

DEVIANCE

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following:

- Define deviance and identify deviant acts.
- Apply theories of deviance to social phenomena.
- Evaluate Robert Merton's ideas of deviance.

WHAT IS DEVIANCE?

As was mentioned in the Culture chapter, a **norm** is *a set of expected behaviors for a given social status*. In most societies, the majority of people conform to the most important norms most of the time. For example, wearing casual clothes to class is normal on many campuses. Attending class in your bikini might not be normal at most US colleges or universities. Deviance is not as easily defined and established as some might think, especially if you are sensitive to cultural relativism and ethnocentrism. **Deviance** is *a violation of norms that typically elicits a response from someone*. It is also important to note that deviance is not always a bad or negative act. For example, Rosa Parks refusing to get up from her seat on a bus eventually sparked an entire social movement. Her single act was a deviant one.

A typical dictionary definition of deviant might be “One who does not conform to the norm;” “One who behaves in sharply different ways from customs;” or “One who ignores the common and behaves in unique ways.” For deviance, a thesaurus might list: “abnormal, aberration, anomaly, weird, irregular, and even unnatural” as similarly related words. Most references attest to the nature of deviance as being something that violates normal behaviors, thoughts, or actions. But, is deviance weird/cool, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable, or good/bad?

For sociologists the answer is found by considering exactly who has the power and authority to define the behavior as being normal or deviant. Throughout history, the United States government, religions, education, media, and family types have influenced and shaped what is considered “normal” or “deviant” on subjects as insignificant as swimsuits on beaches and as significant as women having the same rights that men have. Deviance is considered at both of C. Wright Mills' larger social and personal levels.

A personal level example might be considered with someone wearing a swimsuit on campus. Other students do not need to look at university, government, or media for approval on how they dress for class. They typically consider a source much more valuable to teenagers and young adults—their peers. If your friends wear swimsuits to class you may define the swimsuit issue as being normal among students who were your friends, yet deviant among students who run in different crowds. Since we typically value our own peer evaluations the most, we often defer to peer-based norms.

But, would it be acceptable to wear nothing at all to class? On Wikipedia there is an interesting article about Andrew Martinez who attended school at Berkeley, naked. Berkeley is considered to be a very liberal campus in comparison to most US campuses. A

controversy developed. Eventually his nakedness came before the university and the city of Berkeley leaders (he often walked about town naked, too). He was eventually asked to leave Berkeley, and both the city and University of California, Berkeley passed anti-nudity laws and policies.¹

This example illustrates how deviance is relative. Whether an act is labeled deviant or not depends on many factors including the nature of the act: who commits the act, who is affected by or witnesses the act, and when and where the act is committed. Regularly drinking to excess was considered deviant in the past, but today it is considered a disease: alcoholism. The place, or location where the act occurs, also plays a part in whether it is considered deviant or not. In Berkeley, a liberal town, a naked guy is not that deviant, but if he tried that at UCLA, he probably wouldn't make it through one hour naked without being arrested. The audience is the third factor to take into account when determining if an act is deviant. Who is observing this act? Maybe the naked guy would get by in a group of students, but not if the audience was a group of people working in businesses surrounding the campus. The individual committing the act is the last element when determining the deviance of an act. For example, let's consider cross-dressing. A woman can typically get away with wearing men's clothes without severe social sanctions, but a man is less likely to walk around in women's clothes without eliciting at least some stares (and possibly more serious responses from others).

FUNCTIONS AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF DEVIANCE

Let's consider Émile Durkheim's observations about deviance. Durkheim argued that deviance, especially extreme forms, are functional in that they challenge and offend the established norms in the larger collective conscience.² In other words, extreme deviance pushes things enough to make members of society reconsider why they even consider some behaviors as being deviant. Building on this idea, functionalists often argue that deviance: reaffirms norms when the deviants are punished; promotes solidarity among those who support and those who oppose the deviance; provides a clear contrasting point of comparison for society's members; and often stimulates social change. When there is no deviance present, people tend to take their social independence and interdependence for granted. On the other hand, when a deviant act is committed, people are re-awakened and begin fighting to protect their moral order and social attachments.

