Sociology Shortcuts

D1. Functionalist Approaches

Functionalist approaches are based around an understanding of how societies solve what Durkheim (1895) called two problems of existence:

How to create order and maintain social stability in a situation where millions of unique individuals, each with their own particular self interests, must be persuaded to behave collectively.

The simple answer involves the notion of collective sentiments - shared beliefs about society and the development of behavioural rules designed to reinforce this collective consciousness.

However, the existence of behavioural rules, in the shape of formal and informal norms, presupposes some will break the rules: if they didn't, rules would be unnecessary.

For Durkheim, therefore, deviance was *normal* because it was functional: it contributed to social stability because when people acted together "*as a group or society*" against deviants this represented a social mechanism through which the collective conscience was both recognised and affirmed. Acting against deviants, for example:

▪ tells everyone where the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour lie.

▪ establishes and reinforces a sense of right and wrong behaviour, through the public condemnation of deviants in the media for example,

▪ promotes social integration and social solidarity. Popular alarm and outrage at criminal acts draws people closer together 'against a common enemy'.
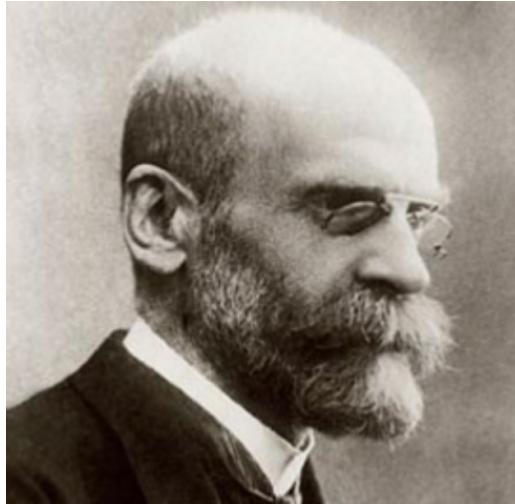
Deviance is also a mechanism for social change because it tests the boundaries of public tolerance and morality.

For Durkheim deviance was a social dynamic that forces people to assess and reassess the nature of social statics (such as written laws).

Laws criminalising homosexuality in the UK, for example, have gradually been abandoned in line with changing social attitudes.

Matza (1964)
This study of juvenile delinquency provides empirical support for Durkheim's basic argument when he suggests young people have little commitment to deviant (or "subterranean") values that threaten the moral consensus.

Matza found that, when caught, people employ techniques of neutralisation in an attempt to explain or justify their deviance.

They deny, for example:
▪ personal responsibility ("I was drunk...")
▪ injury ("no-one was hurt")
▪ victimisation ("they hit me first")

By seeking to justify / explain their deviance people are showing a commitment to the conventional moral values underpinning legal norms; if they did not recognise those values there would be little point trying to justify their guilt.

Strain Theory

While Durkheim saw a certain level of deviance as functional, he also argued 'too much crime' damaged the collective conscience by creating 'normative confusion' or anomie - and Merton (1938) developed this concept to explore how deviance was an *individual response* to problems at the *structural level* of society.

Strain theory is based on the idea *success* was an important cultural goal in modern societies - as Akers and Sellers (2004) put it: "*Everyone is socialised to aspire toward high achievement and success. Worth is judged by material and monetary success*" - and deviance occurs when individual cultural goals (such as the desire to be wealthy) could not be achieved using the approved structural means (such as paid work) provided by the social system.

If individuals are prevented from achieving "success" *legitimately* - because they failed in the education system for example - they experience anomie; *normative confusion* brought about by society demanding they be *successful* while simultaneously *denying* them the means to achieve that goal. How people react to this structural pressure (or strain) is summarised thus:

General Strain Theory

Although strain theory suggests people are *either* conformists *or* deviants, Clarke (1980) argues the reality is less clear-cut; even those heavily involved in criminal behaviour actually spend a large part of their time *conforming* to conventional social norms and values - a criticism addressed by Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory.

A conventional criticism of strain theory is that while it explains utilitarian crimes - those committed for economic gain - it is more difficult to apply to non-utilitarian crimes, such as hate crimes or violent assaults. Agnew, however, argues that while the *general principle* of strain causing specific *reactions* holds true, its *scope* should be broadened. In three ways:

1. The "failure to achieve positively valued goals", such as economic success, status / respect or autonomy (a sense of freedom and control). Strains occur in terms of disunities (an idea that mirrors Merton's "ends and means" argument) across three areas:

▪ Aspirations and Expectations: disparities between what we *want* and our ability to legitimately *achieve it*.

Response	Structural Means	Cultural Goals	Example
Conformity (law-abiding)	v	v	Shop worker
Innovation	x	v	Entrepreneur / thief
Ritualism	v	x	Office worker
Retreatism	x	x	Drug addict
Rebellion	Denies legitimacy of means and goals		Terrorist
v = accepts, x = rejects			

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One-Minute Strain: Click image to play

▪ Expectations and Achievements: when we *fail* to achieve the things we *expect* to achieve.

▪ Outcomes and Expectations: when we *think* we *deserve* something but are then *unfairly* denied it.

2. The "removal of positively valued stimuli". People may, for example, be tipped into deviance by a sense of *loss* - a sudden and unjustifiable removal of something important or desired from their life (such as bereavement, unemployment or educational failure).

