Social Geometry and Social Control

Bradley Campbell
Department of Sociology
California State University, Los Angeles

Jason Manning
Department of Sociology & Anthropology
West Virginia University


Abstract
Donald Black defines social control as any way of defining and responding to deviant behavior, including various means of expressing grievances or otherwise handling moral conflict. Thus defined, social control is highly variable, and it occurs in different forms, styles, and quantities. Black's theoretical program involves explaining variation in social control with its social geometry, or its location and direction in a multidimensional social space. Social geometry includes such variables as relational and cultural distance, or upward and downward direction in vertical space. The social distance and elevation of parties in a conflict predicts and explains the form, style, and quantity of social control, while changes in their geometric relationships explain why social control occurs in the first place. By constructing multidimensional geometric models, sociologists can explain when grievances occur and how exactly they will be handled.
Introduction

Sociologists conceptualize social control in multiple ways. In one well-known conception, social control is defined by its effects, and the term refers to any behaviors or practices that bring about conformity to social norms and mitigate deviance from these norms (Black, 1998, pp. 3-4; see, e.g., Ross, 1901). Others might define social control according to the motives behind it, such that all attempts to enforce norms and deter deviance would count, even if they were ineffective. In still another usage, social control is defined not by what effects it has on deviance, or even by how it attempts to deal with deviance. Instead, deviance is defined by social control, and social control is any behavior that involves treating something as deviant (see, e.g., Lemert, 1948; Becker, 1963).

This last usage has its roots in Durkheim (1997), who famously defined crime as anything society punishes. His definition was based on the observation that what is criminal in one society might be completely unobjectionable, perhaps even praiseworthy, in another. It was also a definition that reflected his approach to the study of law. Durkheim was less concerned with why people engaged in crime than with why society would label things criminal in the first place, or why reactions to crime differed from one time and place to another. Thus he proposed a theory to explain variation in the nature and intensity of punishment across societies and over time.

The recognition that deviance is relative, and the concern with explaining reactions to it, is also central in the work of Donald Black. For Black (1976, p. 105), social control is any process of defining and responding to deviant behavior. This broad conception includes the activities of police and courts, but also a great many other behaviors. Indeed, we all engage in this sort of social control on a daily basis, every time we treat any conduct as rude, inappropriate, or otherwise wrong – that is, any time we express a grievance or otherwise handle moral conflict.

Beginning with his early work on law, Black has led a program of theory and research focused on explaining variation in social control. His work is unique in that, rather than using a more conventional explanatory framework like the rational choice or conflict paradigms, it involves a new and unusual paradigm of Black’s own creation. This strategy of explanation, which Black calls pure sociology, explains social control with its distance and direction in a multidimensional social space – that is, with its social geometry (Black, 1995; 2002).

Black’s program has proven fruitful. If we measure theorists’ productivity by the number of general and testable propositions they produce, then he is likely the most prolific contemporary theorist of social control. His strategy of explaining social control with its social geometry has also attracted the efforts of a number of other scholars over the years who have added their own findings and theoretical insights to this growing body of work. Here we present an overview of the state of the art in Blackian theories of social control. We begin by discussing the kinds of variation in social control that these theories are meant to explain.
Variation in Social Control

Social control varies. People handle grievances using an array of techniques: divorce, gossip, genocide, lawsuits, executions, psychotherapy, and much more. They also conceive of social control in different ways, sometimes as punishment, for example, or sometimes as assistance with a problem. And they use different amounts of social control, perhaps meting out mild punishment for one offense and severe punishment for another. In other words, social control varies in form, style, and quantity (Black, 1998, pp. 5-11; Horwitz 1990).

