

Sociology of Deviance Emerging Concepts and Theories

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ABSTRACT

In each and every society, norms are prescribed standards which guide and regulate the behaviour of its people. They are accepted by the group and shared by group members. For this reason, it is only with reference to norms that we can speak of, or define deviance. Human society permits certain variations in the behaviour demanded by the norms. Essentially these variations are well defined by the cultural norms of the society concerned. When we speak of deviance we are essentially referring to norms violations, or to that behaviour which departs from some norms or standard of behaviour. **Attempt has been made in this study to explore the issue of sociology of deviance. The term psychopathy, sociopathy and social pathology has been described critically in the study. At the end theoretical perspective on sociology of deviance has been described elaborately and comprehensively.**

Key words:- Deviance, Psychopathy ,sociopathy , Social Pathology.

INTRODUCTION

Deviance is any behaviour that violates social norms, and is usually of sufficient severity to warrant disapproval from the majority of society. Deviance is a behaviour, which members of a group or society see as violating their norms. Definition of deviance varies according to groups. Whether an action or behaviour is considered deviant depends on time, place and social situations (Henslin and Nelson, 1995).

Deviant behaviour is any behaviour that is contrary to the dominant norms of society. Deviance can be criminal or non-criminal. Alcoholism, excessive gambling, being nude in public places, playing with fire, stealing, lying, refusing to bathe, purchasing the services of prostitutes, and cross-dressing etc are deviance. People who engage in deviant behaviour are referred to as deviants. The concept of deviance is complex because norms vary considerably across groups, times, and places. In other words, what one group may

consider acceptable, another may consider deviant. Scientists have offered a variety of theories to explain deviance. Biological theories tend to focus on hereditary, anatomical or physiological factors. Psychological explanations tend to discuss personality, motives, aggression, frustration, and other objective factors. Sociological theories attempt to explain deviance by looking at the socio-cultural context of deviance.

SOCIOLOGY OF DEVIANCE

Deviance simply means to go astray. In sociology, social deviance or deviance means those behaviours or characteristics that violate significant social norms and expectations and are negatively valued by a large number of people (Jenson, 2006). According to sociologist William Graham Sumner, **deviance** is a violation of established contextual, cultural, or social norms, whether folkways, mores, or codified law (1906). **Folkways** are norms based on everyday cultural customs concerning practical matters like how to hold a fork, what type of clothes are appropriate for different situations, or how to greet someone politely. **Mores** are more serious moral injunctions or taboos that are broadly recognized in a society, like the incest taboo. Codified **laws** are norms that are specified in explicit codes and enforced by government bodies. A **crime** is therefore an act of deviance that breaks not only a norm, but a law. Deviance can be as minor as picking one's nose in public or as major as committing murder.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL PATHOLOGY

Social scientists usually talk about social pathologies or social problems. Social pathologies have existed as long as humans began living in groups. In other words, they are as antique as humans themselves. The term social pathology generally refers to the pathos of society, i.e., the "social diseases" that affect society. However, a more explanatory term is social problems. Social problems are those diseased conditions of society that affect its normal functioning. A problem that is limited only to the level of an individual person or to only a few groups may not be regarded as a social problem. A social pathology affects society, or its institutions and organizations at large

Salient features for social pathology are such social evils as reification, alienation, invisibilization, ideological social practices (including ideological recognition), distributive injustice, social inequality, economic exploitation and rationality deficits Laitinen & Sarkela (2019).

THE ISSUE OF PSYCHOPATHY AND SOCIOPATHY

Psychopathy and *sociopathy* both refer to personality disorders that involve anti-social behaviour, diminished empathy, and lack of inhibitions. The American Psychological Association (APA) [define](#) psychopathy as "a synonym for antisocial personality disorder." According to Hare (1999) the term

psychopathy is often used to emphasize that the source of the disorder is internal, based on psychological, biological, or genetic factors, whereas **sociopathy** is used to emphasize predominant social factors in the disorder: the social or familial sources of its development and the inability to be social or abide by societal.

Psychopathy is a term that was created by Hervey Cleckley in 1941. This word was initially used to discuss individuals that possessed artificial charisma and intellect, and that were non-empathetic, deceitful in nature, careless, incapable of guilt or real concern for people, and fearless (Larsen & Buss, 2010).

