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2001

## Epidemiology of deviance

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### Recommended Citation

Crews, G. A. (2001). Epidemiology of deviance. In C. Bryant (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Deviant Behavior, Volume One: Historical, Conceptual, and Theoretical Issues*, pp. 143-147. Florence, KY: Brunner-Routledge.

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# Epidemiology of Deviance

## Definitions: Structural Dimensions of Deviance

Deviance (Goode, 1997), in a general sense, is behavior that some members of a given society will find “offensive”. It is behavior which brings about, or would bring about if it were discovered, disapproval, punishment, condemnation, or hostility from another. This is any behavior that is likely to get the actor into “trouble”. Deviance is behavior which is considered to be outside the “bounds” of a given group or society. Another definition, in a more working sense, is “any departure from a social norm which does or could provoke sanctions” (p. 37).

Deviance is a relative term. It is impossible to identify any certain act and find it universally condemned by all societies as a “Deviant” act (this includes acts such as incest and murder). Behavior or acts considered Deviant in one society might not be in another. Even within an individual society, behavior or acts that have been labeled as “Deviant” are continually undergoing redefinition. In every society, what is Deviant at present may very well not be so in the near future (Henslin, 1999).

The United States' Legal System currently categorizes the behaviors it identifies as “Deviant” in four ways: (1) Statistical: behavior judged on the basis of its frequency of occurrence (i.e., if the majority of people in a given society engage in a particular behavior, then the behavior is considered “normal”); (2) Absolutist: behavior is judged based on socially established categories and rules of defining Deviance; (3) Reactivist: behavior which acquires a Deviant connotation when others observe and judge it to be Deviant; and (4) Normative: Deviance is considered to be any act which violates a societal norm or custom relative to a specific social circumstance (Kendall, 1998, p.57).

Some (Kendall, 1998) also attempt to separate Deviant behavior into three levels of behavior: (1) Routine or Normal Behavior: behavior which is “legal” and requires no real understanding or action; (2) Routine Deviance: behavior which is generally criminal in nature and must be corrected or prevented; and (3) Bizarre Deviance: behavior which shocks or terrifies citizens and which must be eradicated for the general “good” of society (p.58).

There are myriad of views on Deviance. Many, under the Traditional View, see Deviance as any harmful and unhealthy behavior, most often “immoral” in nature. Under this view, is also the belief that society must gain an understanding of the “causes” of Deviance in order to control it. Others may view Deviance in a more Reactionist fashion; the view that any behavior must be swiftly dealt with once identified as “Deviant”. Many others view Deviance from a Normative perspective. That is, Deviant behavior is “normal” and should be expected given the conflictive and often oppressive nature of most societies (Thio, 1983).

Finally, in regards to the structural dimensions of Deviant behavior, Deviance is not just simply behavior; it involves a “moral” judgment. An act, to be considered Deviant, must involve a judgment being made by someone other than the actor. Actually, any act one can commit “can”, in theory, be viewed as Deviant by another (Henslin, 1999).

### Why Study Deviance?

Some may wonder why the topic of Deviance is worthy of any examination. A primary reason for the study of Deviance is to facilitate interventions in society. This facilitation is assisted by the field of Criminology and is of great assistance to other fields, such as law enforcement, penology, social work, and medicine. A secondary reason for studying Deviance is the residual effects of increased insight, empathy, and self-awareness one gains from such an examination. Still, others find that their own intellectual curiosity or possibly a way to

experience other “practices” in a vicarious manner generates interest in such study. On a more negative note, some become interested in the study of Deviance simply to gain “cheap thrills” or possible “insider knowledge” for increased sophistication in areas that are already being practiced.

### Standards of “Normalcy”

It is a widely accepted view that all societies have had, and will continue to have, some level of crime and Deviance. Complete and total positive socialization is impossible. Emile Durkheim (1895) was one of the first to view Deviance as “normal” to all healthy, well-functioning societies. He believed a certain amount of Deviance actually affirmed cultural values and norms by clarifying “boundaries” of acceptable behavior. By establishing these boundaries, Deviance actually promoted solidarity. Durkheim also offered the idea that Deviance actually encouraged social change, most often in positive directions.

Deviance is, of course, more often viewed as a dysfunctional element in society. Widespread Deviance in a society can cause excessively high crime rates and destroy trust and solidarity in individual communities. Certain types of Deviance can facilitate increased societal disorganization and leave segments of a given population with high levels of Anomie, thus producing fertile grounds for more Deviance.