Most forms of social control fall into one of four categories: avoidance, negotiation, settlement, or self-help (Black, 1998, pp. 74-94). Avoidance is the reduction of interaction in response to a grievance. Consider a marital conflict. A husband and wife might temporarily stop speaking to one another, or stop having sex, or if they keep having conflicts they might end their relationship completely and seek a divorce. Friends with conflicts might also temporarily stop interacting, or their close friendship might become a more distant one, or they might lose touch entirely. Employees might quit their jobs over grievances against their bosses, or bosses might fire their employees. Customers might stop patronizing a business, or a business might ban a customer. In collective conflicts protesters might call for the boycott of an irresponsible corporation, or nation-states might impose economic sanctions on a rogue nation. Negotiation occurs when the parties to a conflict try to work out an agreement among themselves. An arguing couple might try to talk out their problems. Someone who owes a friend money might meet with the friend to discuss a payment plan. The leaders of enemy nations might hold a summit to arrive at a peaceful solution to their conflicts. If successful, negotiation may end the conflict to the satisfaction of both sides. So might some forms of settlement, or third party intervention, which in its least authoritative forms resembles negotiation. Nonauthoritative settlement might involve a mediator who facilitates a discussion between the two sides, while more authoritative settlement might involve a judge who makes a decision the parties must abide by. Both nonauthoritative and authoritative settlement occur in more informal situations as well. You would be acting as a fairly nonauthoritative settlement agent if you gently changed the subject when your two friends began to argue, and as a more authoritative settlement agent if you intervened forcefully to prevent a fistfight (Black & Baumgartner, 1983). Self-help, finally, occurs when one or more parties to a conflict use aggression. Rather than avoiding adversaries, or negotiating with them, or getting someone else to deal with them, you might take the law into your own hands, such as by destroying their property, assaulting them, or even executing them.

Avoidance, negotiation, settlement, and self-help are the major forms of social control, but we can also divide them into multiple subforms. Avoidance and self-help, for example, can be either unilateral or bilateral. Unilateral avoidance occurs when people reduce contact with adversaries against their wishes – perhaps even without their knowledge – but avoidance can be bilateral when people agree to go
their separate ways. Unilateral self-help occurs when aggression is one-sided, but it is bilateral when aggrieved parties use aggression against one another either by mutual agreement or when one side uses aggression and the other retaliates in kind. Negotiation is by definition bilateral, since it involves mutual discussion, and settlement is trilateral since it involves third-party intervention. We can also distinguish forms of social control based on whether they are individual – where the agents of social control act alone – or collective – where they act in groups. Individuals might reduce contact with one another, but so might nation states. Individuals can negotiate, but so might groups such as management and organized labor. A settlement agent might be an individual acting alone or an agent of a group such as a government. And either individuals or groups can engage in aggression.

The style of social control, the language and logic used in handling deviant behavior, also comes in four main types: the penal, compensatory, therapeutic, and conciliatory styles (Black, 1976, pp. 4-6; see also Horwitz, 1990). With the penal style social control is punishment. Usually the idea is that offenders have violated some kind of prohibition and deserve to have pain, deprivation, or some other unpleasant experience inflicted upon them because of their guilt. With the compensatory style social control is payment. Someone has incurred a debt, by violating a contract, say, or by injuring someone, and needs to pay up. With the therapeutic style social control is way of helping a person. Someone’s misbehavior results from an illness or some other kind of problem, and the person needs help in changing. With the conciliatory style social control is also a kind of help, but it is help in restoring a relationship rather than transforming an individual. We might think of different styles being used for different offenses, and sometimes this is the case. We might punish a robbery, require a payment of compensation when someone cheats a business partner, help an alcoholic give up drinking, and help a husband and wife improve their relationship. But multiple styles might be employed in handling a single offense, and if we look broadly enough we can see just about any style being used at some point for any offense. We might think of a homicide as deserving punishment, for instance, but a killer might also be required to pay compensation, and in some societies compensation is the principle way of handling homicide. A killer might also receive help for demon possession, mental illness, or some other problem that led to the homicide, or a killing might simply be one part of a conflict between two family groups that needs to be solved.

Social control also varies in quantity: There can always be more or less of it. Sometimes situations that elicit reactions in other settings result in no social control at all – misbehavior is simply tolerated, as in M.P. Baumgartner’s study of a conflict in an American suburb, where a Mr. and Mrs. Shephard did nothing at all when their neighbor showed up at their door completely naked and said he just wanted to give them some mail that had been mistakenly delivered to him (Baumgartner, 1988, p. 74). Each type of social control also varies in degree though. Ending a relationship permanently is more avoidance than not speaking.
to someone for a few days, and a killing is more violence than an assault. Black’s early work looked at the quantity of law, which in the U.S. criminal justice system ranges from a call to the police, to an arrest, to a five-year prison sentence, to a 20-year prison sentence, on up to an execution (Black, 1976).

