

Deviance: Functionalist Explanations

The Functionalist Explanation of Crime/22/11/999/P.Covington/ 1999

At times, a package deal is presented in which functionalist, positivism, empiricism, evolutionism, and determinism are collectively linked with a 'consensus' approach to social problems and a conservative approach to their solution.

Downes and Rock, 1995

Being a peripheral and ad hoc modern day, functionalist criminology may be represented as a somewhat piecemeal accumulation of arguments. It is not integrated, organised or coherent, and it has not been the subject of long debate. Others may have criticised what it has done, but those who have been attacked have not usually turned round to amend, defend or clarify their work.

Downes and Rock, 1995

Introduction:

Sociologists' concern with the study of deviance, like many other ideas, issues and concepts, can be traced back to the thinking of **Emile Durkheim**. But perhaps now we should ask whether the **functionalist analysis is still of value to sociologists**.

Looking at the quote, in other words much Functionalist theory has been **found wanting** in its explanation of society in recent years. It has become a 'routine concept folly for students to demolish before moving on towards more rewarding ground', to use the words of **Downes and Rock**.

The Use of Functionalism

Yet despite this trend towards Functionalism bashing, its **role in history of sociological debate is firmly secured**. Equally its linkage with modern **liberal and conservative-**based approaches such as Neo-Functionalism and the New Right means that its history and heritage is **still of relevance to the contemporary sociology syllabus**.

Why it is Not That Useful...

Unlike other major theoretical perspectives such as Marxism, **no specific Functionalist criminology exists to speak of**, with its own individual interpretations of criminal statistics, the source of criminality and potential policy solutions.

Rather functionalism takes a **passing look at the issues of deviance in general**, rather than crime in particular, while in the process trying to explain whole social problems and patterns. The explanation of deviance is vital to this macro analysis but it does not contain the seeds of a 'break off' into the distinctive field of criminology in its own right.

Why it has not been ignored...

While functionalist criminology, especially in modern times, does not have a large, organised or particularly popular voice, this is not to say that within the work of Durkheim the concept of deviance **has been ignored**. Far from it. Equally, this is not to say that functionalist analyses have not informed and shaped the development of non-functionalist perspectives within criminology **since the idea of anomie** had a great influence on many **British and USA sub-cultural studies from the 1920's to the 1950's**.

It must be recognised that Durkheim's work as an individual does not represent the totality of functionalist belief and equally the totality of functionalist belief does not recognise necessarily all that Durkheim wrote.

Why This Concern with Deviance for Durkheim

Durkheim's major concern was with the **analysis of social order**; how **stability is created** and **how the collective will is maintained** in the face of individualism. These concerns were hardly surprising given the specific socio-cultural context within which Durkheim worked. During this work, 'Times were a changing and consequently so were the ways of seeing'. Thus, Durkheim's work was an attempt to engage with the problems of the era – so solutions could be made.

Important Writers

Emile Durkheim
Robert K Merton
Hirschi

Basic Ideas

- ✓ Deviance acts in a positive way to reinforce ideas of right and wrong in society
- ✓ Deviance provides work.

Rather than looking at the **individual**, A Functionalist analysis of deviance begins with **society** as a whole. It looks for the **source of deviance** in the nature of society rather than the biological explanations or psychological nature of the individual.

Basic Ideas....

Much of the Functionalist approach stems from the work of **Emile Durkheim**, as we have already found out from education he believes in societies being held together by **shared values**, and economic interdependence. There is always, according to Durkheim, the possibility of a collapse of society if its values are **not constantly reaffirmed** and passed on from one generation to another. Therefore, the **maintenance of values** is a crucial '**function**' of society. However, people do not always follow this collective conscience - they are naturally self-seeking and prefer to look after their own interests at the expense of others. **What stops them is the law and learning from the institutions** such as the education system the idea of collective conscience, **and primary socialisation** of the family. The law is the weaker of the two-socialisation agencies. Far stronger is the pervasive 'self control' that we all learn. However, in periods of great social strain or dramatic change, the power of the collective conscience is weakened. When Durkheim was writing for example, there was great fear that community life had been shattered by the growth of major cities and industrialisation. As the community collapsed under the weight of dramatic change brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation, so the collective conscience was weakened.

What Happens if the Collective Conscience Fails

The result according to Durkheim, was the development of a state he called **anomie**. In essence, this means that people **regard as unimportant the social expectations** to respect the rights and the needs of others and prefer to look after their own interests even at their neighbours expense. They return to their natural state of greed and self-interest. For society this heralds the long term collapse of order and harmony. **Anomie, then, is dangerous and harmful to all.**

The Ways in Which Society can Reaffirm their Values and Ensure Social Cohesion

There are a number of ways in which societies reaffirm their values and ensure continuing social cohesion. The most obvious ways include....

- ✓ **Education:** the teaching of a common language, history, social studies etc.
- ✓ **Religion:** through the process of collective worship of a common God.

