



# DEVIANCE AND SOCIETY

Subtitle



# Deviance: What Is...?

Common sense suggests that some things are simply “right” and some things are simply “wrong.” We also tend to think or hope that most of us know the difference. But, as you’ll see in this module, the line between “good” and “bad” is largely constructed by society.

- **Deviance**

- Refers to the recognized violation of cultural norms (e.g. standing in an elevator facing backward, sitting right next to someone in an almost empty theater, speaking with your mouth full of food...)
- Norms guide almost all human activities, so the concept of deviance is quite broad. Note that deviance doesn’t need to be “bad” or “wrong.” Sometimes we define especially righteous people (think how sometimes we label some people as “goody two shoes” in a negative way) as deviant.

- **Crime**

- Refers to violation of a society's formally enacted criminal law. Note that a crime is a violation of a norm (and thus deviant), but not all deviant actions are crimes (this is because not all norms are written into law; most norms are unwritten or even unspoken).
- Even criminal deviance spans a wide range, from minor traffic violations, to stealing, to DUI.

# Social Control

Although some people pride themselves on being nonconformists, we generally follow the norms, and it's in our interest if everyone conforms. Just think about what would happen, for example, if there are no traffic rules--our roads would be chaotic because you wouldn't know how to act or what to expect from others. Crossing the road would be akin to taking a leap of faith. Therefore, we often experience social control to make sure our actions align with our social norms.

- **Social control**-attempts by society to regulate people's thoughts and behaviors. There are two main types of social control.
  - **Informal social control**
    - Parents scolding their children for doing something wrong, teachers calling you out for using a cell phone in class, peers making fun of our choice of music or style of clothing...
  - **Formal social control**- Cases of serious deviance may involve the criminal justice system. A formal response by police, courts, and prison officials to alleged violations of the law

# Explanations for Deviance

A century ago, most people assumed, incorrectly that human behavior was the result of biological instincts. Therefore, early interest in criminality focused on biological causes.

- For example, in the late 1800s Italian physician, Cesare Lombroso ,theorized that criminals have a distinct physical appearance with low foreheads, hairy bodies, prominent jaws and cheekbones, and unusually long arms.
- **Critiques of biological explanations:**
  - They offer a limited explanation of crime (focusing mainly on the individual rather than society)
  - Biological explanations offer no insight into how some behaviors come to be defined as deviant in the first place.
- Today most social scientists agree that social factors, such as abuse early in life and poverty, are stronger predictors of crime than biology.

# Explanations for Deviance

- It's also important to note the danger of biological explanations of crime because, in theory, if you can easily identify a criminal by their physical appearance (i.e. hairy bodies) then you would not have to wait for them to commit a crime before locking them up. Their physical appearance would be the evidence of their guilt and no trial would be necessary. This of course violates our fundamental cultural belief that one is innocent until proven guilty.
- Think also about how biological explanations can lead to highly problematic practices such as racial profiling, ethnic cleansing, or even genocide.
- Therefore, sociologists tend to be wary of biological explanations of deviance.

# Explanations for Deviance

- Psychological explanations of deviance focus on abnormality in the individual personality. Most psychologists think that personality is shaped primarily by social experience. Deviance then is viewed as the result of unsuccessful socialization.
- Some psychologists attribute staying out of trouble to a personality that contains (limits) deviant impulses.
- **Critiques of psychological explanations:**
  - There are some crimes that can be explained by personality factors. Nonetheless, while some criminals are psychopaths who do not feel shame or guilt, most serious crimes are committed by people whose psychological profiles are normal.
  - Psychological explanations have limited value in explaining deviance or wrongdoing related to the organization of society.

# Social Foundations of Deviance

- The sociological perspective tells us that how a society defines deviance, who is branded as deviant, and what people decide to do about deviance all have to do with the way society is organized. **Here are the three social foundations of deviance.**
- **Deviance varies according to cultural norms.**
  - No thought or action is inherently deviant; it becomes deviant only in relation to particular norms. For example, if a sex worker travels from a certain part of Nevada where prostitution is legal to California where prostitution is illegal, and she continues her work in CA, she would go from “normal” to “deviant.” This change is not a result of changes in her biology or personality on the way from Nevada to CA. The change in her status is due to the change in the society/state that she is in.

**Here’s a fun task (optional):**

Find at least one bizarre law in a U.S. city. Would you consider a person who violates this law as deviant/criminal?

# Social Foundations of Deviance

- **People become deviant as others define them that way.**
  - Everyone violates cultural norms at one time or another. Have you ever walked around talking to yourself or “borrowed” a pen from your workplace? Have you ever jay walked? Whether such behavior defines us as mentally ill or criminal depends on how others perceive, define, and respond to it.
- **Both norms and the way people define rule-breaking involve social power.**
  - The law, according to Karl Marx, is the means by which powerful people protect their interests. A homeless person who stands on a street corner speaking out against the gov’t risks arrest for disturbing the peace; a mayoral candidate during an election campaign who does exactly the same thing gets police protection. In short, norms and how we apply them reflect social inequality.
  - Or, think about why it is that street-corner gambling is usually against the law but playing the same games in a fancy casino is not?

# The Functions of Deviance: Durkheim's Insight

According to Emile Durkheim, deviance exists because it is a necessary element of social organization. In fact, he pointed out that **deviance serves four important functions**.

- **Deviance affirms cultural values and norms**- people all over the world prefer some attitudes and behaviors to others. But any definition of virtue rests on an opposing idea of vice: There can be no good without evil and no justice without crime. Deviance is needed to define and support morality.
- **Responding to deviance clarifies moral boundaries**- by defining some individuals as deviant, people draw a boundary between right and wrong. For example, a college marks the line between academic honesty and cheating by disciplining students who cheat on exams.