**Variation in Social Geometry**

Variation in one thing can only be explained by variation in something else. The pure sociology of social control explains variation in social control with variation in social geometry (Black, 1995). Social geometry refers to the social structure of a behavior; the social characteristics of everyone involved. Social geometry varies from one instance of a behavior to the next, and we can think of this variation spatially, with every behavior having a location and direction in social space. In explaining social control, we look to the social geometry of the conflict that gives rise to it, and we can think first of all of every conflict as having a vertical location and direction arising from various types of social inequality. One source of inequality is the uneven distribution of wealth, and we commonly describe wealthy people as having a high status and poor people as having a low status. If I have a grievance against you, and we are both wealthy, the conflict has an elevated location in social space. If we are both poor the location is lower. If I am wealthy and you are poor, the conflict has a downward direction, and if I am poor and you are wealthy, it has an upward direction.

Wealth is one kind of social status, but other kinds of status, including integration, respectability, authority, and organization, work the same way. Integration has to do with one’s participation in society, respectability with one’s moral reputation, authority with one’s place in an organizational hierarchy, and organization with one’s capacity for collective action (Black, 1976). So when someone who has a job has a grievance against an unemployed person, the conflict would have a downward direction, as it would when a law-abiding citizen has grievance against an ex-convict, when a boss has a grievance against a subordinate, or when an organization has a grievance against an individual. Any conflict, then, is elevated or lowly, downward or upward, along a number of dimensions.

Inequality gives rise to differences in status, which we think of vertically, but we can think of other aspects of social life horizontally, with people socially closer to or more distant from one another. One type of social distance is relational distance, which has to with people’s involvement in each other’s lives. Relational distance has many dimensions, such as how often people interact, the scope of their interaction, and the length of their relationship (Black, 1976, pp. 40-41). Spouses are usually closer to one another than they are to other family members or friends, and much closer than they are to acquaintances and strangers, so a conflict between spouses is a very close conflict, and a conflict between strangers a very distant one. Cultural distance and interdependence can be thought of similarly. Cultural distance has to do with similarities and differences in language,
dress, cuisine, religion, ethnicity, and other cultural characteristics (Black, 1976, pp. 73-74). Two people who speak the same language are thus closer than two people who speak different languages, and people who share an ethnic identity are closer than those who do not. Interdependence has to do with how much people depend on one another – how much they cooperate economically and otherwise. People who exchange goods and services are more interdependent, and thus socially closer to one another, than people who are economically independent (Black, 1998, pp. 45-47).

The social geometry of a conflict explains the handling of the conflict. High-status disputants handle conflicts differently than low-status disputants do, and people with downward grievances handle them differently than people with upward grievances. Those who are socially close handle conflicts differently than those who are socially distant, and third parties respond to all these conflicts differently as well. The social characteristics of third parties matter too, so high-status judges rule differently than low-status judges. Likewise third parties who are close to one party to the conflict do not behave like those who are close to both sides, and neither acts like those who are distant from both sides. Every conflict has a social configuration arising from different dimensions of social inequality and social distances, and it is this configuration – the social geometry – that makes certain responses more or less likely.

