

Theoretical Perspectives on Deviance

Biological and psychological explanations for deviant behavior typically focus on how processes within the individual lead to deviance. Such theories often look for the causes of deviance in genetics, neurochemical imbalances, or childhood failures to internalize appropriate behavior or attitudes. Most sociologists agree that biology and psychology play a role in causing deviance but consider social forces even more important. Sociological theories, therefore, search for the causes of deviance within the social structure rather than within the individual.

Structural-Functional Theories

The basic premise of structural-functional theory is that the parts of society work together like the parts of an organism. From this point of view, deviance can be useful for a society—at least up to a point. Consider spring break: It's easier to settle down to your final papers and exams in May if you got a break from the work in March. In addition, according to structural-functionalists, deviance can help nudge a society toward needed, incremental social changes. But when deviance becomes extreme, they argue, it is *dysfunctional* (disruptive) to the society.

This perspective was first applied to the explanation of deviance by Emile Durkheim. Durkheim recognized the potential benefits of minor deviance. In his classic study of suicide ([1897] 1951), however, he focused on the causes of dysfunctional, extreme deviance. To explore this issue, Durkheim raised the question of why people in industrialized societies are more likely to commit suicide than are people in agricultural societies. He suggested that in traditional societies the rules tend to be well known and widely supported. As a society grows larger, becomes more diverse, and experiences rapid social change, the norms of society may become unclear or no longer apply. Durkheim called this situation **anomie** and believed it was a major cause of suicide in industrializing nations.

Importantly, Durkheim and later structural-functional theorists define deviance as a social problem rather than a personal trouble; it is a property of the social structure, not of the individual (Passos & Agnew 1997). As a consequence, the solution to deviance lies not in reforming the individual deviant but in changing the dysfunctional aspects of the society.

Explaining Individual Deviance: Strain Theory

The classic structural-functionalist theory of crime is Robert Merton's (1957) **strain theory**. Strain theory begins by noting that most of us are conformists, who (as Merton defined the term) accept both our society's culturally approved *goals* and its culturally approved *means* for reaching these goals. Strain theory argues that deviance results when individuals cannot reach culturally approved goals using culturally approved means. This theory is most commonly used to explain lower-class crime.

Merton's Modes of Adaptation

Merton's strain theory of deviance suggests that deviance results whenever there is a disparity between goals and the institutionalized means available to reach them. Individuals caught in this dilemma may reject the goals or the means or both. In doing so, they become deviants.

Modes of Adaptation Cultural Goals Institutional Means		
Innovation	Accepted	Rejected
Ritualism	Rejected	Accepted
Retreatism	Rejected	Rejected
Rebellion	Rejected/replaced	Rejected/replaced

American culture places strong emphasis on economic success. Although this goal is widely shared by Americans, the means to obtain it are not. Few lower-class Americans are able to achieve success through culturally approved means, such as attending school to become a lawyer or computer programmer. According to Merton, lower-class persons turn to crime not because they *reject* American values but because they *accept* them: They believe that only through crime can they achieve our shared cultural goal of economic success. Of course, few people who find society's norms inapplicable to their situation respond by turning to a life of crime.

Merton identifies four ways in which people adapt to anomie without becoming criminals: innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. These four strategies are illustrated in the Concept Summary on Merton's Modes of Adaptation.

In Merton's terms, *innovation* refers to people who accept society's goals but reject accepted institutional means, instead using illegitimate means to achieve their goals. Innovators include poor teenagers who steal flashy cars, students who cheat on tests, and athletes who use steroids to boost their performance. *Ritualism* refers to people who continue to use culturally approved means for achieving socially desired goals even though they have rejected—or at least given up on—those goals. A primary example of the ritualist is the worker who follows all bureaucratic procedures just to keep his or her job, not to get ahead. *Retreatism* refers to those who have given up on both society's goals and its accepted means. They are society's dropouts: the vagabonds, drifters, and street people. Like retreatism, *rebellion* also refers to those who abandon society's goals and means, but rebels additionally adopt alternative values. These are people like revolutionaries, Rastafarians, or the Rainbow Tribe who hope to create an alternative society.

Explaining Neighborhood Crime Rates: Collective Efficacy Theory

Whereas strain theory attempts to explain why some *individuals* are more likely to engage in crime than are others, collective efficacy theory attempts to explain why some *neighborhoods* have higher rates of crime than others (Sampson & Raudenbush 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley 2002). Collective efficacy theory is also a structural-functionalist theory because it,

too, assumes that crime or deviance occurs when the parts of a society no longer work together smoothly.

