontaneous social control, and

the thinness of the suggested theoretical arguments all suggest that work remains to be done. Nevertheless, Gibbs is certainly on target in exposing definitional problems and he has identified a domain of study sorely in need of attention. The next step is for other scholars to undertake the theoretical and empirical work necessary to make social control a rich specialty.