**Geometry and Form**

Different conflict geometries give rise to different forms of social control. Whether social control is individual or collective, for example, often depends on whether the conflict geometry is conducive to partisanship. Whether third parties act as partisans – whether they take a side in a conflict – depends on the social distances between the adversaries and third parties and on their relative statuses. People tend to side with adversaries they are close to and against those they are distant from, and they tend to side with high-status adversaries against low-status adversaries (Black, 1998, pp. 125-143). Forms of collective violence such as lynching, rioting, blood feuding, and gang warfare occur only when at least one side of the conflict has strong partisans who join in the violence (Black, 2004b; Senechal de la Roche, 2001). Lynchings in the Jim Crow South, which were usually responses to suspected offenses by blacks against whites, followed this pattern. Not only were the members of the white lynch mobs culturally closer to the victim of the offense that gave rise to the lynching than to the accused, due to their ethnic similarities, but they also tended to have stronger relational ties, since lynchings were more likely to occur when a stranger to the community was suspected of an offense against an insider (Senechal de la Roche 1996, 1997, 2001). Status was also important, and the system of racial oppression that kept blacks poor and otherwise low in status is one reason for the pattern of lynching. But again, not all inter-ethnic conflicts led to lynchings, and lynchings were more likely to occur in re-
sponse to offenses against wealthy and otherwise high-status whites (Senechal de la Roche, 2001, p. 131). Riots likewise occur under conditions of strong partisanship, as do blood feuds and gang wars, but blood feuds and gang wars occur when partisanship is strong on both sides. Clans in a tribal society or gang members in modern America might respond to a killing by killing a member of the killer’s group, and the killer’s group might respond with a retaliatory killing. In this situation third parties who are close to the original killer but distant from the victim, and others who are close to the original victim but distant from the killer, quickly mobilize for vengeance (Black, 2004b, pp. 153-154; Cooney, 1998, pp. 73-82).

Note that while lynchings, riots, blood feuds, and gang wars are all collective, lynchings and riots are unilateral and blood feuds and gang wars are bilateral. In general bilateral social control is more likely when the adversaries are of equal status, and unilateral social control when they are not. Remember that organization, the capacity for collective action, is itself a kind of status, so attracting supporters increases the status of an adversary. Thus the uneven support we see in conflicts that lead to lynching or rioting is one reason those conflicts give rise to unilateral collective violence, while support for both sides is necessary for bilateral collective violence. Other kinds of status matter, too, so any kind of inequality between the adversaries of a conflict – whether of wealth, integration, authority, or anything else – makes bilateral social control less likely. Negotiation tends to be between equals, as does bilateral avoidance. Unilateral avoidance – whether expulsion or flight – occurs along with inequality, with high-status parties expelling lower-status adversaries, and low-status parties fleeing from high-status adversaries.

Patterns of social status and social distance also explain trilateral social control, or settlement. First, settlement agents tend to be higher in status than adversaries, since lower-status third parties would be unlikely to intervene at all. They also tend to be equally distant from the adversaries, since if they were closer to one side they would act as partisans. And the more pronounced these patterns, the more authoritative settlement becomes. Mediation, where settlement agents simply help facilitate a discussion between the adversaries, is more likely when the settlement agents are not much higher in status than the adversaries and when they are relationally and culturally close to them. Adjudication, on the other hand, where settlement agents make decisions and enforce them, is more likely when they are much higher in status and more distant. And in between falls an intermediate form, arbitration, where settlement agents make decisions that are not enforced, and the geometry thus falls in between that of mediation and adjudication (Black, 1998, pp. 15-17).

In hunter-gatherer societies, where people are all socially close to one another and there is little inequality of any kind, there is also very little settlement – and certainly little authoritative settlement. Among the Eskimos of the Arctic, for example, the relatives of a homicide victim might take vengeance, but the group as a whole has no law to deal with it (Hoebel, 1961). Nonlegal forms of settlement do
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occur in tribal societies, where clans are separated by some relational, but not
cultural distance, and where there is more inequality. Inequality is still minimal,
though, and settlement tends to be nonauthoritative. Thus when feuding Monteg-
rins wanted to end a feud, they might call a temporary truce and go to the Court of
Good Men for help in solving their conflict. But they could always reject the court’s
suggestions and go back go feuding (Boehm, 1986). And even in societies with
more inequality and more social distance, and thus more developed legal systems,
people resisted law whenever the geometry of the conflict was not right for au-
thoritative settlement. In late medieval and early modern Europe, for example,
land-owning noblemen were extremely high in status compared to agents of the
emerging state, and they refused to take their conflicts before legal officials, pre-
ferring instead to take vengeance themselves (Cooney, 1998, pp. 31-44).

