

Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World

Deviance

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World

Chapter Title: "Deviance"

Pub. Date: 2003

Access Date: October 03, 2013

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9780761925989

Online ISBN: 9781412952583

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952583.n153>

Print pages: 396-402

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952583.n153>

Deviance can be defined as behavior or activities that break generally shared social norms. Shouting, using a mobile phone, talking during a class, driving at high speeds, smoking tobacco, selling heroin, and tax avoidance can all be examples of deviance. They might also be examples of conformity, depending on the circumstances, the norms being applied, others' expectations, and the credibility of excuses or accounts given to explain the behavior. Some kinds of deviance are regulated by criminal law, or by social convention, morality, the expectations of specific groups or social settings, the welfare system, or the medical profession. Deviance is an everyday aspect of social life, and sociological discussions of deviance are not primarily concerned with bizarre, unusual, or weird activities but with the definition, emergence, and regulation of deviance in everyday life. There has been considerable research and theorization on the relationship between deviance and community, and their effects on each other.

A Sociological Approach to Deviance

The simple definition of deviance given above belies a number of complexities. Is behavior still deviant if the norm breaking is not visible to anyone else, or is not sanctioned (i.e., restricted or limited) by others? Given the plurality of social mores in complex Western societies like Australia and the United States, is there widespread agreement on social norms? In reality there is more likely to be disagreement than agreement on appropriate behavior, standards, and expectations. Who has, or what groups have, the power and authority to determine and enforce social rules? For example, while there is considerable diversity on dress code and body presentation, employers have considerable power in enforcing both formal and informal norms regarding dress and presentation. Types of norms range from informal, unwritten social rules or etiquette, to mores or ethics, convention, organizational rules, and on to laws, especially criminal law.

Even though there are significant cultural differences in the determination of what constitutes deviance, the existence of activities deemed by others to be deviant is universal; all societies define some behaviors as deviance, as offensive to legal or moral norms. This is not to say that certain forms of behavior or activities are regarded as deviant in all societies or historical periods. Over the course of the past century, in

Western societies there has been widespread normative change regarding alcohol use, smoking, sexuality, women in paid work, parenting, the use of violence, and gender relations.

The very fact that social groups have social norms or rules ensures the existence of deviance. Even though definitions of what constitutes deviance alter, there will always be some activities and practices that some members of a society agree are inappropriate and require eradication or control. Without deviance, conformity would be impossible, and vice versa. The benchmark of what constitutes deviance is a comparison with what constitutes conformity. Our conceptions of deviance are premised on notions of conformity, which in turn depend on views about deviance. Recognizing this, the sociologist Émile Durkheim writes, “Imagine a society of saints, a perfect cloister of exemplary individuals. Crimes, [or deviance] properly so called, will there be unknown; but faults which appear venial to the layman [sic] will create there the same scandal that the ordinary offence does in ordinary consciousness. If, then, this society has the power to judge and punish, it will define [p. 396 ↓] these acts as criminal [or deviant] and will treat them as such” (1938, pp. 68–69).

In this passage, Durkheim encapsulates many of the attributes of a sociological perspective on deviance: Deviance is universal yet variable; deviance is a social phenomenon; social groups make rules and enforce their definitions through judgment and social sanctions; deviance is situational; and definitions of deviance and its control involve power. A society of saints is impossible because a process of social redefinition continuously operates to ensure that all the positions on the scale from wickedness to virtue will always be filled. Consequently, some people will always be holier than others. The scale of social definitions of deviance expands and contracts, denoting an “elasticity of evil” (Cohen 1974, p. 5). This elasticity reflects the fact that individuals' identities contain moral aspects that place value on doing the right thing, which involves defining and responding to others who are not doing likewise. Some people develop such high stakes in their moral identities that they take the initiative in locating deviance and legislating new prohibitions, thus helping to maintain the supply of the deviance which reinforces their own identities. Sociologist Howard Becker calls these people “moral entrepreneurs” (1963, p. 147). The expansion of deviance accommodates those whose identities will be enhanced by new scales of virtue, by changing the saliency of existing scales, or by enlarging the moral significance of differences along those scales.

Questions and Answers regarding Deviance

Three kinds of question can be asked about deviance: Why do some people engage in activities others define and punish as deviant? Why are some activities and individuals identified or defined as deviant? Who designates what is deviant and enforces social sanctions?