The individual may use deviant means to regain what they feel they have lost or to take *revenge* on those they believe responsible (which may, if they blame themselves, include *suicide*).

This extends to larger social groups in that if the belief arises that *other groups* - class, gender, age, ethnic etc. - are treated *more favourably* than one's own by the judicial system, positive stimuli towards conformity is loosened. The perception there is "*one rule for them and one rule for us*" provides a powerful stimulation for deviance.

3. The "presentation of negatively valued stimuli". Where people are hit with negative stimuli (collectively - such as sexual or racial discrimination - or individually through things like parental divorce, sexual abuse, school bullying and so forth) their *response* may be a deviant one.

Finally, to explain *why people react differently to strain* Agnew argues individuals develop coping strategies that minimise, avoid or deflect stains:

▪ Cognitive involves things like accentuating the positives or accepting the negatives.

▪ Behavioural involves modifying or changing expectations about certain situations, such as what they want out of school or work.

▪ Emotional involves neutralising tensions through things like physical exercise or relaxation techniques.

Evaluation

Conventional criticisms of Functionalist explanations focus on their over-reliance on official statistics as "social facts" that capture the broad reality of crime in our society, rather than as social constructions that may tell us as more about the priorities and activities of control agencies such as the police, media and politicians than they do about offenders.

The focus on consensus as the basis for legal norms is also a problematic area since it fails to explain why *some forms of behaviour* and *some forms of offender* are more-likely than others to be criminalised.

Conflicts over who and what becomes seen as deviant are generally ignored or marginalised, as is the idea that some groups take for themselves the power to make and shape laws that reflect their own particular interests.

The activities of large, powerful, corporations, for example, are less likely to be defined as criminal (and even where they are, are less-likely to be rigorously and forcefully policed - unlike the behaviour of the poor and powerless).

Finally, while Functionalism can be criticised for over-determining crime and deviance as a simple response to "structural stimulation", General Strain Theory goes some way to avoiding this problem.

While deviance must be explained by how people *respond* to structural strains, there is room for individual moral choices explained in terms of how people *experience* different types of strain in different ways.

Functionalist Subcultures

A further dimension to Functionalist explanations involves subcultures, with two basic forms:

1. Reactive (or oppositional) subcultures involve group members developing norms and values as a response to, and opposition against, the prevailing norms and values of a wider culture. Cohen (1955), for example, argued young male delinquent subcultures developed out of status frustration / deprivation and Hargreaves (1967) showed how young lower class males react to being denied status in schools by forming groups that give them the status they desire through subcultures that consciously opposed school rules. In a contemporary application of this idea Gardner (1993) suggested the search for *respect* (from peers in particular) was a salient feature of gang membership for young working class males, such that "*any insult to even the trappings of gang identity is ground for battle*".

Taking a wider view, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) argued a different form of reactive subculture developed in terms of opportunity structures: Following Merton they noted the significance of legitimate opportunity structures (such as work) as a way of achieving success. However, these were paralleled by three types of 'illegitimate opportunity structure' that provided an 'alternative career structure' for deviants:

• Criminal subcultures developed in stable working-class communities with successful criminal role models (showing 'crime pays') and a career structure for aspiring criminals.

• Conflict subcultures: Without community support mechanisms, self-contained gang cultures developed by providing 'services', such as prostitution and drug dealing.

• Retreatist subcultures developed among those unable to join criminal or conflict subcultures (they failed in both legitimate and illegitimate job markets).

Members retreated into 'individualistic' subcultures based around drug abuse, alcoholism, vagrancy, and so forth.

2. Independent subcultures involve individuals holding norms and values that developed out of their experiences within a particular cultural setting. Subcultural development is an *independent* product of and solution to the problems faced by young working class males in their everyday lives. A classic example is provided by Miller (1958) in his analysis of gang development in the USA. He argues the focal concerns of lower-class subcultures (*acting tough, being prepared for 'trouble', a desire for fun and excitement*) bring these groups into *conflict* with the values of wider society, leading to their perception and labelling as deviant. In a British context, Parker (1974) observed a similar process in his study of Liverpool gang behaviour.

Evaluation

Costello (1997) suggests two crucial problems are left unanswered by Functionalist subcultural theories:

1. The assumption *similar behaviour patterns* are indicative of an organised group. Cohen (1972), for example, argues 'subcultural groups' reflect a labelling process by "outsiders" such as the media, which *imposes* a sense of organisation on behaviour that has little or no collective meaning for those involved.

2. Most "subcultural groups" lack cultural transmission mechanisms for socialising new members - which suggests it's mistaken to see them as particularly coherent social groups. Bennett (1999), for example, argues that "subculture" has become a 'catch-all' category applied indiscriminately to behaviours that are not subcultures in the sociological sense. He suggests the concept of neo-tribes - loose gatherings of like-minded individuals - has more relevance and meaning for the analysis of such behaviour, since it reflects a postmodern emphasis on the way cultural identities are "*constructed rather than given and fluid rather than fixed".*

While these criticisms can be applied generally to a lot of behaviour traditionally assumed to be subcultural in origin, some groups - such as highly-structured youth gangs in America - do seem to exhibit *strong subcultural features*.