Collective efficacy refers to the extent to which individuals in a neighborhood share the expectation that neighbors will intervene and work together to maintain social order. If your neighbors believe it is important to work together to control neighborhood crime and delinquency and are likely to call the police when teenagers race cars down the block or scrawl graffiti on a wall, then you live in a neighborhood with high collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is most common in neighborhoods that experience few structural disadvantages: They have high rates of employment and home ownership, many residents whose work and incomes give them a sense of control over their lives, and police and municipal services that they can count on for help when needed. According to collective efficacy theory, crime is most likely in neighborhoods that suffer extreme structural disadvantage and, as a result, experience low collective efficacy. This theory has strong empirical support and is growing in influence.

Conflict Theory

Structural-functional theory suggests that deviance results from a lack of integration among the parts of a social structure (norms, goals, and resources); it is viewed as an abnormal state produced by extraordinary circumstances. Conflict theorists, however, see deviance as a natural and inevitable product of competition in a society in which groups have different access to scarce resources. They suggest that the ongoing processes of competition should be the real focus of deviance studies (Lemert 1981).

Conflict theory proposes that deviance results from competition and class conflict. Class conflict affects deviance in two ways (Reiman 2005): (1) Class interests determine how the criminal justice system defines and responds to crime, and (2) economic pressures can lead to crime, particularly property crime, among the poor.

Defining and Responding to Crime

Conflict theorists argue that the law is a weapon used by the ruling class to maintain the political and economic status quo (Arrigo 1998; Liska, Chamlin, & Reed 1985; Reiman 2005). Supporters of this position argue that the very definitions of crime sometimes reflect the interests of the wealthy. Corporations can kill or injure thousands when they sell cars, contact lenses, or other goods that they know are harmful. They can endanger workers when they cut corners on factory safety, and they endanger whole communities when they dump dangerous chemicals into the water or soil. They also can impoverish workers and investors through shady business practices, even while their executives earn multimillion-dollar salaries. Yet these actions are often defined by the courts as ordinary and necessary business practices rather than as crimes. Similarly, conflict theorists argue that the criminal justice system's response to behaviors labeled criminal also reflects the interests of the wealthy. Our system spends more money deterring muggers than embezzlers and more money arresting prostitutes than arresting their clients. Except in rare, high-profile cases, courts typically impose much more severe sentences for street crimes than for corporate crimes and impose much heavier sentences against those who use drugs favored by the poor (such as "crack" cocaine) than against those who use drugs favored by the more affluent (such as other forms of cocaine). Police are more likely to arrest those who assault members of the ruling class (well-off whites) than those who assault the powerless (nonwhites and the poor) (Reiman 2005). Finally, even when people from the upper and lower classes commit similar crimes, those from the lower class are more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced (Reiman 2005).

As this suggests, most conflict theorists reject structural functionalism's assumption that poor people are unusually likely to commit crimes. Instead, and as research suggests, most poorer people adjust their goals downward sufficiently so that they can meet their goals through respectable means (Simons & Gray 1989).

Meanwhile, many highly successful individuals adjust their goals so far upward that they cannot reach them by legitimate means. Recent court cases that reveal Microsoft's illegal attempts to gain a monopoly over Internet services and tobacco manufacturers' attempts to make cigarettes more addictive provide clear evidence that the means-versus-goals discrepancy is not limited to the lower class. Conflict theorists argue that it only appears that rich people commit fewer crimes because rich people control the state, schools, and courts, and so are often able to avoid criminal labels (Reiman 2005).

Lower-Class Crime

Although the preceding view of the way crime is defined would be accepted by all conflict theorists, some believe that individuals in the lower class really are more likely to commit criminal acts. One critical criminologist has declared that crime is a rational response for the lower class (Quinney 1980). These criminologists generally agree with Merton that a means/ends discrepancy is particularly acute among the poor and that it may lead to crime (Reiman 2005). They believe, however, that this is a natural condition of an unequal society.

Symbolic Interaction Theories

Symbolic interaction theories of deviance suggest that it is learned through interaction with others and involves the development of a deviant self-concept. Deviance is believed to result not from broad social structure but from specific face-to-face interactions. This argument takes three forms: *differential association theory*, *deterrence theory*, and *labeling theory*.

Differential Association Theory

Not surprisingly, researchers have found that those who have more delinquent friends are more likely to become delinquent themselves (Haynie & Osgood 2005).