# The Functions of Deviance: Durkheim's Insight

- **Responding to deviance brings people together** - People typically react to serious deviance with shared outrage. In doing so, they reaffirm the moral ties that bind them. For example in 2014, NYC police used a chokehold while arresting Eric Garner for a minor crime causing his death. In the days that followed, people across the country joined together in demonstrations against police using deadly force against unarmed African Americans.
- **Deviance encourages social change**- Deviant people push a society's moral boundaries, suggesting alternatives to the status quo and encouraging change. Today's deviance, can become tomorrow's morality. Can you think of any actions that were deviant when your parents were growing up that are now considered normal?

# Labeling Deviance

- **Labeling theory**-tells us that deviance and conformity result not so much from what people do but as from how others respond to those actions.
  - Labeling theory stresses the relativity of deviance, meaning that people may define the same behavior in any number of ways
  - Consider the following scenarios:
    - A college student takes a sweater off the back of a classmate's chair. Does this make him deviant? (Well, it depends how we interpret this action. We could interpret it in various ways as carelessness, borrowing, or stealing.)
    - A city mayor gives a big contract to a major campaign contributor. Does this make her deviant? (Well, we might see her as deviant if we interpret this as paying off a political debt. Or we might label her action as acceptable if we interpret it as choosing the best contractor).

# Labeling Theory: What Is...?

- **Primary deviance**-Norm violations that most people take part in with little harm to self-concept.
  - Examples are skipping school, rolling over a stop sign...norm violations that provoke only a slight reaction from others and have little effect on a person's self concept (chances are your beau won't leave you because they can't be with a person who rolls over a stop sign as opposed to stopping, and you probably don't think of yourself as deviant if you engage in minor norm violations such as "borrowing" a pen without ever returning it).
- **Secondary deviance**- But what happens when people "make something" of another's deviant behavior? Well, that person may begin to change, taking on a deviant identity by talking, acting, or dressing in a different way, rejecting the people who are critical, and repeatedly breaking the rules. This change of self concept is secondary deviance.
  - **Stigma**- As people develop a deeper commitment to deviant behavior, they typically acquire a stigma: a powerful negative label that greatly changes a person's self-concept/identity and social identity.
  - You can see here that in primary deviance, an individual is seen as engaging in deviant behavior. But, with secondary deviance, our perception changes and we start to see a person as a deviant person (the deviance is now part of their identity).

# Labeling Deviance: What Is...?

Once someone acquires a stigma, people around them may engage in retrospective and projective labeling.

- **Retrospective labeling**- Reinterprets someone's past in light of present deviance. For example, after discovering that a priest has sexually molested a child, others rethink his past, thinking “he always did want to be around young children.”
  - Retrospective labeling which distorts a person’s biography by being highly selective, typically deepens a deviant identity (afterall, we don’t know if this is something the priest has always done or if it was a one time incident.)
- **Projective labeling**- Predicts future deviant behavior based on present deviance. Regarding the hypothetical priest, people might say, “he’s going to keep at it until he gets caught.” (Of course we don’t know if that will be the case, we don’t have a crystal ball).
- While retrospective and projective labeling might be inaccurate, what they do is deepen someone’s deviant identity, claiming that this person has always been and always will be a deviant person.

# Labeling Deviance: What Is...

- Too often we label difference (or behavior that annoys us) as deviance or even as a mental illness (or “cray cray”). While mental illness certainly exists, we have to remember that the world is full of people who think or act differently, but such differences are not grounds for defining someone as mentally ill or deviant.
- However, mental illnesses are like physical illnesses; they are medical conditions, not deviance. Only people with the medical/psychological knowledge can diagnose mental illnesses.
- We also have to be careful throwing around words such as “crazy” because there are real social and legal consequences to being considered mentally ill (there is stigma; also one’s freedom could be limited, for example the courts assigning someone to make decisions for them)

# Medicalization of Deviance

- **Medicalization of deviance**- a shift in the way our society understands deviance, which has transformed some actions that used to be considered moral and legal deviance into a medical condition (sometimes a mental illness).
- For example, in the mid 1900s, people viewed alcoholics as morally weak people easily tempted by the pleasure of drink. Gradually, medical specialists redefined alcoholism so that now most people consider it a disease.
- When deviance is seen in moral terms, we evaluate people or their behavior as “bad” or “good.” When deviance is seen in medical terms we pass no moral judgment, we instead use medical diagnoses: “sick” or “well”

# Medicalization of Deviance

Whether medicalization of deviance is positive (young boys with ADD/Attention Deficit Disorder are not brats, they have a medical condition that needs treatment) or negative (claims regarding mental illness are sometimes used to let people off the hook -- you might want to look up the *twinkie defense*) it has **three main consequences**. It affects:

- **who responds to deviance**-an offense against morality usually brings about a reaction from the community or the police. A medical label, however, places the situation under the control of medical specialists or therapists.
- **how we respond to deviance**- a moral approach defines deviants as offenders subject to punishment. Medically, however, they are patients who need treatment. Whereas punishment is designed to fit the crime, treatment programs are tailored to the patient's needs.
- **how we view the competency of the deviant person**- Morally, whether we are right or wrong, we are responsible for our behavior. Medically, however, we seen as unable to control or sometimes even understand our actions. People who are labeled incompetent, therefore, are in turn subjected to treatment often against their will. For this reason, attempts to define deviance in medical terms should be done with extreme caution.