Three major sociological approaches to answering those questions are functionalism (particularly as articulated by Émile Durkheim), which assesses the implications of deviance for communities and social groups; the labeling perspective, which focuses on the implications of labeling for those successfully labeled; and critical theories, which emphasize inequality in explaining the existence and management of deviance, especially criminal deviance. Critical feminist theories, for example, underscore the gendered nature of many social norms and the assumptions about male and female deviance.

What makes these approaches sociological is their focus on social factors (opportunities, definitions, background, resources, inequalities, power) rather than individual characteristics (such as personality or genetic makeup) to explain the emergence of deviance.

Functionalist Theories

Every human community has its own special set of boundaries, its own unique identity, and thus every community also has its own characteristic styles of deviant behavior. When a community feels jeopardized by a particular form of behavior, it will impose more severe sanctions against it and devote more time and energy to rooting it out. For example, drug trafficking is viewed as a particularly heinous crime and many governments, including those in Australia and the United States, have turned their attention to fighting the “war” against drugs and the crime syndicates.

Émile Durkheim proposes that a certain amount of deviance or crime has positive functions for social solidarity. This is an unexpected conclusion, as most discussions of crime and deviance focus on the negative consequence—the harm done, the damage caused, and the suffering experienced by the victim. Durkheim argues that crime (and by extension other forms of deviance) unites people in shared indignation and outrage when valued rules of conduct are broken. “Crime ... draws honest consciences together, concentrating them. We have only to observe what happens, particularly in a small town, when some scandal involving morality has just taken place. People stop each other in the street, call upon one another, meet in their customary places to talk about what has happened. A common indignation is expressed” (Durkheim 1984, p. 58). The common expression of anger increases social solidarity and reinforces morality. It makes people more conscious of shared interests and values, thus reaffirming agreement on standards or social norms. At the same time this collective expression of anger and reaffirmation of shared norms identifies individuals and activities that are deemed to be outside the shared boundaries and that constitute a threat to the collective interest and security.

While Durkheim observes that crime (or deviance) is universal because no social system—even a society of saints—avoids deviant behavior, he argues that the specific forms of deviance vary. Crime, then, is normal. This does not imply that any amount of crime is normal, or that someone who breaks the law is necessarily biologically [p. 397 ↓] or psychologically normal, though he or she may be. What is normal is the existence of criminality, so long as the rate does not go beyond a certain level. Nonetheless, Durkheim suggests that criminal motivations or tendencies are not social products but have biological and psychological causes “given the incorrigible wickedness of men [sic]” (1938, p. 67). The implication is that in any society there exists a normal distribution of individuals motivated to break the law.

An examination of three crime waves (as indicated by official records) in seventeenth-century colonial Massachusetts reveals the positive functions of deviance for the maintenance of the social group or community. In *Wayward Puritans*, Erikson (1966) argues that the Puritan community of Salem, Massachusetts, began to censure forms of behavior that previously had been present and tolerated by the group, as a way of reasserting its identity and moral boundaries. As [p. 398 ↓] the sense of mission and zeal began to diminish due to the growth and differentiation of this religious community,

a spate of witchcraft trials occurred that had the effect of reinforcing the community's religious identity. The frantic displays of Puritan zeal and public witchcraft trials had the effect of clarifying the moral meaning of membership in the colony. The trials were not so much a response to an increase in witchcraft as to the need to provide work for God's agents in the battle against the devil.

When the community applies social control to combat deviance, it makes a statement about its boundaries. It declares how much variability and diversity can be tolerated within the group without risking its distinctive identity. A group's boundaries are elastic: At one point certain activities may fall within those boundaries, while at another they may not. In Salem, the apparent fits and odd actions of young girls in the community fell outside those boundaries, but they were not held responsible for their deviant behavior, as it was determined that witches were causing the fits. The people the girls identified as witches were already marginal members of the community—a West Indian slave, a beggar, and a woman who was lax in church attendance and lived with a man before marriage. In a sense, these individuals were the most dispensable members of the community. Interestingly, when the girls started to accuse respectable individuals, doubts about their infallible judgment began to grow, and the incidence of witchcraft declined. Erikson observes, “Deviant forms of behavior, by marking the outer edges of group life, give the inner structure its special character and thus supply the framework within which the people of the group develop an orderly sense of their own cultural identity” (1966, p. 13).