Differential association theory, first proposed by Edwin Sutherland, explains this finding by arguing that people *learn* to be deviant through their associations with others. How does differential association encourage deviance? There are two primary mechanisms. First, if our interactions are mostly with deviants, we may develop a biased image of the generalized other. We may learn that, “of course, everybody steals” or, “of course, you should beat up anyone who insults you.” The norms we internalize may differ greatly from those of conventional society. Second, if we interact mostly within a deviant subculture, that subculture will reward us not for *following* conventional norms but for *violating* them. Through these mechanisms, we can learn that deviance is acceptable and rewarding.

Deterrence Theory

Differential association theory can only explain deviance that occurs in settings and groups that encourage it. Deterrence theory provides a broader explanation of deviance. This theory suggests that individuals will engage in deviance when they believe it will offer more rewards than will conformity *and* when they believe the potential risks and costs of deviance are low.

Deterrence theory combines elements of structural functional and symbolic interaction theories. Although they place the primary blame for deviance on an inadequate (dysfunctional) system of rewards and punishments, they also believe that individuals actively make a cost/benefit decision about whether to engage in deviance (McCarthy 2002; Paternoster 1989; Piliavin et al. 1986). When social structures do not provide adequate rewards for conformity, more people will choose deviance. For example, people who lack jobs or who have only dead-end jobs are more likely than others to believe they have little to lose and much to gain from crime or other forms of deviance, especially if they believe the risk of arrest is low (Crutchfield 1989; Devine, Sheley, & Smith 1988; McCarthy 2002). Conversely, those who have strong bonds with their parents, do well in school, feel a part of their school, and hold good jobs are more likely to avoid deviance because they feel they have too much to lose (Haynie & Osgood 2005).

Labeling Theory

A third theory of deviance, which combines symbolic interaction and conflict theories, is labeling theory. **Labeling theory** focuses on how and why the label *deviant* comes to be attached to specific people and behaviors. This theory takes to heart the maxim that deviance is relative. As the chief proponent of labeling theory puts it, “Deviant behavior is behavior that people so label” (Becker 1963, 90).

EXPLAINING INDIVIDUAL DEVIANCE The process through which a person becomes labeled as deviant depends on the reactions of others toward nonconforming behavior. The first time a child acts up in class, it may be owing to high spirits or a bad mood. This impulsive act is *primary deviance*. What happens in the future depends on how others interpret the act. If teachers, counselors, and other children label the child a troublemaker and if the child accepts this definition as part of her self-concept, then she may take on the role of a troublemaker. Continued rule violation because of a deviant self-concept is called *secondary deviance*. The major limitations of labeling theory are that (1) it doesn’t explain why primary deviance occurs, and (2) it cannot explain repeated deviance by those who haven’t been caught—that is, labeled. For this reason, it is less popular today as an explanation of why individuals become deviants.

EXPLAINING DEVIANCE LABELING Labeling theory is more useful as an explanation of how behaviors become labeled as deviant. Many labeling theorists take a conflict perspective in exploring this topic. They argue that groups sometimes try to label the behavior of other groups as deviant as a means of increasing their own power and status. Because groups try to “sell” their moral ideas about who should be labeled deviant, just as entrepreneurs sell their ideas for new businesses, sociologists refer to those who attempt to create new definitions of deviance as **moral entrepreneurs**. Typically, the more power a group has, the more successful it will be in branding others as deviant. This, labeling theorists allege, explains why lower-class deviance is more likely to be subject to criminal sanctions than is upper-class deviance. But groups can fight back against those who would label them deviant. For example, the Parents Television Council (PTC) is a nonprofit organization that campaigns against television shows that offend its conservative morality. One of its targets is the World Wrestling Federation, which PTC has lambasted for its violent and sexually explicit shows (Lowney 2003). The Federation responded in two ways. First, it attacked with humor by forming a wrestling team called the Right to Censor. This team pretended to preach the PTC’s moral values while brazenly cheating during fights. Second, it successfully sued the PTC for libel and slander. Through both these strategies, the Federation protected its public image and fended off the PTC’s efforts to label the Federation’s shows as deviant in the public’s eyes.

Activities :

1/Explain and translate those terms into Arabic: Social control /dysfunction/ anomie/ Conformists/ lower-class/ deviance/ ghetto/ internalize/ subculture

2/ has a student you may be exposed to fraud in exams, how would the 3 theories we encountered in the text analyze this phenomena?

3/why is there more crime in some neighborhood than in others?

4/ how does society control our behavior?

5/ how do you know the a behavior is normal or deviant?

6/Give an example of rebellious behavior