In Martinez's naked-guy case, both Berkeley City and the University had to take a serious look at why and how they defined public nudity, and which formal norms they would develop to support their position. Similar formal evaluations of deviance occurred after Dr. "Death" Kevorkian assisted severely ill persons in taking their own lives; after September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. (Twin Towers, Pentagon, and flight crash in Pennsylvania) killed about 3,000 people; and more recently after major U.S. corporations which have been mismanaged and have deeply shaken markets, investments, and economic stability. Extreme deviance does make us consider "normal" behavior on the personal and larger social level.

There are, of course, also dysfunctions caused by deviant behavior. First, deviance provides a threat to social order because it makes social life difficult and unpredictable. Further, it causes confusion about morals and values in society. Let's consider Dr. Kevorkian's assisted suicides. Before Dr. Kevorkian medically assisted people with their suicides, usually to relieve themselves from an excruciating death, suicide was generally thought of as always being a deviant and selfish act. However, Dr. Kevorkian's act forced society as a whole to reconsider suicide as a possible legal medical procedure. The morals pertaining to suicide were suddenly blurred. His deviant behaviour was a dysfunction that caused society to re-evaluate its ideas about suicide and suffering.

Another dysfunction of deviance is the diversion of valuable resources that usually occurs when the act needs to be controlled. In other words, to control deviant behavior, resources must be called on and shifted from other social needs. For example, California happens to be #1 in the country in prison spending and only #38 in school funding. Monies that could be funnelled into the public schools have been diverted into funding for prisons.

SOCIOLOGY AND DEVIANCE

As a sociologist, you should strive for an objective stance when studying deviance. It takes practice but is truly rewarding because of the clarity it brings to your evaluation. Let's consider a sensitive and sometimes controversial issue—**homosexuality**, or *a sexual orientation toward persons of the same sex*. Consider this simple question, "Is homosexuality deviant or normal?" National studies indicate that less than five percent of the United States population considers itself to be exclusively homosexual. Does that make it more or less common and therefore more or less deviant? At five percent it's less common. Yet, every society in the history of the world has typically had homosexuality among its members. That includes almost all societies with recorded histories and almost every society in the world today. So it is less common, but is it deviant or normal? The answer is found in the complexity of modern societies. Not all members of society agree on the same issue in the same way. We rarely have total agreement on what's normal. In the U.S. we have over 300 million people, hundreds of religions, and thousands of voluntary organizations, political interest groups, and personal interest groups, many of which are in striking opposition to other groups. However, as a sociologist, studying homosexuality would need to include an objective stance. Despite personal morals, values, or religious considerations, the topic of sexuality from a sociological perspective would need to be explored through a completely unbiased lens.

Many sociologists have argued that it is normal to have deviance in a healthy society. If you regard homosexuality as being normal or deviant, as a sociologist you can step into a more objective role and understand the larger social level of consideration. It allows you to become more of an analyst and less of an advocate when understanding deviance. To build upon this idea, let's consider how sociologists strive for objectivity when considering cross-cultural issues of deviance. Remember that **ethnocentrism** (*the tendency to judge others based on our own experiences*) tends to burn cross-cultural bridges while **cultural**

relativism (*the tendency to look for the cultural context in which differences in cultures occur*) tends to build them.

Sociologists not being objective would consider homosexuality deviant behavior. Scientific “research shows that homosexuality is an example of *normal* variation in human sexuality and not a source of negative psychological effects” (emphasis added).³ Remember the term “cultural lag” from the chapter on Culture? This happens when one part of culture changes faster than related parts. Certain members of U.S. society deny this scientific evidence, so they are lagging behind the more objective members of society who accept scientific findings.

Deviance tends to vary on three major levels: across time, cultures, and from group to group. When considering deviance we must realize that collectively people experience social levels of shifting values. In one example, contrast the *I Love Lucy* show, which aired in the 1950's, to the *Sex and The City* show, which aired 1998-2004. How was Little Ricky conceived given that Lucy and her (real-life and TV-life) husband, Ricky, slept in different beds on the TV show? Even their kisses were controversial to some at the time.