Geometry and Style

Different combinations of social distance and inequality also account for the
style of social control that responds to a conflict. Penal and compensatory law
are both accusatory styles of social control, where at least one side of a conflict
accuses the other of wrongdoing, and these styles are more likely when the so-
cial distance between the adversaries is greater. The therapeutic and conciliatory
styles are remedial rather than accusatory, though, and these are more likely when
the adversaries are close (Black, 1976, p. 47). Downward grievances – grievances
against lower-status offenders – are more likely than upward or lateral grievanc-
ies to be handled with the penal style, while upward grievances are more likely to
be handled with the compensatory and therapeutic styles, and lateral grievances
with the conciliatory style (Black 1976, p. 29; Black, 1980, pp. 109-186; Horwitz
1990).

Modern law mostly doles out punishment or compensation, but legal systems
in more intimate and egalitarian settings are more remedial. And so is social con-
trol in intimate and egalitarian settings within modern societies, such as within
families, tight-knit communities, and communes, and even in what might seem
to be unlikely places. In what are often called post-bureaucratic corporations, for
example, decision making is less centralized and less specialized than in tradition-
al corporations, and the people there are more intimate and equal. And in these
settings there is little formal discipline, and therapy thrives. Rather than punish
their employees, managers talk to them about their problems and encourage them
to seek help (Tucker, 1999).

Geometry and Quantity

In Blackian theory and research, one of the most consistent predictors of the
quantity of social control is social distance. Most broadly, Black proposes that
moralism is a direct function of social distance (Black, 1998, p. 144). Relational and
cultural distance encourage harsh judgments and harsh punishments. Suspicion attaches to strangers and foreigners, and historically being an outsider has been dangerous. Given great enough distances, the deviant’s actual conduct becomes irrelevant, and someone’s mere existence is treated as an offense. Thus some isolated tribes attack strangers as a matter of course (Black, 1998, pp. 150-153). Relational and culture closeness, on the other hand, encourage toleration: “As people grow close, they ‘normalize’ conduct that earlier would have spurred them to action” and “people who are vicious toward foreigners will more readily forgive their own kind” (Black, 1998, p. 89). For example, academics are less likely to contest intellectual conflicts when the offender is a close friend or colleague. Given sufficient closeness, even major intellectual theft might be tolerated (Cooney & Phillips, 2017).

We can see the relationship between distance and quantity clearly in cases of self-help. Self-help becomes more likely, more violent, and more severe as distance increases. When a conflict occurs between two solidary groups, such as clans or street gangs, the groups are less likely to turn to violence if there are cross-cutting ties between them (Cooney, 1998, pp. 67-99). The same is true for individuals (Baumgartner, 1992; Phillips & Cooney, 2005). People who lack such mutual social ties are more prone to violent conflict, but if they still have some degree of intimacy – such as being able to recognize one another’s members as individuals – and if they share a common culture, any violence is likely to be relatively restrained. The classic blood feud, for instance, is a precise and even exchange of killings, a life for a life, often governed by some rules about who is an acceptable target and where killings can take place. Black proposes that blood feuds occur only at an intermediate degree of relational distance and between groups that are culturally homogeneous (Black, 2004b). Increase the relational and cultural distance, making the group’s total strangers and ethnically distinct, and the violence will become more indiscriminate and war-like.

Similar patterns are seen in other forms of self-help. Senechal de la Roche (1996, 1997; 2001) proposes that distance increases the likelihood of lynching, a form of mob justice that usually targets strangers or recent arrivals to the community. Mere suspicion might be enough for members of a tight-knit community to lynch an outsider, though it often takes a history of repeat offenses for them to lynch one of their own (Senechal de la Roche, 2001). Increase distance still further, she argues, and lynching turns to rioting. Riots employ collective liability, treating all members of a racial, ethnic, or religious group as deviant regardless of their individual actions. They thus have many more victims than the typical lynching, and they typically involve more perpetrators. As social distance increases still further, the scale of self-help increases even more. The greatest extremes of social control – including wars, genocides, and mass casualty terrorism – usually occur between strangers from different societies, religions, and ethnic groups, separated by large degrees of relational and cultural distance and completely lacking functional inter-
dependence (Black 2004a; Campbell, 2015a; 2015b; Senechal de la Roche, 1996, 2001). Even within these acts of large-scale violence, the quantity of self-help varies from locality to locality based on the degree of distance involved. For instance, during the Holocaust, genocidal violence against the Jews began later and was less intensive in areas with higher rates of intermarriage and greater cultural similarity between Jews and Gentiles (Campbell, 2009, pp. 163-64; 2015a, pp. 20-21).