At first sight it seems strange that some functionalists should argue that **deviance is a necessary part of all societies**, and that it performs positive functions for the social system. After all deviance break the norms and values of society. With the functionalists emphasis on the importance of shared norms and values as the basis of social order it would appear that deviance is a threat to social order, and therefore should be seen as a threat to society. All functionalists agree those social control mechanisms such as the police and the courts

Other important writers who take a Functionalist perspective include, **Merton**, who further developed **Strain Theory**, and **Hirshi**.

Emile Durkheim *The Rules of Sociological Method*

Durkheim developed this argument with his discussion of crime in ***The Rules of Sociological Method***. He argued that crime is an **inevitable** and **normal aspect of social life**. *A limited amount of crime* is **necessary** and **beneficial to society**, so much so that society could not exist without **some form of deviance**. It is **inevitable** because **not every member of society** can be **equally committed** to the **collective sentiments** (the shared values and moral beliefs of society). Since individuals are exposed to different influences and circumstances, and it is 'impossible for all to be alike', therefore, not everyone is equally reluctant to break the law.

Durkheim imagines a '**society of saints**' populated by perfect individuals. In such a society there might be no murder or robbery, but there would still be deviance. The general standards of behaviour would be **so high** that the slightest slip would be regarded as a **serious offence**. Thus the individual who simply showed bad taste, or was merely impolite, would attract strong disapproval.

Functions and Dysfunction of Crime

According to Durkheim, there are two crucial elements in understanding crime, which at first sight appear to be slightly contradictory. A limited amount of **crime is necessary** and beneficial to society, so much so that society could not exist without some form of deviance. On the other hand, **too much crime** is bad for society and can help bring about its collapse.

Thus Durkheim is suggesting that crime is not only inevitable **but also functional**. It only becomes **dysfunctional** when its **rate** is unusually **high or low**. He argues that all social change begins with some form of deviance. In order for changes to occur, yesterday's deviance must become today's normality. Since a certain amount of change is healthy for society, so is deviance. If the collective sentiments are too strong there will be little deviance, but neither will there be any change, or any progress. The collective sentiments must have, therefore, only 'moderate energy' so they do not crush individuality; both the originality of the criminal, and the originality of the genius.

To make progress individual originality must be able to express itself. In order that the originality of the idealist who dreams transcend this century may find expression it is necessary that the originality of the criminal, who is below the level of his time, shall also be possible. One does not occur without the other.

Durkheim

Thus the collective sentiments must be too powerful to block expression of people like Jesus, Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa.

Durkheim regarded some crime as 'an anticipation of the morality of the future'. In this way, terrorists or freedom fighters may represent the future established order.

Hirschi

He asked why don't people commit crime. He argues that criminal activity occurs when the individual attachment to society is weakened.

Attachment:

Concerns the extent to which we care about other people's opinions and wishes. For example, psychopaths are characterised by lack of concern for the welfare or views of other people.

Commitment:

Refers to the personal investments that each of us makes in our lives. The person with less to lose is the one more likely to turn to crime.

Involvement:

Describes a person's level of activity or business interests. A person who is extremely busy with a wide range of legitimate activities may be too preoccupied to engage in deviancy.

Belief: refers to a person's conviction that they should obey the rules of society.

Exercise One

Students are to make prompt cards about key Functionalist ideas which will be pinned up on the wall after lamination.

Exercise Two

Complete the following sentences by picking the correct words jumbled up below...

1. Deviance in all societies is However, Durkheim stressed that although certain types of deviance may occur normally in a given society, levels can reach abnormal proportions.
2. Durkheim also believed that occasionally deviant behaviour can be functional by contributing to
3. He used the concept of to explain how societies undergoing rapid social change can experience confusion over right and wrong behaviour. This sort of analysis can be applied to modern affluent societies undergoing rapid change where there is a confusion over common values. The successful businessperson might be admired until it is discovered that his/her dealings are fraudulent. How do we react to this? Does success in business excuse fraudulent behaviour as a legitimate means or end? Or do we see all fraud as wrong and worthy of punishment?
4. Durkheim argued that deviance can be to society providing it does not reach excessive proportions.
5. Deviance contributes to the 'normal evolution of law and morality by stimulating social and thus causing normally acceptable behaviour to be affirmed.
6. Moreover, for Durkheim a small amount of deviance can have a reinforcing function in bonding society together against a
7. For Durkheim crime is behaviour that contradicts the of the group.

1. universal
2. unilateral
3. Disapproval
4. Common enemy
5. Morality and Law
6. Collective sentiments.
7. Anomie
8. Functional
9. Uncommon enemy
10. Atomic
11. Dysfunctional
12. Approval

The Positive Functions of Deviance

Durkheim held that a society consisted of common expectations regarding behaviour, based upon shared values and beliefs. We all agree what is right and wrong, and act accordingly. However, the boundaries of what is acceptable behaviour need to be defined and made known to all. This is the role of criminal law.

