# Deviance and Crime

## Deviance

For many Sociologists, deviance usually refers to behaviour or activities which do not seem to fit in with the expectations of the majority of the members of a particular society and which receive their disapproval. It is impossible to be born a criminal or deviant because crime and deviance involve legal and social rules and what counts as deviant or criminal will depend on how society defines these rules.

American Sociologist, Howard Becker argues that social groups create deviance by making the rules, the violation of which constitutes deviance. From this point of view deviance is not quality of the act a person commits, but, rather a consequence of the application of those rules.

## List of some deviant acts

- Time related deviance: Cigarette smoking used to be a popular and socially acceptable activity in the UK until a ban was placed in 2007.
- Social /cultural deviance: consumption of alcohol is often seen as deviant or illegal in many Islamic societies but is seen as normal in Western societies.
- Place/ context related deviance: fighting in public is deviant but not if it takes place in a boxing ring. Or killing/murder is a crime but not in case of self defense or defending the soil.

## Difference between crime, deviance and delinquency

As Sociologists study social rules and social actions, the more important distinction for them is not between legal and illegal acts but rather the difference is between 'socially acceptable acts' and 'socially stigmatized' acts. Acts that are regarded in some way as socially wrong are labeled by the sociologists as deviant. **Deviant acts** therefore, are all acts that are regarded as norm breaking whether they are legal or illegal. **Crime** is the violation of any law (law breaking act), whereas **delinquency** is a crime committed by minors (those between the ages of 10 and 17).

The influences both formal and informal to maintain order in the society

This refers to the control, exercised in a variety of ways to curb and prevent deviant behaviour. Sociologists divide social controls into two main groups:

**Informal social control**

These controls are based on unwritten rules and acceptance of social norms. They form a close part of everyday social life, through agencies of socialization such as family, the school, peer group and the mass media.

- Positive sanctions: In conforming or obeying the established norms, individuals usually receive acceptance and rewards as positive sanctions for example they are shown respect or are trusted with personal matters.
- Negative sanctions: Individuals who break these norms receive negative sanctions for their deviant behaviour for example ridicule, comment or disgust shown to them.

**Informal Influences/ Agencies**

1. Socialization: Socialization is a wide ranging mechanism of various agencies which influence upon the behaviour of individuals in indirect way. These agencies are:

**a. Family**: This is where primary socialization takes place and children learn the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, gender roles and acceptance of parental authority. The approval or disapproval of parents can be important elements in encouraging children to conform to the expectations of social norms (can be in forms of praise, rewards, threats, teasing and even physical violence).

**b**. School: A school socializes pupils and sets standards of correct behaviour expected by the society through uniforms, school discipline and timely examinations. This is also achieved by sanctions such as detentions, suspensions, expulsions, merit points and other aspects of hidden curriculum.

c. Peer group: The peer group is a significant motivational element in either making an individual conform to the societal norms or to break those norms. The fear of rejection and ridicule by the peers may exert enormous influence on an individual's behaviour to act in a certain way.

**2. The media:** The mass media are a major source of information and can have powerful influence on people's attitudes, opinions and behaviour. The mass media carry out social control through the processes of norm setting and agenda setting. Norm setting means the mass media emphasizes and reinforces conformity to social norms and seek to isolate those who do not conform by making them the victims of unfavourable public opinion. Agenda setting is the idea that the media have an important influence over the issues by laying those issues in front of people on purpose. (News items, advertisements, talk shows are strategically designed and laid down before people by the media itself). Therefore media also plays a certain role in establishing social control in a particular society.

**3. Religion**: Religion or belief system of a particular society also plays a part in influencing peoples mind about right and wrong and thus has an impact on their behaviour. For example Christianity promises rewards (heaven) to those who conform to its teachings and punishments (an eternity in hell to those who disobey. Religious beliefs and teachings often support and reinforce the values and norms of society by giving them a 'sacred quality'. The Ten Commandments in Christianity reinforce values such as respect for human life, private property and monogamous marriage. Feelings of guilt (a guilty conscience) may occur if religious rules are broken by the believers – a sort of inner police officer controlling behaviour.

