

Introduction to Deviance

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We should condemn a little more and understand a little less. **John Major, Prime Minister, 1993**

Deviance may be considered as banned or controlled behaviour, which is likely to attract punishment or disapproval. **Downes and Rock, 1988**

Deviance is behaviour that violates the standards of conduct or expectations of a group or society. **Wickmann, 1991**

Defining Deviance is like trying to nail a jellyfish to the wall: it is so illusive and slippery that it is almost impossible to define. The view is very social constructionist and qualitative; deviance is socially constructed and must be interpreted.

Defining deviance is straightforward: actions that offend conventional norms are deviant.

Introduction

Deviance is an **often exciting and popular area of investigation** for sociology and sociologists. Deviance, and more significantly **that specific form of deviance**, or rule breaking **known as crime**, is not only a sociological problem; it is defined by some, especially ruling groups as a *social problem*. Whereas, some see **the purpose of sociology** is to **explain and describe human behaviour** in a detached manner – others often working in this topic area – wish to use **sociological insights to produce social policy** that limits the effects of crime and helps policy makers and decision makers to reduce or limit the account of so-called ‘undesirable activities’.

In 1993, Prime Minister, John Major had a view on deviance. (See above quote) . This has important implications for the **pursuit of a sociological understanding of crime and deviance**. Are sociologists **guilty of supporting the activities of deviants in society by not condemning their activities**, or must understanding come before society can genuinely attempt to solve or reduce social problems?

A great deal of sociology of deviance attempts to add to, evaluate and replace what we could call ‘common sense’ understandings of crime and deviance. In the pursuit of a sociological understanding of crime it is not enough to simply seek answers, although this is a good starting point. **Answers must be sought to specific questions**, and answers must take into account **both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of sociological analysis**. However, before we can discuss, analyse and evaluate some of these theoretical and empirical contributions made by sociologists and sociological thought to an understanding of crime and deviance, we must be clear in our use of the terms and of others central to this topic area.

What is Crime?

The category of crime is usually associated with behaviour which the **formal, written laws of a given society**. The punishment of **crime is likely to be more serious than the punishment of ‘deviance’** in general but obviously different crimes and different laws and treated in varying ways.

What is Deviance?

To deviate means, literally, to **move away or stray from, set standards in society**. Deviance, then is a much more **general category than crime**, and is used by sociologists to refer to **behaviour that, while being different, is often not controlled legally**.

It must be made clear, however, that to distinguish between **crime and deviance** like this is to a disservice to the **complexities of these concepts**. It is of more value to think of **deviance as a wide category**, of which crime is a smaller part. Thus **all crime is deviance, but not all deviance is crime**.

Introduction to Deviance

1. An Act can be Criminal and Deviant

Moreover, an act can be criminal and deviant i.e. Breaking both social and legal rules. For example, most people would agree that battering an old lady to death is both criminal and deviant and deserves punishment such as imprisonment. Other acts of killing may be more complex; what happens, for instance, if killing occurs in wartime? The 'killer', who in other contexts would be condemned as a murderer, might be applauded and called a 'heroine'.

2. When an Act can be deviant but not criminal

An act can be deviant but not criminal i.e. breaking social, but not legal, rules. Examples, of this include acts that are seen as deviant when they occur in a certain context, such as a male manager wearing a dress to the office or someone talking loudly in the middle of a concert. Close examination of such instances shows how delicately balanced our social order world can be. Minor transgressions of behaviour, which may be acceptable in our own private realm, become very different when occurring in public.

Defining Deviance

Exercise One

Picture a man living in a dark room with the curtain permanently drawn, spending his final years lying naked in an armchair watching old films on TV. He has few personal contacts as he has an intense fear of germs – to the extreme that he places tissue paper on the floor to step on as he walks. The man described is Howard Hughes, who has a multimillionaire American businessman.

In May 1982, Colonel 'H' Jones died a hero, leading his parachute regiment into the Falklands battle of Goose Green. He was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously, for his 'devastating display of courage'.

In his book, *Not Mentioned in Dispatches* **Spencer Fitzgibbon**, 1996 raises questions about the nature of Colonel Jones's heroic act. His fellow soldiers admitted that he was an impatient, impulsive man who had suddenly left his post and charged alone towards a heavily armed Argentinean position. The Argentinean soldier who had shot and killed him said he could not believe anyone would be so foolish to do such a thing.

How do we now see this person. A straightforward 'comic book' hero with outstanding courage and valour, or a deviant whom lost his life in a vain attempt against impossible odds? A closer examination of many of our historical heroes might cause us to make similar revisions of their actions. These two cases show the complexity of how we arrive at definitions of heroism and deviance.

1. Read the article and decide whether Howard Hughes behaviour falls into the category of deviance as defined.
2. Reflect on your first impressions of the description of the man, before you knew who was being described. Does this further information alter your view? Are terms like 'eccentric' or 'odd' now more appropriate than 'deviant'? If so why?
3. How does the case of Hughes compare with the definitions of deviance given in this handout?