Today, *Sex and the City* is an in-depth story line that follows the lives of four New York City women with active sex lives. As you read in the Culture chapter, values shape norms, which in turn shape morés and folkways, which in turn shape laws. As values shift and change over time, so eventually do laws.

HOW DOES CULTURE INFLUENCE DEVIANCE?

Deviance varies between cultures because values vary between cultures. In Washington DC, there is a non-profit research organization that performs international studies.⁴ On their website, they discuss their mission statement and organizational purpose. “The project provides to journalists, academics, policymakers and the public a unique, comprehensive, internationally comparable series of surveys. Since its inception in 2001, the Pew Global Attitudes Project has released 21 major reports, as well as numerous commentaries and other releases, on topics including attitudes toward the U.S. and American foreign policy, globalization, terrorism, and democratization.”

This project is a series of worldwide public opinion surveys that encompasses a broad array of subjects ranging from people's assessments of their own lives to their views about the current state of the world and important issues of the day. More than 175,000 interviews in 54 countries have been conducted as part of the project.

Based on 91,000 of these surveys from 50 different countries, Kohut and Stokes (2007) wrote an insightful book comparing the U.S. to other cultures, explaining how we are perceived.⁵ In this book, American values, culture, economic influence, and military activities have led to a singular notion about what America does to the world. Some may have misguided ideas from TV and news reports, though many have suffered at the U.S.' imperialistic actions around the world. Most see the need for another superpower to keep

the U.S. in check. In sum, the average non-American views Americans much differently from how those of us who are ill-informed of U.S. global actions view ourselves.

How might social cohesiveness compare between countries of the world? Pew also studied the concept of trust between countries and found that people in Eastern Europe have lower levels of trust than did the U.S. when asked if they agreed with the statement “Most people in society are trustworthy” (see Table 1). Among the 47 countries included in this survey, wars, famine, economic downturns, street and organized crime, and other local social influences have contributed to higher or lower levels of trust over time.

Table 1. Pew Study: Percent who Agreed with the Statement “Most people in society are trustworthy.”⁶

Country	%	Country	%
China	79	Russia	50
Sweden	78	Poland	48
Canada	71	Ukraine	47
Britain	65	Mexico	46
United States	58	Kuwait	27
Germany	56	Kenya	25

Values also vary from group to group. When Ron Hammond was a research professor at Case Western Reserve University, he arranged for a former gang member to come and speak to his Social Problems class. He was a large man, 6 foot 3, about 275 pounds, and also a black belt in martial arts. He explained that when he was much younger he had to go through an initiation ritual called a “beat-down” in order to be admitted to the gang. He eventually converted to Christianity and chose to leave the gang. He qualified his comments by saying, “No one ever really leaves the gang.” Typically to go on an inactive status with the gang there is a beat down. Because of his stature and fighting skills, they decided to forego his beat-down for the overall benefit of everyone involved. The point of this story is that in most social groups a beat-down would be considered deviant. In a gang it’s very much normal. Yet, in this situation, not beating him down was deviant within his gang, yet a wise choice.

Not only do values vary over time, between cultures, and between groups, they also vary a great deal between individuals. If you interviewed 11 people you personally know and asked them when abortion should be available to American women, you’d probably find some very strong opinions that change from person to person. If you polled the entire country, as did CBS and the New York Times in 2003, you would begin to see patterns that gave you a global understanding of U.S. attitudes about abortion. In the CBS and NYT survey, only one in four felt that abortion should not be permitted under any circumstances.⁷ These trends are very similar across political parties and gender. But how

does one person feel about abortion? It can be best understood by looking at one of three perspectives that typically frame an individual's perspective on an issue.

PERSPECTIVES ON DEVIANCE

The **absolutist perspective** claims that *deviance resides in the very nature of an act and is wrong at all times and in all places*. The **normative perspective** claims that *deviance is only a violation of a specific group's or society's rules at a specific point in time*. The **reactive perspective** claims that *behavior does not become deviant unless it is disapproved of by those in authority (laws)*.⁸

An absolutist would probably fall among the one in four who feels that abortion is always wrong. For absolutists, abortion is an unacceptable act perhaps because they believe that life begins at birth. Taking that life away is the same as committing murder and playing god. A normative individual would consider the circumstances (rape, incest, diagnoses, or health of mother, parent's economic stability), while a reactive would consider the legality of abortion.