The development of subcultures with particular reference to youth cultures

A sub-culture is a smaller culture held by a group of people within the main culture of a society, in some ways different from the dominant culture but with many aspects in common with that main culture. Subcultural explanations of crime and deviance suggest that those who commit crime are to some extent not satisfied with the broader values of the society.

Deviance and youth subcultures

The development of deviant and criminal subculture among the youth is because of various reasons. Sometimes it is the economic dissatisfaction which leads to frustration. Sometimes due to a particular environment young people tend to develop deviant characteristics. Two main subcultures among the youth are identified with reference to crime and deviance:

**1. Status frustration and deviant subculture**:  Albert Cohen explains why so many young people who committed offences were from working class backgrounds. Cohen argued that the reason for this was their feeling of low self-esteem and low status gained at school. According to Cohen, working class boys are more likely to fail at school and consequently feel humiliate. In an attempt to deal with this and gain status amongst their peers, they develop subcultures which invert traditional middle class values such as obedience, politeness and obeying the law. Instead they behave badly and engage in a variety of anti social behaviour. At school messing about in class and destroying school property may replace the values of studying and exam success, stealing becomes a means of getting money (replacing career success) and vandalism replaces respect for property. Within the norms and values of their subculture i.e. such acts of delinquency enable these youngsters to gain a status in their peer group which the wider society has denied them.

**2. The working class subculture:** The values of working class males, often leads to crime among young people. This subculture engages men to demonstrate their toughness, masculinity and smartness to pursue excitement and thrill. For Robert Merton deviance is born out of reaction to the norms and values of the society. The major value is success defined financially. The norm to achieve this goal is hard work. Merton insists that young working class males are aware of this goal; they only lack the ability to score. Lacking the accepted norms of success, they steal, lie and cheat their way to financial success, since they know they cannot reach end through manual labour. This situation is referred as **Anomie**.

**Anomie (the gap between goals and means):** Inability to achieve the goals set by the society through conventional means leaves an individual in a condition of anomie or ambiguity. Anomie also means a lack of norms or "normlessness". People can be thrown into this situation for various reasons; the loss of loved one, marital breakdown, financial disaster or desire for immediate success being the most obvious reason.

**Gender and crime**

According to the official statistics, social trends pocketbook (1999) men commit far more crimes than women. Overall nearly five times as many men as women were found guilty. Theft and handling stolen goods is the most common offence for both men and women committing these offences.

**Explanation for females committing fewer crimes**

Females are generally socialized into a pattern of values and actions which stress that women are less aggressive and violent. These roles are taught through parents, schools, media etc. These differences may make it more likely that boys will get into trouble with the police later.

**Opportunity**

Throughout their lives females are shielded from opportunities to commit crime. Social control keeps them under the surveillance of parents, their peer group and male partners. Later women are usually responsible for looking after children. This also restricts opportunities for crime for women.

**Explanation of criminal behaviour**

**Biological explanation**

One of the earliest biological theories of crime was that of an Italian doctor, Cesare Lombroso, in the mid nineteenth century. After studying criminals in Italian prisons, Lombroso believed that criminals had distractive physical features. An all he studied some 400 prisons and concluded that criminals have large jaws, large ears, dark skin, flattened noses, thick hair and insensitivity to pain the fact that criminals shared these features , was an evidence that they were genetically abnormal.

**Criticism:**

There are a number of problems with Lombroso's study. He only studied the characteristics of people who had already been caught and sentenced. The prisoners may have had abnormalities because of poverty and malnutrition. Furthermore Lombroso also overlooked the environmental /socialization aspects which could be responsible for criminal behaviour.

**Psychological explanation**

Psychological explanations are in many ways similar to biological explanations as they explain crime by the criminal's personality and mental stability.

Hans Eyesenck believed that there were two basic types of personalities, the introvert and the extrovert.