David Lykken (1995) uses the phrase *sociopath* when he is discussing people with antisocial personality disorders that demonstrate negative behaviours that are caused by unhealthy social or family-related experiences. He uses the phrase *psychopath* when he is talking about humans that express socially undesirable behaviours that are likely a result of a physiological anomaly and not because of their socialization.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIOLOGY OF DEVIANCE

Social scientists have developed many theories attempting to explain what deviance and crime mean to society. Sociological theories of deviance are those that use social context and social pressures to explain deviance. These theories can be grouped according to the three major sociological paradigms: functionalism, Structural Functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and conflict theory.

Functionalism perspective on Sociology of Deviance

Sociologists who follow the functionalist approach are concerned with how the different elements of a society contribute to the whole. They view deviance as a key component of a functioning society. Social disorganization theory, strain theory, and **cultural deviance** theory represent three functionalist perspectives on deviance in society.

Émile Durkheim: The Essential Nature of Deviance

Émile Durkheim believed that deviance is a necessary part of a successful society. One way deviance is functional, he argued, is that it challenges people's present views (1893). For instance, when black students across the United States participated in sit-ins during the civil rights movement, they challenged society's notions of segregation. Moreover, Durkheim noted, when deviance is punished, it reaffirms currently held social norms, which also contributes to society (1893). Seeing a student given detention for skipping class reminds other high schoolers that playing hooky isn't allowed and that they, too, could get detention.

Robert Merton: Strain Theory

Sociologist Robert Merton agreed that deviance is an inherent part of a functioning society, but he expanded on Durkheim's ideas by developing **strain theory**, which notes that access to socially acceptable goals plays a part in determining whether a person conforms or deviates. From birth, we're encouraged to achieve the "American Dream" of financial success. A woman who attends business school, receives her MBA, and goes on to make a million-dollar income as CEO of a company is said to be a success. However, not everyone in our society stands on equal footing. A person may have the socially acceptable goal of financial success but lack a socially acceptable way to reach that goal. According to Merton's theory, an entrepreneur who can't afford to launch his own company may be tempted to embezzle from his employer for start-up funds.

Merton defined five ways people respond to this gap between having a socially accepted goal and having no socially accepted way to pursue it.

1. *Conformity*: Those who conform choose not to deviate. They pursue their goals to the extent that they can through socially accepted means.
2. *Innovation*: Those who innovate pursue goals they cannot reach through legitimate means by instead using criminal or deviant means.
3. *Ritualism*: People who ritualize lower their goals until they can reach them through socially acceptable ways. These members of society focus on conformity rather than attaining a distant dream.
4. *Retreatism*: Others retreat and reject society's goals and means. Some beggars and street people have withdrawn from society's goal of financial success.
5. *Rebellion*: A handful of people rebel and replace a society's goals and means with their own. Terrorists or freedom fighters look to overthrow a society's goals through socially unacceptable means.

Structural Functionalism

The second main sociological explanation of deviance comes from structural functionalism. This approach argues that deviant behaviour plays an active, constructive role in society by ultimately helping to cohere different populations within a particular society (22). Deviance helps to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. It draws lines and demarcates boundaries. This is an important function that affirms the cultural values and norms of a society for the members of that society. In addition to clarifying the moral boundaries of society, deviant behaviour can also promote social unity (23) by creating an —us-versus-them mentality in relation to deviant individuals. Deviance is actually seen as one means for society to change over

time. Deviant behaviour can imbalance the social equilibrium but—in the process of restoring balance—society will adjust norms. With changing norms in response to deviance, the deviant behaviour can contribute to long-term social stability

Social Disorganization Theory

Developed by researchers at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, **social disorganization theory** asserts that crime is most likely to occur in communities with weak social ties and the absence of social control. An individual who grows up in a poor neighborhood with high rates of drug use, violence, teenage delinquency, and deprived parenting is more likely to become a criminal than an individual from a wealthy neighborhood with a good school system and families who are involved positively in the community.

Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay: Cultural Deviance Theory

Cultural deviance theory suggests that conformity to the prevailing cultural norms of lower-class society causes crime. Researchers Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942) studied crime patterns in Chicago in the early 1900s. They found that violence and crime were at their worst in the middle of the city and gradually decreased the farther someone traveled from the urban center toward the suburbs. Shaw and McKay noticed that this pattern matched the migration patterns of Chicago citizens. New immigrants, many of them poor and lacking knowledge of the English language, lived in neighborhoods inside the city. As the urban population expanded, wealthier people moved to the suburbs and left behind the less privileged.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory looks to social and economic factors as the causes of crime and deviance. Unlike functionalists, conflict theorists don't see these factors as positive functions of society. They see them as evidence of inequality in the system. They also challenge social disorganization theory and control theory and argue that both ignore racial and socioeconomic issues and oversimplify social trends (Akers 1991). Conflict theorists also look for answers to the correlation of gender and race with wealth and crime.