In every society, when deviance is considered it is most often controlled. **Social control** consists of the *formal and informal attempts at enforcing norms*. There are a few basic concepts that help to understand social control. First the **Pluralistic Theory of Social Control** claims that *society is made up of many competing groups whose diverse interests are continuously balanced*, and second **social order** is the *customary and typical social arrangements that society's members use to base their daily lives on*.

Society's members use informal and formal sanctions to reinforce control efforts. **Informal sanctions** might be *remarks from family or peers about a behavior*, while **formal sanctions** are *more strongly enforced*, and might come from a police officer, teacher, or judge. **Negative sanctions** are *punishments or negative reactions toward deviance*. **Positive sanctions** are *rewards for conforming behavior*. Your family might apply informal sanctions such as spanking (negative) or praise for a job well done (positive). A religious order would apply both formal and informal sanctions, such as a priest giving penance to a parishioner (informal, negative), excommunication (formal, negative), or a promotion to bishop (formal, positive).

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF DEVIANCE

The first theory we are going to explore is Robert K. Merton's **Strain Theory**. Merton was a functionalist theorist who studied why people conform or deviate.⁹ Using Durkheim's concept of **anomie**, Merton devised a theory of deviance that brings in the concept of materialism. The average American sees the American Dream as a goal of monetary and social success. Most desire this dream, which is the culturally-approved goal, but some realize that they lack the culturally-approved means to attain it. Therefore, Merton theorized that society pushed individuals toward deviant behaviors because it overemphasizes the importance of making money, while failing to emphasize the

importance of using legitimate means to reach that monetary success. Thus the goal of financial success combined with the unequal access to important resources creates deviant behavior. Merton claimed that deviant individuals respond to this in one of five ways (see Table 2). They either conform or are deviant by becoming innovators, ritualists, retreatists, or rebels.

Conflict theories of deviance focus on issues of power and powerlessness. It's about who has the power, and how they attempt to force their values and rules upon those who don't. The wealthier, more educated elite of society typically have the most power. The **power elite** are *the political, corporate, and military leaders of a society who are uniquely positioned to commit elite crimes, or crimes of an insider nature that typically are difficult to punish and have broad social consequences upon the masses*. A few recent examples of this might include corporate mismanagement, embezzlement, and fraud, which led to massive federal bailouts and prosecutions.

Table 2. Robert Merton's **Modes of Adaptation**.

1. Conformity

These people are not deviants; they live with what they have, and get by; they accept and pursue their goals within the socially accepted means; some will attain the American Dream. *Average US Citizens*.

2. Innovation

People accept and pursue the goals by replacing legitimate with deviant/criminal means to attain them. *Criminals*.

3. Ritualism

People lower their goals; they appear to pursue the goals by going along with the socially accepted means. Example: *Someone who focuses on following rules, fitting in, or conforming instead of attaining the dream*.

4. Retreatism

People reject the goals and the means; they withdraw. Example: *Street people, bag ladies, and hoboes*.

5. Rebellion

People reject the goals and the means but replace them with their own goals and means. Example: *Terrorists and freedom fighters*.

Among Symbolic Interactionists who study crime and deviance, a few core theoretical approaches are used. The **labeling theory** claims that *the labels people are given affect their perceptions and channel their behaviors into deviance or conformity*. The focus shifts from the individual to the social process by which a person comes to be labeled as a deviant, and the consequences of such labeling for the individual. Although we break the rules from time to time, we generally do not see ourselves as deviants, nor are we labeled as such by others. However, some are, actually bringing out more deviant behavior. Three factors seem to determine whether an individual will be labeled as a deviant or not:

- 1) The importance of the violated norm. The more strongly held the norms and morés are, the more likely the violator will be labeled as deviant. For example, the sexual

abuse of a minor is always seen as more deviant than jay-walking—even though both acts are crimes and punishable, both do not hold the same consequences.