- Introverts were shy and quiet.
- Extroverts were confident and outgoing.

Eyesenck argued that extroverts were more likely to get into situations where they might get into trouble as they were harder to socialize and get disciplined.

Another psychologist John Bowlby (1971), studied how human beings form attachments and how they experience grief and loss. He suggested that human have form infancy an overwhelmingly important affiliation to mothers. Disruption of relationship with mother in childhood may lead to psychopathic personality in later life. Bowlby claimed that criminals who constantly broke the law and showed little response to punishment had suffered from maternal deprivation in their early years.

**Social explanation of crime**

The social or sociological explanation of criminal behaviour looks into the relationship between the individual and culture, and how both help to create each other. The problem with biological and psychological explanation was considering individuals as solely responsible for deviant criminal behaviour. The concept of deviance is a social construct. For sociologist, crime and deviance occur within the social setting and framework, and are studied in terms of the social introduction which takes place between members of society and those who made and carry out the rules. The rule makers together with rule enforces interact with the rule breakers.

**Crime Statistics**

Crime statistics provide a measurement of crime in any society. However, these figures may not represent the actual amount of crime in the society. In the UK a government department, the home office publishes the official crime statistics annually but these are the only figures related to more serious offences. Less serious offences and those that are not reported to one police are excluded from the figures.

**Problems with measuring crimes**

In order for a crime to reach the official statistics and be recorded, two things are important.

**1) Reporting the crime to the police:**

- This is very important but doesn't always happen because;
- The victim/witness may be too frightened of the consequences,
- The mistrust with the police as the institution,
- In case of theft, consider too small to be reported,
- Sympathy with the offenders.

**2) The role of police in recording the crime:**

The police officers sometimes do not carry their role of recording crime in fair way. They have considerable influence and discretion over how they categorize incidents. Their priorties lead to uncovering of some crimes but may also help conceal the others.

**The dark figure:**

The above factors lead us to the conclusion that there is more actual crime than recorded crime. The difference between the actual crime and recorded crime is referred to as " dark figure". This is like the

part of an iceberg below the water, invisible but very crucial, sometimes large than the recorded crime figure.

**Crime surveys**

To resolve the problems of dark figure more systemically some attempts were made in order to estimate hidden crimes.

1: **Self report studies**; people volunteer by their free will to disclose /discover about their involvement in any deviant or criminal activity or their appearance in front of any court. In this case, anonymity of people is guaranteed.

2. **Victim study:** where a population is questioned as to whether they have been robbed, assaulted etc. some victim studies examine closely the influence of factors such as age, class, gender, and race on the nature and extend of crime that people experience.

3**. Labeling:** the way that people place labels on others based on stereotypes. It is particularly associated with the individuals becoming failures or deviant because of the labels attached to their behaviour by those in authority. People can be labeled as troublemakers or a fool as a saint.

4. **Who labels**: We are applied labels as part of everyday life. However, the agencies of social control are in much stronger positions to apply labels on individuals. In case of criminal offenses, it is the court which applies labels by finding someone guilty of an offense.

5. **Who gets labeled**: whether someone gets labeled or not depends upon that person's identity and image. Behaviour that is tolerated in one person may not be acceptable from another. Class, gender, ethnicity, age can all be involved in this. A research conducted in California regarding role of police in catching criminals found that the police had a stereotype image of an offender young black, working class male with an attitude of challenging authority.

6. **Deviant career**: being labeled makes it harder for an individual to continue with a normal life. People will treat the labeled person in terms of his/her label as a drug addict thief and so on. This can become a self fulfilling prophecy that is the person ends up more strongly committed to the deviance and may even have a deviant career.

**Media attention**

Role of media in highlighting crimes through moral crusade: They create moral panic by projecting random incidents of hooliganism, making them as big as possible.

The creation "folk devils" of modern criminal terminology includes,

- Punks
- Mods and rockers
- Hell's angels
- Skinheads etc