### Classic and Contemporary Views on Deviance

Throughout history, there has been a myriad of explanations to the phenomena of Deviance. For centuries, the Western World’s view of Deviance has been strongly influenced by the church's view, which dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Religious Explanations were the first explanations for Deviance. Goode (1997) noted that from the beginning of time to the 1700s, the most dominant explanations of Deviance invoked visions of “evil spirits”. The Deviant was seen

as morally deprived and perhaps even possessed by the “Devil”. To most, during this time, alcoholism was viewed as a weakness; mental illness as irresponsibility; criminal and Deviant acts resulted from giving in to one’s evil nature; sexual Deviance was seen as moral depravity; and rebellion was seen simply as immaturity. Solutions used to correct demonic possession were extreme. Holes were drilled in the head of human “hosts” to let the evil spirits escape. The church also employed exorcisms. As other explanations for Deviance began to emerge, Demonic possession began to lose its support around the late 1700s.

The Positivist School of the second half of the 19th century (Crews, Montgomery, & Garris, 1996) argued that Deviant behavior was dictated by forces beyond the control, or even the awareness, of individuals. Biological explanations for Deviance became popular. According to the Positivist philosophers, only through scientific inquiry could one understand the forces which drive society. Cesare Lombroso (1836-1909), a well-known Positivist of the time, argued that certain physical abnormalities which afflicted people actually caused them to pursue Deviant (or criminal) activity. Lombroso argued that criminals were throwbacks to some sort of pre-human. Lombroso (Kendall, 1998) called these criminal types Atavists. He claimed that prisoners had "low foreheads and smaller than normal human cranial capacities" (p. 191). Lombroso thought he could predict Deviant behavior based on skull and body types.

Emerging views developed during the late 1800s called Functionalist theories, focused on the preservation of social order. Emile Durkheim (1895) emphasized the importance of Deviance in society as a tool for boundary maintenance. The “state”, which defines and identifies Deviance and administers the accompanying punishment, serves to educate the public by restating society's rules. Punishing violators reaffirms the rightness of society and its rules. Within this, Deviance was seen as an important element of social change because it offers

alternative definitions to what is right. Sometimes the alternative becomes acceptable and it may even become the dominant view.

Kendall (1998) suggested that one functionalist perspective raised the question of why people do not engage in more Deviance than they do. Logically, people who are poor might be pulled toward Deviance to alleviate their discomfort brought on by poverty. Kendall (1998) noted the poor might harbor feelings of aggressiveness and hostility and, therefore, will not want to act according to the dominant norms and values found in a given society. He suggested people often do not engage in Deviance because they have “outer containments” emanating from a supportive family and friends who reinforce the idea that Deviance is wrong, while inner containments, such as self-control and a sense of responsibility, actually reduce Deviance (p. 193).

In the early and mid-1900s, the Chicago School emerged and shifted the emphasis away from individual pathology to social structure. It represented an attempt to uncover the complex relationship between Deviance and neighborhood. The Chicago School discovered the highest rates of Deviance in neighborhoods considered transitional. According to the Chicago perspective, entire neighborhoods had become disorganized. The transitional neighborhood where one would expect to find Deviance, according to the Chicago School, has the following characteristics: (1) neighborhoods where immigrants first came; (2) the population was geographically unstable; (3) the transitional neighborhood contained a variety of racial and ethnic groups; (4) population density was very high; (5) high poverty; and (6) low levels of education.

Frederick Thrasher (1963) found a greater number of gangs in transitional neighborhoods than in more stable neighborhoods. He noted the “Gang” was a social creation. The gang was

the way people organized themselves to cope with disorganized neighborhoods. The gang functioned in two ways. First, it offered a substitute for what society failed to give. Second, it provided relief from suppression and distasteful living conditions. In this respect, the gang filled a gap and afforded an escape at the same time.

Goode (1997) has contended that Edwin Sutherland's Differential Association Theory was one of the more important theories in the study of Deviance while moving criminological thought into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It arose as a critique to those theories which sought biological explanations for Deviance. According to Differential Association Theory, people learned to be Deviant (Henslin, 1999). One learns Deviance the same as one learns to walk. People learn to be Deviant by associating with people who are Deviant. Criminal knowledge, skills, values, traditions, and motives are passed on by word of mouth. People develop Deviant lifestyles when they differentially associate with people who support norm violations. It is not especially necessary for people to associate with actual criminals; all that is needed is common criminal definitions.

Kendall (1998, p.196) argued, "delinquents and criminals are people who have been successfully labeled as such by others." The labeling, according to Howard Becker (The Outsiders), was done by "moral entrepreneurs." They were people who used their own views of right and wrong to establish rules and label others as Deviant. Kendall (p. 197) contended the process of labeling was "directly related to the power and status of the people who do the labeling and those who are being labeled."