- 2) The social identity of the person. There are those with wealth and power, which enables them to ward off being labeled as deviant despite their violation of certain norms and values. For example, Keith Richards, guitarist for the band The Rolling Stones, is infamous for drug abuse. Since he is a rock musician, especially from a band that formed in the 1960s, his drug-abuse habits strike no one as odd, even though he has been arrested a number of times, and has served time in prison.¹⁰
- 3) The social context in which the act occurs. In certain situations, acts might be considered deviant, whereas in another it will not. For example, women lifting their tops in public and exposing their bare breasts is usually considered a deviant act. At Mardi Gras, however, women are typically rewarded for this behavior with bead necklaces.

Edward Lemert studied deviant identity formation and identified **primary deviance** *when an individual violates a norm but is not caught or labeled as a deviant*. He maintains a self-definition of being a conformist. **Secondary deviance** *is when the individual internalizes the deviant identity others have placed upon her and it becomes part of her lifestyle*. In the Movie *Boyz n the Hood*,¹¹ Cuba Gooding Jr.'s character, Tre is faced with a tremendous amount of pressure. His best friend is gunned down by street gang members and he has a profound urge to retaliate. Tre is deeply supported by his father who helps him to reject both the opportunity and label of street thug and to remember his own potential.

One final consideration is when someone is given a **master status**, or a *social position that is so intense it becomes the primary characteristic of the individual* (ex-con, gang banger, etc.). Understanding how powerful a master status can be as a labeling influence helps to understand why so many criminals reoffend and end up incarcerated again. **Recidivism** *is the act of a person repeating an undesirable behavior after they have experienced negative consequences of that behavior*. In a study of recidivism rates among American prisoners, the U.S. Department of Justice tracked the rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration of former inmates for three years after their initial release from prison. It is estimated that 67.5% of released prisoners will be rearrested within three years; among these, 46% were reconvicted.¹² This information has provoked many studies on why those labeled criminals continue to commit acts that lead to their rearrests. The majority of these researchers have implemented labeling theory in order to facilitate their research.

Social learning *is an approach that studies how people learn behaviors through interactions with others*. In studying crime, Edwin Sutherland taught the concept of **differential association**, or the process of *learning deviance from others in your close relationships who serve as role models and provide opportunities for deviance*.

We can use this theory to understand a couple who started a methamphetamine lab in a neighborhood home. They were young high school drop-outs who had a sports boat, jet skis, new truck and car, and new furniture. The only catch is that the man's brother's best friend had them employed in the meth business. When caught, both men served time in prison, but the wife who was expecting their next child was not charged. Their family and

friends saw criminal behavior as being worth the risks and acceptable given the tough economy. In other words, they associated with others who taught them how to be deviant (how to make meth), and modeled the appropriate behavior for a successful meth business.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Martinez 15 September, 2008. Martinez would often find himself being labeled “deviant” throughout the remainder of his life and perhaps suffered from mental illness. He died in jail May 18, 2006 from an apparent suicide.

² *The Division of Labour in Society*, 1893.

³ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality#cite_ref-2. Accessed on 15 January, 2012.

⁴ See <http://pewglobal.org/about/>. Accessed on 15 January, 2012.

⁵ *America Against the World: How We are Different and Why We Are Disliked*. Holt Publishing, 2007

⁶ “Since Communism’s Fall, Social Trust Has Fallen in Eastern Europe”, originally released 15 April, 2008.

<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/799/global-social-trust-crime-corruption>. Accessed on 15 January, 2012.

⁷ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abortion_in_the_United_States#Public_Opinion Taken 17 September, 2008 from “Abortion in the United States”

⁸ For more, Google Moral Relativism.

⁹ See Merton, R. K. (1938) Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5).

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith_Richards#Public_image_and_private_life

¹¹ 1991 film directed by John Singleton

¹² Langan, P., D. Levin, 2002. “Recidivism Report of Prisoners Released in 1994.” US Department of Justice: Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved August 3, 2008.