

Conflict Theories

Explain how critical theories approach the topic of deviance.

Interpretive theories give insight into the processes by which we come to understand deviance—behaviours, other people, and ourselves. Interpretive theories explain how it is that the varying points of view which characterize the deviance dance emerge. What they are not able to explain is why some behaviours are more likely than others to be understood as deviant, and why the understandings of some groups of people are in a position to steer the direction of the deviance dance in the larger society (Bereska, 2018). Critical theories focus on precisely these issues. They explain how perceptions of and reactions to deviance are intertwined with the structure of power in society. With an **emancipatory foundation**, they seek to raise people's awareness of that structure so that society can work toward dismantling that structure's influence. Four types of critical theories are addressed in this module (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Critical theories.

Conflict theories draw attention to the tension that exists between the powerful and the powerless. **Power-reflexive theories** give insight into the ways that power influences what is understood as "legitimate" knowledge. **Feminist theories** emphasize the importance of recognizing differences in the experiences of females and males in society. **Postmodern theories** question the very possibility of any cohesive

form of knowledge. Each of these theories is described in more detail below.

Conflict Theories: The Powerful versus the Powerless

Conflict theories draw attention to the tension that exists between powerful and powerless groups as each pursues society's scarce resources. Various conflict theories share three core assumptions (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Core assumptions of conflict theories.

Different conflict theories describe the source of power in society in varying ways. You will learn more about those differences, as well as the processes by which the powerful exert their power, in the assigned reading.

The website of the Marxist-Leninist Party of Canada (<http://www.cpcml.ca/>) reflects the view of one of the founders of conflict theory, Karl Marx (1818–1883). Marx argued that the structure of power in society was based on relations between the **bourgeoisie** (the business owners) and the **proletariat** (the workers). The bourgeoisie have a vested interest in maintaining the oppression of the proletariat; it enables the bourgeoisie

to preserve their control of society's resources, and it also provides a passive workforce.

Take some time to look at the "Political Program" of the Marxist-Leninist Party of Canada. What are some of the means they propose for emancipating the proletariat? Type your answer in the box below and click the "Show Answer" button below to see some other examples.

Power-Reflexive Theories: Knowledge is Power

Power reflexive theories argue that what we come to perceive as being legitimate knowledge, or the "truth," is determined by where a particular claim to knowledge comes from in the structure of power in society. There are multiple **discourses** (that is, bodies of knowledge) that co-exist regarding any specific social phenomenon—much in the same way that you learned (in Module 1) that there are many different moral codes in society. The discourses that emerge from locations of power are more likely to be perceived as "legitimate" or "true." Michel Foucault (1926–1984) refers to those discourses as being **elite discourses**; they come to be perceived as the only rational or logical way of thinking about a given phenomenon (Foucault, 1980). In a later module, we will

see that in contemporary society, the claims that are made by scientists hold this type of power. Elite discourses are reinforced in so many ways in a modern, bureaucratic society, that most people internalize them. Subsequently, people monitor and control their own behaviours on the basis of those discourses (Foucault, 1995). You will learn more about this process, as a **panoptical society**, in the assigned reading.

Feminist Theories: Deviance is Gendered

Feminist theories are tremendously diverse. While some focus on women's experiences exclusively, others emphasize the ways that both men and women are negatively impacted in a patriarchal society (Nelson, 2010). Furthermore, feminist theorizing is done within many of the other theories you have already learned about (such as symbolic interactionism or conflict theories). In the context of deviance and normality, feminist theories draw our attention to the ways that what is considered "deviant" and "normal" varies for females and males in society (Bereska, 2018). For instance, a girl wearing a t-shirt and jeans is likely to be considered normal, while a boy wearing a dress is likely to be deviantized and subjected to social control measures, such as teasing and bullying. As you progress through the remaining modules in the course, you will

frequently see issues of gender being addressed in the context of specific topics (sexuality, for example).

Postmodern Theories: Deviance and Normality are Fragmented

There is some disagreement about what constitutes “postmodern” theories. Some scholars include power-reflexive theories in this category, while others do not. While the critical theories we have addressed so far work to dismantle the structure of power that creates various forms of social inequality, postmodern theories seek to dismantle the notion that any cohesive “truth” is possible.

Because of a variety of social changes that have occurred since the end of the Second World War (which you will learn about in the assigned reading), people are—in our postmodern society—bombarded by so many constantly-changing images and ideas that it becomes impossible to develop any type of cohesive knowledge or identity. This means that any dominant moral codes that can be used to judge “deviance” and “normality” are being eroded (Bereska, 2018).

Table 2. *Critical Theories: Power Relations and Social Justice*

Theory	Emphasis
Conflict Theories	Standards for deviance and normality are created by the powerful to serve their own vested interests
Power Reflexive Theories	Knowledge that emerges from locations of power is perceived as "legitimate" and then used to judge deviance and normality
Feminist Theories	What is considered to be deviant and normal varies for females and males
Postmodern Theories	Any dominant moral codes that can be used to judge deviance and normality are being eroded in a postmodern society