

Social Control and the Regulation of Poverty Analysis

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Social Boundaries and the Sociological Meaning of Control

In the writings of early sociologists, one finds their observations with regard to acceptable boundaries within society. Sociologists such as Durkheim see boundaries to behavior as praiseworthy and argue that it is the social control that forms the foundation of a society to police its boundaries.

Social control also leads societies to deal with the criminal and deviant behavior of a minority portion of society. Such forms of social control can be of two types: formal and informal. Those specific agencies that are given the responsibility to maintain law and order in the society exert formal social control, whereas any kind of belief or social interaction that drives members of the society to conform to its social conscience is an informal part of social control.

To observe how the lives of poor people are regulated through different forms of social control, I visited Central Park in New York City and recorded my observations of the poor people I saw. (Piven & Cloward, 1993) One of my first observations was that public spaces in New York City are now becoming off-limits due to gentrification. As I wandered around the park, I could not find too many people around, despite the fact that there are over 1.7 million people in New York who fall below the federal threshold for poverty. The city's landscape has started to feel increasingly elite, making poor people feel uncomfortable. The result of gentrification is that there are clashing ideologies in public space of how people see and view a public place. The people who I observed to have been poor came from both African-American, White, and Latino backgrounds. One can easily tell that the gap between the rich and the poor in this city is increasing.

Poor people are more frequently assigned deviant labels because of the tendency of powerful groups who hold different stereotypes about others. More social control is applied to the less powerful groups in society, and that is what my observations confirm. The poor people seemed more careful and restrictive in their behavior compared to the middle class or the elite. It is not illogical to think that the poor know that they are more likely to be convicted, arrested, and imprisoned for an accusation of crime than upper-class or middle-class people.

Formal and Informal Mechanisms of Social Regulation

It is common for societies to have different forms of formal and informal mechanisms of social control. How the two forms are balanced often depends on the type of society in which one lives. In American society, where I observed people, the concept of liberty or minimal government is part of a political tradition where individualism is stressed over social controls. However, various forms of informal controls push people towards conforming to societal rules regardless. Since a joint collective conscience is impossible to achieve basically, that is where formal social control methods are used.

My observations also point me to notice that the poor people in the vicinity did exhibit some tendencies toward deviance. This, however, could be out of a number of different factors, one of which is the common idea thrown at American society regarding the American dream. The poor man walking about in Central Park knows that the society he lives in values economic success more than any other thing. Economic success is also marked by social norms that define approved means of working to achieve that economic success. The increasing gap that I observed leads to frustration and strain, which in turn leads to deviance. The poor man that I saw following a few women, whistling towards them, exhibited, in my opinion, the same form of frustration that rejects traditional means of success.

Park security, in this case, is assigned to ensure formal control over any signs of deviance or crime. Their intervention was, for the most part, advisory, and I did not see them resort to any aggression against the poor. Their presence, however, is an indication that society's social controls are enforced and that any deviant behavior will be punished. Functionalists see a collapse of society into a state of anomie if it has no punishments or controls. Therefore, the formal controls enforced in the park gave a clear message that any deviant behavior would be punished by the Justice system, according to what the majority of the society, in this case, the visitors at the park, would find unacceptable.

Poverty, Public Space, and the Operation of Informal Social Control

The poor people that I observe in the park also demonstrate a form of Informal social control. Most sociologists see informal social control as a result of a society's shared collective conscience, in which a society's majority views certain acts or activities as negative. (Conerly et al., 2021) This form of control leads the criminals to think before they commit any form of crime and makes them wish that they had never committed it. Although it is out of a misplaced stereotypical view to think that the poor people in Central Park are more susceptible to deviant or criminal behavior, a tendency of the people to view them as such, though ethically wrong, is still there.

Bonds such as family, commitment, attachment, belief, and involvement become factors that bind people together in a society and prevent them from being ostracized. My observations confirmed this theory of sociology during the 45 minutes that I stayed in the park, despite the fact that poor people could not achieve the American dream when they exhibit tendencies of social commitment, family, and involvement, such as those poor people who walked about with their girlfriends or relatives, they seemed to me as a neutral observer to be less susceptible to crime. I would feel more secure being around such people than those who preferred isolation.

Indeed, in today's fast-paced society, people have less time to worry about others. The gap between the rich and poor and social injustices in our society are commonly observable. A society's formal and informal controls check the behavior of individuals who are more disposed toward deviant behavior. My stroll in Central Park allowed me to correlate theoretical perspectives in sociology regarding formal and informal social controls to the actual behavior of the people I observed. I observed that formal control holds greater power over the actions of the people than informal social control. Both forms are crucial, however, to prevent individuals and groups from engaging in harmful behavior. The degree of formal controls varies according to a society's dynamics, and in the case of New York's society, as I observed in Central Park, it is seemingly kept minimal.

References

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