

DEVIANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Deviance

Sociologists use the term deviance to refer to a violation of norms.

1. According to sociologist Howard S. Becker, it is not the act itself that makes an action deviant, but rather how society reacts to it.
2. Because different groups have different norms, what is deviant to some is not deviant to others. This is true even for criminal deviance, the violation of rules that have been written into law.
3. Deviants are people who violate rules, whether the infraction is minor (jaywalking) or serious (murder). When sociologists study deviance, they are nonjudgmental; they are not judging whether the behavior is good or bad, just that it is viewed negatively by people within the social group. To sociologists, all people are deviants because everyone violates rules from time to time.
4. Erving Goffman used “stigma” to refer to attributes that discredit one’s claim to a “normal” identity; These include violation of norms of appearance (a facial birthmark, a huge nose or ears) and norms of ability (blindness, deafness, mental handicaps). The stigma can define a person’s master status, superseding all other statuses the person occupies.

Norms

Norms make social life possible by making behavior predictable. Without norms, social chaos would exist. The reason deviance is seen as threatening is because it undermines predictability. Thus, social control (the formal and informal means of enforcing norms) is necessary for social life.

Sanctions

When a norm is violated, sanctions are imposed.

1. Sanctions can be either negative or positive.
2. Negative sanctions, which reflect disapproval of a particular behavior, range from frowns and gossip for breaking a folkway to imprisonment and capital punishment for breaking a more.
3. Positive sanctions, from smiles to formal awards, are used to reward conformity.
4. Most sanctions are informal.

Comparisons

Comparisons can be made between biosocial, psychological, and sociological explanations of deviance.

1. Psychologists and sociobiologists explain deviance by looking within individuals; sociologists look outside the individual.
2. Biosocial assume that genetic predispositions lead people to such behaviors as juvenile delinquency and crime. Explanations focus on genetic predisposition, including factors such as the “XYY” theory (an extra Y chromosome in men leads to crime); or body type (squat, muscular persons more likely to commit street crimes).
3. Psychological explanations focus on personality disorders (e.g., “bad toilet training,” “suffocating mothers,” and so on). Yet these do not necessarily result in the presence or absence of specific forms of deviance in a person.
4. Sociological explanations search outside the individual: crime is a violation of norms written into law, and each society has its own laws against certain types of behavior, but social influences such as socialization, subcultural group memberships, or social class (people’s relative standing in terms of education, occupation, income, and wealth) may “recruit” some people to break norms.

THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Differential association is Edwin Sutherland’s term to indicate that those who associate with groups oriented toward deviant activities learn an “excess of definitions” of deviance and thus are more likely to engage in deviant activities.

1. The key to differential association is the learning of ideas and attitudes favorable to following the law or breaking it. Some groups teach members to violate norms (e.g., families involved in crime may set

their children on a lawbreaking path; some friends and neighborhoods tend to encourage deviant behavior; even subcultures contain particular attitudes about deviance and conformity that are learned by their members).

2. Symbolic interactionists stress that people are not mere pawns, because individuals help produce their own orientation to life and their choice of association helps shape the self.

According to **control theory**, everyone is propelled towards deviance, but a system of controls work against these motivations to deviate.

1. Walter Reckless described two complementary systems of controls. Inner controls are our capacity to withstand temptations toward deviance and internalized morality, integrity, fear of punishment, and desire to be a “good” person. Outer controls involve groups (e.g. family, friends, and the police) that influence us not to deviate.

2. Travis Hirschi noted that strong bonds to society, based on attachments, commitments, involvements, and beliefs, lead to more effective inner controls.

Labeling theory is the view that the labels people are given affect their own and others’ perceptions of them, thus channeling their behavior either into deviance or into conformity.

1. Gresham Sykes and David Matza use the term “techniques of neutralization” to describe the strategies deviants employ to resist society’s label. These are:

- (a) denial of responsibility (“I didn’t do it”)
- (b) denial of injury (“Who really got hurt?”)
- (c) denial of a victim (“She deserved it”)
- (d) condemnation of the condemners (“Who are you to talk?”)
- (e) appeal to higher loyalty (“I had to help my friends”).

2. Most people resist being labeled deviant, but some revel in a deviant identity (e.g., motorcycle gangs who are proud of getting in trouble, laughing at death, and so on).

3. William J. Chambliss’s study of the Saints (troubled boys from respectable middle class families) and the Roughnecks (boys from working class families who hang out on the streets) provides an excellent illustration of labeling theory, which is how labels given to people affect how others perceive them and how they perceive themselves, thus channeling their behavior into deviance or conformity. The study showed how labels open and close doors of opportunity for the individuals involved.

THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Emile Durkheim stated that deviance, including crime, is functional, for it contributes to social order.

1. Deviance clarifies moral boundaries (a group’s ideas about how people should act and think) and affirms norms.
2. Deviance encourages social unity (by reacting to deviants, group members develop a “we” feeling and collectively affirm the rightness of their own ways).
3. Deviance promotes social change (if boundary violations gain enough support, they become new, acceptable behaviors).

Robert Merton developed strain theory to analyze what happens when people are socialized to desire cultural goals but denied the institutionalized means to reach them.

1. Merton used “anomie” to refer to the strain people experience when they are blocked in their attempts to achieve those goals.
2. The most common reaction to cultural goals and institutionalized means is conformity (using lawful means to seek goals society sets).
3. He identified four types of deviant responses to anomie: innovation (using illegitimate means to achieve the goals of society); ritualism (giving up on achieving cultural goals but clinging to conventional rules of conduct); retreatism (rejecting both the cultural goals and the institutionalized means of achieving them); and rebellion (seeking to replace society’s goals).

4. According to strain theory, deviants are not pathogenic individuals but the products of society.

Social class produces different types of crime.

1. Sociologists Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin suggest that these differences are due to differential access to institutionalized means.
2. Illegitimate opportunity structures are opportunities for crimes such as robbery, burglary, or drug dealing that are woven into the texture of life. These structures may result when legitimate structures fail.
3. For the urban poor, there are opportunities to make money through “hustles” such as robbery, burglary, drug dealing, prostitution, pimping, gambling, and other crimes. The “hustler” is a role model because he or she is one of the few who comes close to the cultural goals of success.
4. White-collar crime (crimes that people of respectable and high social status commit in the course of their occupations) results from an illegitimate opportunity structure among higher classes. Such crimes exist in greater numbers than commonly perceived, and can be very costly, possibly totaling several hundred billion dollars a year. They can involve physical harm and sometimes death.

There have been some recent changes in the nature of crime. A major change is the growing ranks of female offenders. As women have become more involved in the professions and the corporate world, they too have been enticed by illegitimate opportunities.

THE CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE

The state’s machinery of social control represents the interests of the wealthy and powerful; this group determines the laws whose enforcement is essential for maintaining its power.

The criminal justice system directs its energies against violations by the working class; while it tends to overlook the harm done by the owners of corporations, flagrant violations are prosecuted. The publicity given to this level of white-collar crime helps stabilize the system by providing evidence of fairness.

The law is an instrument of oppression, a tool designed to maintain the powerful in privileged positions and keep the powerless from rebelling and overthrowing the social order. When members of the working class get out of line, they are arrested, tried and imprisoned in the criminal justice system.