From research on campaigns against pornography, a similar observation can be made regarding the relationship between denoting some activity or behavior as deviant, the wider social processes (including identity formation) or structures (especially the class structure), and the limits of collective outrage against pornography. The overwhelming elite support for campaigns against vice in Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia during the late nineteenth century was related to three aspects of upper-class formation and reproduction. Specifically, the loss of political control to immigrants, the attempt to control upper-class children's education by sending them to elite boarding schools, and the construction of a high culture that distinguished the upper class from social inferiors were central to elite mobilization against vice. The social class of the viewer became a primary determinant of whether a painting or a photograph was deemed art or obscenity. This became apparent when the New York upper class failed to support

the arrest of a leading art dealer on vice-related charges: The incident questioned their own purity, taste, and refinement.

More recently, the public discussion and outrage following the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., exemplify the emergence of a collective consciousness and shared abhorrence of acts deemed to be “evil” and “terrorist.” Collective sentiment was expressed in countless examples of generosity and volunteerism, which reinforced commonality and community. The attacks were referred to as crimes against humanity or crimes against America, and thus were portrayed by many Western leaders as threatening such core (Western liberal) values as freedom and democracy. One result was that certain people—especially Muslims and people of Middle Eastern origin—were labeled deviants, although they were not personally responsible for the attacks. Collective anger and common sentiment often emerge following particularly nasty or unusual homicides, such as school massacres, incidents in which children have committed murder, and cases of child sexual abuse perpetrated or covered up by people in power or those whom others trust, for example, priests.

The Labeling Perspective

Labeling theorists question the existence of a consensus on norms and argue that they are continually being contested. They do not accept that social control is the automatic and usual response to norm-breaking behavior. Reactions, they argue, depend not only on the violation of a rule but on who breaks the rules, the time and place, and whether she or he is visible to others who are motivated and have the authority to invoke sanctions. The definition of behavior as deviant depends on the social audience, not just on the norm-breaking activity, and therefore the behaviors themselves do not activate the processes of social reaction. Rule violation and the application of deviant labels are distinct. If two actors violate social norms, one may be labeled deviant while the other may escape the label; the consequences of being branded deviant may be severe, and only the actor so branded will have to face them, though both violated the same norm.

[p. 399 ↓] Howard Becker offers the most influential and oft-cited formulation of the labeling perspective: “Deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender.’ The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label” (1963, p. 9). The people so labeled may not accept the designation and may seek to resist or ignore that interpretation of them and their behavior (though sometimes this will be impossible, given the power and authority of such official labelers as the police and criminal courts); indeed, they may view the labelers as deviant. Becker suggests that the term deviant be reserved for those labeled as deviant by some segment of society and concludes that “whether a given act is deviant or not depends in part on the nature of the act (that is, whether or not it violates some rule) and in part on what other people do about it” (1963, p. 33).

Labeling theorists stress that becoming deviant, or acquiring a deviant self-identity, depends on a social audience's enforcement of a rule, which may entail a degradation ceremony in which a person's public identity is ritually replaced by another of lower status. For example, in a criminal trial, a person's public and personal identity may be transformed from that of ordinary citizen to accused or convicted criminal, rapist, pedophile, thief, or prisoner. From then on, others will make new assumptions about the kind of person he or she really is, which will affect that person's access to employment, housing, or insurance, even when the deviance does not affect conformity with other social norms. A final stage in the deviant career is participating in a deviant subculture that enables the formation of new identities. The subculture provides self-justifying rationales and ideologies, often rejecting legal or moral rules and institutions.

The labeling perspective has been criticized for focusing on the successfully labeled deviants rather than on social audiences; for neglecting self-labeling processes; for failing to explain why some individuals are motivated to break rules; for assuming that labeling only escalates deviance, thereby ignoring the deterrent effects of sanctioning; and for failing to give sufficient attention to questions of power and inequality.

Critical Theories

Critical theorists emphasize power and conflict in the definition, content, and application of criminal laws. Social norms are not conceptualized as deriving from general consensus; rather, their substance is intimately linked to the political economy and the interests of dominant segments. Critical theorists seek to demonstrate how the criminalization of certain types of conduct and the uneven enforcement of criminal laws reflect the interests of economically and politically powerful groups. The theories are less concerned with why individuals or groups are motivated to be criminally deviant and more concerned with why the behavior is defined as criminal and thereby subject to state control. Critical theorists note that the activities of lower-class people are disproportionately defined in law as criminal, and that lower-class people are more likely to be arrested, charged, convicted, and sentenced than are middle and upper-class people.