The effect of social distance can be seen with other forms of social control as well. Black proposes that, within a society, law increases with social distance (Black, 1976, pp. 40-46, 73-78; 1989, pp. 12-13). Thus people are more likely to call the police against someone more distant than against someone more intimate. Rape victims, for instance, are more likely to report the crime if the attacker was a stranger rather than an acquaintance, and more likely if the attacker was an acquaintance rather than a friend or relative (e.g., Williams, 1984; Fisher et al. 2003). And once reported to the legal system, crimes against intimates are treated less severely than crimes against strangers (e.g., Cooney, 2009b, pp. 156-157). Social closeness – particularly such dimensions of closeness as multiplexity and interdependence – also mitigates avoidance. Total and complete avoidance is thus more likely in relationships with a narrower scope and where parties do not rely on one another (Black, 1998, pp. 81-81).

Another factor that determines quantity is vertical direction. The overall volume of social control appears to be greater in downward directions. Black proposes that moralism is a direct function of superiority, such that distant inferiors attract more and harsher social control than do equals or superiors (Black, 1998, p. 144). Superiority breeds judgment, while inferiority encourages toleration: “Social inferiors may not be subjectively tolerant of their superiors, but behaviorally they are exceptionally so” (Black, 1998, p. 89). For instance, in-depth interviews of immigrants living in Ireland found that lower-status immigrants – those who lacked wealth, education, or employment – experienced more ethnic hostility than did higher-status immigrants, but were more likely to do little or nothing in response (Cooney, 2009a). And in the U.S. immigrants are much more tolerant of slights by the cultural majority than they are of those by other minorities (Baumgartner, 1998).

We can also see this relationship in law, which Black (1976) proposes is greater in downward directions than in upward ones. Thus courts process more cases by organizations against individuals than by individuals against organizations, and cases by individuals against organizations are less likely to succeed (see, e.g., Wanner, 1999; Songer and Sheehan, 1999). Wealth produces similar differentials, and killings of the wealthy by the poor are handled more severely than are killings of the poor by the wealthy. The greater the degree of inequality in a society, the greater the differential (Cooney 2009b, pp. 39-50). In most societies that practice slavery, for example, the killing of a slave by his or her master is not even a crime. Masters also frequently punish their slaves with flogging and other severe violence,
and it appears that violent self-help in general is greater in downward directions than in upward ones. In the span of history far more slaves have been beaten than have rebelled. It is also historically common for servants, children, and other subordinates to be subjected to corporal punishment, while violent rebellion against masters, parents, and other superiors has been rare and harshly punished when it does occur. True, there are some particular forms of violence that are more likely in upward direction. This is the case for terrorism, a pattern of covert mass killings by organized civilians who target enemy civilians (Black 2004a). But the casualties inflicted by largest known acts or campaigns of terrorism pale in comparison to those inflicted by history’s largest genocides, and genocide is more likely in downward directions (Campbell, 2015b).

**Multidimensional Geometry**

Each dimension of social geometry exerts an influence on social control. By specifying this influence, we can explain different aspects of social control, such as its severity or the degree to which it is unilateral rather than bilateral or trilateral. We can also consider the joint impact of several geometric variables at once. For instance, we might ask what forms of social control happen between individuals who are relationally close and functionally interdependent but highly stratified, or between groups that are relationally distant but culturally close and of equal status. We can thus construct multidimensional models that predict the effect of different combinations of variables. Doing so allows us to construct more precise explanations of particular forms and patterns of social control.