Karl Marx: An Unequal System

Conflict theory was greatly influenced by the work of German philosopher, economist, and social scientist Karl Marx. Marx believed that the general population was divided into two groups. He labeled the wealthy, who controlled the means of production and business, the bourgeois. He labeled the workers who depended on

the bourgeois for employment and survival the proletariat. Marx believed that the bourgeois centralized their power and influence through government, laws, and other authority agencies in order to maintain and expand their positions of power in society. Though Marx spoke little of deviance, his ideas created the foundation for conflict theorists who study the intersection of deviance and crime with wealth and power.

C. Wright Mills: The Power Elite

In his book *The Power Elite* (1956), sociologist C. Wright Mills described the existence of what he dubbed the **power elite**, a small group of wealthy and influential people at the top of society who hold the power and resources. Wealthy executives, politicians, celebrities, and military leaders often have access to national and international power, and in some cases, their decisions affect everyone in society. Because of this, the rules of society are stacked in favor of a privileged few who manipulate them to stay on top. It is these people who decide what is criminal and what is not, and the effects are often felt most by those who have little power. Mills' theories explain why celebrities such as Chris Brown and Paris Hilton, or once-powerful politicians such as Eliot Spitzer and Tom DeLay, can commit crimes and suffer little or no legal retribution.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical approach that can be used to explain how societies and/or social groups come to view behaviours as deviant or conventional. Labeling theory, differential association, social disorganization theory, and control theory fall within the realm of symbolic interactionism.

Labeling Theory

Although all of us violate norms from time to time, few people would consider themselves deviant. Those who do, however, have often been labeled “deviant” by society and have gradually come to believe it themselves. **Labeling theory** examines the ascribing of a deviant behaviour to another person by members of society. Thus, what is considered deviant is determined not so much by the behaviours themselves or the people who commit them, but by the reactions of others to these behaviours. As a result, what is considered deviant changes over time and can vary significantly across cultures.

Differential-association theory

Edwin Sutherland coined the phrase **differential association** to address the issue of how people *learn* deviance. According to this theory, the environment plays a major role in deciding which norms people learn to

violate. Specifically, people within a particular *reference group* provide norms of conformity and deviance, and thus heavily influence the way other people look at the world, including how they react. People also learn their norms from various socializing agents—parents, teachers, ministers, family, friends, co-workers, and the media. In short, people learn criminal behaviour, like other behaviours, from their interactions with others, especially in intimate groups.

The differential-association theory applies to many types of deviant behaviour. For example, juvenile gangs provide an environment in which young people learn to become criminals. These gangs define themselves as countercultural and glorify violence, retaliation, and crime as means to achieving social status. Gang members learn to be deviant as they embrace and conform to their gang's norms.

Differential-association theory has contributed to the field of criminology in its focus on the developmental nature of criminality. People learn deviance from the people with whom they associate. Critics of the differential-association theory, on the other hand, claim the vagueness of the theory's terminology does not lend itself to social science research methods or empirical validation.

Control theory

According to **Walter Reckless's control theory**, both inner and outer controls work against deviant tendencies. People may want—at least some of the time—to act in deviant ways, but most do not. They have various restraints: *internal controls*, such as conscience, values, integrity, morality, and the desire to be a “good person”; and *outer controls*, such as police, family, friends, and religious authorities. **Travis Hirschi** noted that these inner and outer restraints form a person's **self-control**, which prevents acting against social norms. The key to developing self-control is proper socialization, especially early in childhood. Children who lack this self-control, then, may grow up to commit crimes and other deviant behaviours.

Whereas theory also suggests that people society labels as “criminals” are probably members of subordinate groups, critics argue that this oversimplifies the situation. As examples, they cite wealthy and powerful businesspeople, politicians, and others who commit crimes. Critics also argue that conflict theory does little to explain the causes of deviance. Proponents counter, however, by asserting that the theory does not attempt to delve into etiologies. Instead, the theory does what it claims to do: It discusses the relationships between socialization, social controls, and behaviour.

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