Many of these theories commence with the writings of Marx and focus on the influence of an economic elite on the substance of the criminal law. They propose that the causes of crime are bound up with the kind of social arrangement existing at a particular time. For crime to be abolished, they argue, social arrangements must also be transformed. Some maintain that the state, via the legal system, protects its own interests and those of the capitalist ruling class, which are indistinguishable. Crime control represents the coercive means of checking threats to the prevailing social and economic order. The contradictions of capitalism produce poverty, inequality, and exploitation, which lead to crime as a means of survival. Burglary and drug dealing, crimes against the person, industrial sabotage, and other predatory crimes are rational responses to the inequities of capitalist society. The irony is that compared with the activities that criminal law prohibits, the capitalist class and the state are engaged in many more serious injurious practices, which are rarely prosecuted but affect large numbers of people. Even when price-fixing, discrimination, embezzlement, pollution, and economic exploitation are illegal, enforcement is rare.

Feminists argue that mainstream discussions of deviance are biased because they deal primarily with men and boys. Where research on female deviance exists, it tends to rely heavily on assumptions about women's nature and to centralize marital and

reproductive roles, actual and anticipated, as explanations. Such approaches often reflect a deterministic view of women's and girls' behavior by claiming that supposedly essential or natural female qualities—emotionalism, deceit, irrationality, sexuality, and the tendency to promiscuity among single women and girls—constitute key factors in female deviance. Women and girls are depicted as engaging in [p. 400 ↓] such sex-specific and gender-related deviance as shoplifting, prostitution, and transgressing motherhood norms (for example, having children at an unusually young or old age).

Different norms get applied to men and women; many norms regarding the presentation of self, marriage and parenthood, sexuality, and occupational choice are applied to women but not to men. While expectations are made of men around these issues, arguably the scope for normal behavior is much narrower and more restrictive for women. The gender system makes certain kinds of deviance (for example, mental illness, prostitution, hysteria, obesity, shoplifting) more appropriate to or expected of women than men. While deviant behavior in women is often explained in terms of women's supposed nature, men's deviance is explained in terms of social, economic, and political conditions and normal learning processes.

Some contemporary feminist discussions of normativity, social control, and conformity focus on the body and the ways in which women's bodies are subject to greater surveillance than are men's bodies. The array of images and expectations regarding women's shape, size, diet, emotions, dress, and adornment tend to be very restrictive and affirm specific feminine models of appearance, attractiveness, and behavior. These models become norms against which many women constantly measure, judge, discipline, and modify their own bodies, even to the extent of undergoing elective cosmetic surgery. If a woman's body is evaluated as overweight, aged, or unattractive to heterosexual men, that fact is often taken as evidence that the woman lacks discipline and control and therefore is less morally worthy than others whose bodies indicate that they exercise restraint or “take care of themselves.” It is not just the body that is being evaluated; the whole person is labeled as overweight, unattractive, or inappropriately attired and associated conclusions are drawn regarding the person's personality, reliability, credibility, and perceived authority.

Sources of Information on Crime and Deviance

There are at least four major sources of information on crime and deviance: statistics that are collected routinely by government agencies (for example, police statistics); statistics and data compiled following independent research; personal or direct knowledge; and the mass media. All of these data sources have strengths and weaknesses. For example, statistics released by police departments or courts include only information about criminal deviance coming to the attention of those agencies, criminal deviance is defined differently in different jurisdictions, and decisions on whether to proceed with a case may be based on factors other than whether a crime actually occurred.

Periodically, media attention and government concern focus on young people and deviance (both actual and suspected or assumed). Youth offenses, especially such offenses as graffiti, motor vehicle theft, and street activities, have stimulated various moral panics, defined as “a condition, episode, person or group of persons [that] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media” (Cohen 1980, p. 9). The media are instrumental in portraying young offenders as “folk devils” by exaggerating and distorting the seriousness of the offenses, the numbers of people involved, and the degree of damage or violence in particular incidents and confrontations with the police. Media reports often emphasize several serious or violent offences committed by repeat offenders to justify arguments that the juvenile justice system requires reform and that young offenders should be punished more severely. There is also anxiety expressed about young people's use of public space or private spaces that other members of the public frequent, such as shopping malls.