For example, Black (2004b) proposes a multidimensional model of the classic blood feud: a precise and even exchange of vengeance killings, tit for tat. According to his theory, such feuds occur only in conflicts that are between groups, such as clans and other kin groups, that are (1) internally solidary, with high intimacy and interdependence between members, (2) socially equal to one another; with similar levels of wealth and group size, (3) functionally independent of one another; (4) culturally close to one another, sharing religion, ethnicity, and, often, codes about the conduct of feuds, and (5) separated by an intermediate degree of relational distance. Alter any aspect of this configuration of variables, and the form of social control will deviate in some way from the classic feud. Decrease the solidarity of the groups, and the lack of strong partisanship leads to killings going unavenged. Increase the inequality between groups, and violent self-help becomes more one-sided and uneven. Decrease the social distance, and non-violent forms of social control become more likely.

Different forms of social control require different models. A form of social control that has emerged on college campuses in recent years is the microaggression complaint: People who take offense at the words and actions of others react by complaining in online forums that they have been subjected to a so-called microaggression, something believed to be a severe offense because it further contrib-
utes to the domination of disadvantaged minorities. Campbell and Manning (2014; forthcoming) propose that microaggression complaints arise upwardly across small degrees of inequality, between members of different cultural groups, and in the presence of higher status third parties. They thus thrive on college campuses, where students from lower and higher status ethnic groups interact as relative equals in the presence of a paternalistic bureaucracy.

Another peculiar form of social control involves people killing themselves as a way of protesting or punishing someone else. For instance, someone might kill himself or herself to bring guilt or shame upon an abusive or unfaithful spouse. Manning (2012) proposes that such moralistic suicides are most likely to express grievances against someone who is relationally and culturally close, socially superior, and with whom the aggrieved is functionally interdependent. Moralistic suicide is therefore common among wives and children in highly patriarchal societies. While most common in relationships that combine closeness with inequality, a sufficient degree of one variable can compensate for the other, such that we also see suicide as a tactic of political protest by citizens against governments. Yet if we increase distance still further, the positive relationship between distance and violent self-help leads to pure protest suicide being replaced by suicide attacks. Thus suicide terrorism tends to share protest suicide’s upward direction, but is much more likely to cross lines of nationality, religion, and ethnicity (Manning, 2012; 2015).

Using multidimensional geometry, we can specify avoidance structures and negotiation structures (Black, 1998, p. 74-89), lynching structures and feuding structures (Senechal de la Roche, 1997, Black, 2004b). We can thus predict and explain how grievances will be expressed and how deviants will be dealt with. But we can go still further: In addition to explaining why social control takes one form rather than another, we can ask what causes it to occur at all.

### Changing Geometry

All the relationships discussed above come with an important qualification: They are expected to hold only when the nature of the deviant behavior is held constant. We do not assess the relationship between relational distance and law by comparing a verbal spat between spouses to a homicide between strangers, or vice versa. Obviously, a homicide is more likely to attract legal response than mere angry words, and the difference is great enough to drown out the effect of most geometric variables. We understand the impact of social geometry only by comparing reactions to the same sort of offense, such as by looking at variation in the handling of killing, insults, theft, and so on.

It is also important to note that the geometric relationships described above all operate on the assumption that a grievance has occurred; that is, someone has taken offense or otherwise defined someone else’s behavior as deviant. The ques-
tion is then how the deviant behavior will be handled.

But why does the labelling occur in the first place? What exactly causes people to take offense? And why is it that some offenses, like homicide, are predictably treated more severely than others?

According to Black’s (2011) more recent theory of conflict, the key to answering these questions is to recognize that social geometry is not static, but always subject to change. Relational distance, for instance, changes whenever we grow more intimate with a new acquaintance or sever old relationships. So too for vertical distance: The level of equality or inequality between persons and groups is subject to change, and it fluctuates whenever anyone gains or loses social status. The behaviors and events that spark conflicts can all be conceptualized as changes in social geometry. Viewed in this light, conflict is caused by changing geometry, and deviant behaviors are labeled deviant because they alter social geometry. An employee disobeys a boss, a small act of rebellion that reduces the boss’s superiority by undermining his or her authority. A woman leaves her husband, causing a sudden increase in relational distance. A heretic adopts new and unconventional beliefs, growing more culturally distant from everyone else. All these acts change the geometry of social relationships, and all are likely to be treated as deviant. Changes in social geometry cause social control (Black, 2011, pp. 4-5).