1. Marking The Extremities of Acceptable Behaviour

First the law unambiguously marks the extremities of acceptable behaviour. Each time the Police arrest a person, they are making it clear to the rest of society that, the particular action concerned is unacceptable.

2. The Publicity Function

Second the boundaries must be made known to everyone in society, so some form of publicity and drama needs to be generated. **Erikson** (1966) has pointed out for example, the dramatic setting of the courtroom where the lawyers and judges dress in special clothes, and where there is a ceremony, which condemns a person's actions in a public arena. In contemporary society newspapers also help to perform the publicity function, with their often-lurid accounts of criminal acts. In effect, the courts and the media are 'broadcasting' the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, warning others not to breach the walls of the law (and therefore society)

3. It helps to Reflect the Wishes of the Population and Legitimises Social Change

A further action performed by the criminals is to provide a constant test of the boundaries of permitted action. For example, every time a person is prosecuted for a crime attention is drawn to the commission of that act. People can also express their feelings about this - in most cases they simply and unquestioning accept the illegality and evil nature of the act, but sometimes they may feel sympathy for the criminal. When the law is clearly out of step with the feelings and values of the majority, legal reform is necessary. Criminals therefore, perform a crucial service in helping the law to reflect the wishes of the population and legitimising social change.

4. Bonds are Strengthened

Another element is the 'boundary testing' function. When feelings of mutual horror or fear, so the bonds between them are strengthened.

5. Deviance Provides a Safety Valve

Deviance can also be a safety valve, providing a relatively harmless expression of discontent. In this way social order is protected. For example, Cohen suggests that 'prostitution performs such a safety value function, without threatening the institution of the family' It can provide a release from the stress and pressure of the family life without undermining family stability, since relationships with prostitutes and their clients usually involves strong emotional attachments.

6. Acts as A Warning Device to Indicate that an Aspect of Society is Malfunctioning

Cohen also suggests that certain deviant acts are useful warning device to indicate that an aspect of society is malfunctioning. This may draw attention to the problem and lead to measures to solve it. Thus truants from school, deserters from the army or runaways from Borstals may 'reveal unsuspected causes of discontent, and lead to changes that enhance efficiency and morale'

Exercise Three

Link the following with one of the positive functions of deviance, above....For each state whether they involve **social regulation** (that is, they tell people how to behave) or **social integration** (that is, they help people feel that they have things in common and belong to a particular group or society).

1. Smoking Pot
2. Prostitution
3. Riots
4. Paedophilia
5. Public Hanging
6. Drunkenness
7. Fred West Murder Case
8. Derek Bentley Case
9. Joyriding
10. Nelson Mandella's ANC planting bombs in Johannesburg

The Contribution of Durkheim

His writing represented a major breakthrough in the understanding of deviance. Most late 19th Century writers on crime were trying to find out what was wrong with criminals and deviants. Durkheim argued that crime and deviance are not created by a small number of sick individuals, nor is it in any way unnatural, rather they are an integral part of society which performs an absolutely crucial function.

Criticisms of Durkheim

- ✗ He does not explain why certain people are more likely to commit crimes than others. He appears not concerned with this problem, he was most interested in the nature of the relationship between deviance and order in society. However, if questioned on individual motivations of criminals, he would probably have invoked their lack of socialisation.
- ✗ He stresses harmony of society and the belief that the law reflects the interests and views of the majority of the population. He seems to ignore the concept of power. It is generally accepted that in all societies some groups have greater ability than the bulk of the population to influence the law making process.

Exercise Four

Looks at the following sentences are they strengths or weaknesses of Durkheim's work...

1. Durkheim suggests that there is a purpose to the existence of all social phenomena, the necessary purpose of deviance being to bond the social group. This is difficult to imagine because it treats society as a living thing, an object which forces individuals to follow, like sheep or robots, the wider social pattern
2. His influence on sociology has been immense and even those who disagree with him have generally fallen into dialogue with his views.
3. He does not explain why certain people are more likely to commit crimes than others.
4. It is difficult to test the theory of crime. It seems to be a 'have your cake and eat it theory', where crime may invalidate the functionalist claims of social stability, but it seen to 'really' function to create such stability by showing people how not to behave. Thus functionalists are able to 'prove' stability in life, even where conflict is shown to exist
5. He seems to ignore the concept of power. It is generally accepted that in all societies some groups have greater ability than the bulk of the population to influence the law making process.
6. Functionalism fails to provide an answer to the question 'Functional for whom?'
7. Durkheim's work was perhaps the first to analyse deviance in terms of a broad sociological theory.

Resources Used

Heavily Used

Sociology Themes and Perspectives: Michael Haralambos, 4th Edition
Investigating Crime and Deviance: Stephen Moore, Second Edition, and Sociology in Action Series.
Sociology in Focus: Taylor et al
Sociology for A level A Skills Based Approach: Tony Lawson.
Introduction to Sociology: Mike O'Donnell, 4th Edition.
Sociology an Interactive Approach: Nik Jorgensen.
Sociology in Perspective: Mark Kirby et al

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