Correcting Deviant Behavior

The following extract of ethnographic text describes deviant behavior that occurred at a Chippewa dance in Wisconsin. The men at the dance took immediate actions to correct

the deviant behavior in a way that clearly enforced appropriate behavior but without offending those whose behavior was judged to be deviant.

Directly after the feast certain speeches were made by some of the leading men relative to the attendance at the ceremony of certain whites. Other than this comparatively little of importance happened until about three p.m. when two young men from Round lake arrived and entered the dancing area prepared to participate in the ceremony. One of these men was naked above the waist and had his body more or less elaborately painted. The two danced the next round after their entry, this being one of the ordinary dances and in no way especially sacred. This young man had, however, by appearing in this half nude attire transgressed one of the many strict rules governing the ceremony and, although in olden times dancing in this sort of attire was considered proper, such action under the rules of the drum and in connection with the present day religious ideas was decidedly culpable.

Immediately following this round a "brave dance" was danced in which, of course, as the rules prescribe, only those men who belonged to the division known as "the braves" participated. Immediately following this dance one of the old men who was a member of "the braves" arose and spoke upon the impropriety of the participation of a person in such scanty attire in the dances held in the presence of the drum and in its honor. He went at considerable length into an explanation of the rules and regulations which govern such matters and was careful to state that it was in no way his desire to offer offense to this young man or to anyone else, but that he felt it his duty to remonstrate with the young man and to call his attention to what he was charitable enough to consider a lack of education upon the young man's part rather than a willful violation by him of any of the precepts of the faith. In concluding he outlined very positively that it was, according to the rules of the drum, absolutely necessary that the young man should be properly and completely attired and finally ended his discourse by walking over and presenting him with a shirt. His example was immediately followed by two others of the braves who had participated in the foregoing dance. These two men made no speeches since the first brave had voiced their sentiments and had spoken at sufficient length concerning the matter. Each simply walked over and made the young man a present. One gave him a shirt and the other a coat.

He was not obliged to immediately put on any of these garments which were presented to him for, as the above mentioned speaker said, the young man had come to the dance and had danced once in this half nude condition and he should therefore be permitted to continue throughout the remainder of the afternoon. He pointed out, however, that it must be distinctly understood that thereafter he was not to appear so attired in the ring.

Immediately following this were a few more rounds of dancing after which one of the more important men spoke further upon the same subject, saying that he felt sure that this young man had intended no offense and that his action was due solely to the fact that he was unaware that it was contrary to the rules of the cult to dance in the presence of the grandfather (meaning the drum) in such attire. He said that he deprecated very greatly any illfeeling which might possibly arise from this little incident and that he hoped that all present would look upon the matter with due forbearance, and that the young man himself would not consider that he was being unduly upbraided. He then offered on his own behalf the materials for a feast, which action was hailed with much show of good will and appreciation by all present.

Barrett, Samuel A. (1910). *The Dream Dance of the Chippewa and Menonimee Indians of Northern Wisconsin*. Milwaukee, WI: Public Museum of the City of Milwaukee, Bulletin, 1, art. 4., pp. 333–334.

Implications

As conceptions of deviance are socially constructed, no behavior is inherently deviant; its classification as deviant depends on social definitions and the application of norms. Often, conceptions of deviance are not a product of a general agreement among members of a particular community, but result from the activities of specific groups that attempt to have their conceptions of right and wrong, of appropriate and inappropriate behavior, translated into law and enforced. A significant portion of everyday social life and public policy remains concerned with conformity, control, designations of deviance (or at least attempts to designate some groups or individuals as deviant), and moral evaluations that affirm the importance of deviance as a site of analysis and research.

A central point is that deviance is situational, contested, and relative but present in all social settings and [p. 401 ↓] societies. Social movements, as well as other interest groups and political or legal activists, are often instrumental in changing public conceptions of a behavior's deviant status. This can involve attempts (which may or may not be successful) to criminalize or decriminalize a range of activities and behavior. Tobacco use, for example, has gradually become less acceptable, as has domestic violence, whereas homosexuality and abortion have become more acceptable.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952583.n153>

See also

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