Black (2011, p. 6) proposes that the severity of the deviant behavior is a direct function of the magnitude and speed of the change. The reason homicides usually attract more social control than insults is that homicide has a greater impact on social space. An insult subjects someone to a minor act of dominance and possibly of humiliation; it takes away at least a small degree of status. But a homicide takes everything the victim has and ever will have. It is therefore a greater change to the status structure. It also severs the relationship between the deceased and his or her associates, creating a drastic increase in relational distance. Killing is generally a more severe kind of deviant behavior because it involves a greater change in geometry. Likewise, the cold shoulder is a smaller increase in relational distance than is divorce or abandonment, so it provokes less social control in response. The greater and faster the change, the more social control.

The nature of the change interacts with the geometry of social space. For example, a given increase in relational distance will cause more conflict in closer relationships than in more distant ones (Black, 2011, p. 138-142). Intimates are likely to fight over intimacy itself, and most domestic homicide is a way of punishing an estranged partner for “the crime of saying goodbye” (Black, 2011, p. 46). Likewise, a given increase in inequality will cause more conflict among those who are highly equal than among those who are already highly stratified (Black, 2011, p. 138-144).

Furthermore, such interactions allow us to specify which particular changes in geometry are likely to spark which particular forms of social control. Campbell
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(2013; 2015a) thus proposes that the fundamental cause of all genocides is some combination of increasing cultural distance and decreasing vertical distance. Genocides are sparked by encounters with a new ethnic group, or when an already subordinate group rises in status, reducing the superiority of the dominant group. Similarly, Cooney (2014) proposes that most family honor killings are a response to actions that threaten to reduce the superiority of the family over its members, of men over women, and of the older family members over the young. If an Arab or Turkish girl disobeys her elders by wearing Western clothing or beginning a sexual relationship with a boy not of their choosing, she is engaging in an act of rebellion. The honor killing is a form of punitive social control that crushes the rebellion. Combining theories of conflict and social control allows us to make more precise predictions about when and where each variety of social control is likely to occur (Manning 2013).

Conclusion

Social life without moral conflict is hard to imagine. Every day we find ourselves immersed in it. We disapprove of someone’s conduct – our neighbor’s noise, our roommate’s messiness, our children’s disobedience, our spouse’s lack of affection, our boss’s groping, our coworker’s laziness, our pastor’s boring sermon, our students’ complaints, our political leaders’ lies. We object to the bad writing on what was once our favorite television show, we complain about the lack of good movies, or we express disappointment over the failings of our favorite celebrities. We get angry reading about robberies, rapes, murders, wars, and genocides. We despair over poverty and racial injustice. We might experience these things ourselves – crime, violence, bigotry – and we might despise those who have wronged us. We might even scrutinize our own lives and come to despise much of our own behavior.

And we might engage in any number of reactions to our conflicts. We gossip, and gossip, and gossip. We confront people. We complain. We report our neighbor. We avoid our roommate. We discipline our children. We divorce our spouse. We quit our job. We leave our church. We vote people out of office. We protest. We march. We boycott. We sue. We call the police. We yell. We get therapy. Some of us hit someone, kill someone, or kill ourselves.

As participants in conflict and social control, we may feel as if we are just jerked about by uncontrollable emotions triggered by the actions of others. Or we may feel as if we are just applying our ethical principles in a world that too often ignores them. But however we feel, the way we evaluate things and the way we respond to them occur in predictable patterns, the same patterns that governed the moral life of our tribal ancestors, and of the great empires, and that govern the moral life of every family, school, workplace, and nation today. Patterns of conflict and social control correspond with patterns of social inequality and social distance. Social geometry explains the form, style, and quantity of social control, as
well as the conflicts to which social control responds.

References


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