Introduction to Deviance

1. When Acts can be criminal but not deviant

Acts can be **criminal but not deviant**. You **might think that all crimes are deviant**, but are this always the case? Take the example of **speeding, breaking the speed limit is a criminal offence**, but the **majority of drivers do it at some time or another**. The question **arises as to how others see it**. If someone is found guilty of a minor speeding offence and fined, **are they subject to social disapproval?** Similar examples include tax evasion and fiddling expenses.

Exercise Two

1. Give three examples of each of the three categories described above.
2. Write a short essay of around 500 words of why the relationship between crime and deviance is not straightforward.

Not all deviance is negative

To deviate from social standards, however, is not to say that the **deviant in question has performed a negative act** (as defined by the standards of a given society). Although crime is usually associated with a negative action, **it is perfectly possible for one to deviate in a positive action**. One could be held in high social regard, for example, for contributing outstanding and original sciences. Thus the modern day and much heralded physicist Stephen Hawking, could be seen as deviant; his book *A Brief History of Time* has become an outstanding popular best-seller even amongst non scientific book buying public, and its is certainly true that his knowledge of modern science deviates from the norm in society.

Norms

As the name suggests, **norms are the normal ways of behaving in society**. A norm refers specifically to a **given behavioural pattern**. This is **what we do in our everyday lives to behave normally**. As with the relationship between deviance and crime, **all laws are norms but not all norms are laws**. If one breaks, a norm one is considered deviant. Sanctions – or punishments- against one who breaks norms depends upon the severity of the norm and the public nature of the norm breaking action. Such sanctions can range from simple ‘disapproving stare’ to, on extreme occasions, social exclusion from a group.

The Social Construction of Deviance

Norms are the products of **social construction**. Behaviour can vary in **being normal or abnormal depending upon the situation the social actor is in**. Norms also vary across both **time and space** – they vary within a society historically, and between societies

Values

A value has a **special relationship to a norm**. **Values are the specific cultural goals towards which norms are directed**. Whereas a norm prescribes actual behaviour, a value justifies that behaviour. It is the reason why some actions are approved of more than others.

Introduction to Deviance

The Problem of a 'Sociology of Deviance'

The term sociology of deviance, is an overarching theme for the next few months, has its problems. Whereas some sociologists **investigate deviance in its everyday general sense**, others almost exclusively **study the specific form of deviance known as criminality**. In the literature, these two terms have also become associated closely with one another; so much so, that what is called the 'sociology of deviance' contains a vast array of different theories, terms and interests, as Downes and Rock comment...

The very title of the discipline, which we shall describe, the sociology of deviance, is a little misleading. A singular noun and a hint of science seem to promise a unified body of knowledge and an approved set of procedures for resolving the analytical difficulties. It suggests that the curious and troubled may secure sure answers to practical, political, moral and intellectual problems. In addition, of all branches of applied sociology, the demands placed on the sociology of deviance are probably the most urgent. Deviance is upsetting and perplexing and it confronts people in many settings. Turning to sociology, enquirers are rarely given certain advice.

They will not be offered one answer, but a series of competing and contradictory visions of the nature of people, deviation and the social order.

Downes and Rock, 1995

The academic study of crimes and criminality, why crime occurs, who commits crime and how crime can be reduced solved and eradicated, if at all, is known as criminology. Sociology and criminology exist in a special but problematic relationship to one another. Whereas, some would claim that criminology is a smaller part of sociology, others claim criminology is much wider, since it draws on a whole variety of disciplines – sociology being one.

Sources Used...

Investigating Crime and Deviance: Stephen Moore
Sociology in Perspective: Mark Kirby et al
Introductory Sociology: Mike O'Donnell, 4th Edition.
Sociology in Focus: Taylor et al
Sociology, Themes and Perspectives: Michael Haralambos.

Introduction to Deviance

Exercise Three

1. Why does the issue of crime interest you?
2. Name five criminals you admire, and a couple you do not.
3. Which of the following activities are deviant and which are criminal?
 - Living as a hermit
 - Alcoholism
 - Forcing your wife to have sex against her will.
 - Downloading porn off the Internet.
 - Stealing from a shop
 - Smoking pot in the privacy of your own home.
 - Cross Dressing
 - Not appointing a black candidate because you are racist.
 - A homosexual relationship between 17 year olds.
 - Cheating at cards
 - Chanting racist tunes at the Arsenal.
 - Having sex at 15 years of age.
 - Prostitution
 - Becoming an 'eco warrior'
 - Being rude to Friends.
 - Two-timing your boy or girl friend.
 - Attempting suicide.
 - Buying cigarettes when only 14.
 - Asking for paper from Mr. C, when you know you do not really need it.
 - Lesbianism

Exercise Four

Collect up to ten popular news stories featuring crime and deviance and summarise their dominant themes and concerns in the form of a table.

Exercise Five

Conduct a small survey asking people to define deviance. Ask them how much time they spend thinking/reading about crime.