The community most often defines Deviance. People, as they interact, define what is appropriate and what is not. Some people in a community have more power than others to define Deviance. People who occupy high positions within economic and political sectors are in a

stronger position to determine what laws are enacted and to enforce their definitions of Deviance. The upper class is in a better position to determine what crimes are seen as serious and they tend to point to problems associated with the lower classes.

Kendall (1998, p.194) contended that one conflict approach "focuses on how authority and power relations can contribute to some people, but not others, becoming criminal." According to this perspective, Deviance is a status rather than a behavior. Individuals acquire the Deviant status when people who create and enforce legal rules apply those rules to others. One can also explore the relationship between economic inequality and crime. Marxists would argue that "social institutions" (law, politics, education) create a superstructure that legitimizes the class structure and maintains the capitalists' superior position. Crimes people commit are based on their class position (Kendall, 1998). Poor people engage in crime where items of worth are taken by force or stealth. Upper-class crime, on the other hand, occurs by nonphysical means, like paper transactions or computer fraud (Kendall, 1998, p.194).

### Types of Deviant Behavior

If one were to compile a list of the most common types of Deviant behavior in America, there is little doubt that such behavior as drug addiction, prostitution, homosexuality, mental disorder, and crime would be among the most frequently cited examples. Probably, in the course of listing these types of Deviance, specific mental images would be pictured for each type, and in all likelihood these images would depict depraved and disheveled types of Deviants.

The following is a brief mentioning of the most common acts often labeled as Deviant and discussed in the literature.

### Sexual Behavior

There are traditionally (Holmes, 1991) four standards used to determine “normalcy” when it comes to perceptions of sexual behavior. The first is Statistical Standards (i.e., if the majority commit the act it could be viewed as normal); second, Cultural Standards (i.e., every society has set of customs and norms, if an act violates these it is considered Deviant); third, Religious Standards (i.e., right and wrong, thus non-Deviant and Deviant is determined by the teachings or doctrine of a particular religion); and, fourth, Subjective Standards (i.e., one’s behavior is judged by his or her own personal views, belief systems, and opinions).

### Homosexuality

Most people continue to view homosexuality as a Deviant sexual activity. There are many reasons why individuals place such a label on same-sex relations. One reason is the religious indoctrination most experience from childhood. From the Old Testament through modern times, Christianity has taught that homosexuality is a “sin”. Many are violently opposed to this sexual practice for “personal” reasons as well as religious ones (e.g., fear of AIDS). Numerous negative stereotypes exist dealing with homosexuals being pedophiles, sexual predators, emotionally unbalanced, and dangerous to children.

### Prostitution

There is no precise definition of prostitution (Goode, 1996). A rather simple definition of prostitution is the “act of selling sexual favors for money” (p. 38). Although a vague and ambiguous term, prostitution has long been a subject of great interest to many people. There are many stereotypes and myths that have evolved out of this interest over the centuries. First, some believe street prostitutes are primarily supplied through “white slavery” whereby young girls are kidnapped and forced into slavery. Second, many still believe all prostitutes are

“nymphomaniacs” who have an insatiable desire for sexual intercourse with numerous men. Third, some still believe the primary purpose for all prostitution is to support a growing “drug habit.” Finally, most people still assume prostitution is completely incompatible with personal religious beliefs and church attendance. There is no hard evidence that any of the preceding is true or has any merit.

### Drug Addiction

Many people (Thio, 1983) have been misled by the terms drug addition and drug abuse. This does not automatically mean the drug in question is a dangerous item, nor even an illegal substance. It should also be noted that drug addition and drug abuse are not generally scientific terms or objective ones. Instead, they are very social and subjective in nature. They are most often used to label any socially unacceptable alcohol or other drug use. It often has very little to do with the real nature of the drugs used, but instead, more so with the person using it.

### Mental Disorder

There are many popular misconceptions (Pfohl, 1994) in reference to mental disorders. First, the insane are popularly believed to be extremely “weird”. Second, it is widely taken for granted that there is a sharp difference between the mentally ill and the mentally healthy. Third, most mental illness is popularly believed to be the result of Hereditary Defects. Finally, mental illness is commonly felt to be a hopeless and incurable situation. The fact is that most mentally ill are relatively indistinguishable from the other members of a society. Within this is the fact that most mentally ill people do not demonstrate behaviors that are noticeably different from other members of society. It is true that some mental illness is from a genetic defect, but the majority is not. Also, with the progress of modern psychology and medicine, most mental illness, if not curable, is at least controllable.

## Crime

Generally, crime, in any form, is inherently viewed as Deviance. This is a natural occurrence in that most Deviant acts would be labeled and identified as crimes. Crime is a widely popular subject in modern media and entertainment. Unfortunately, it is most often portrayed in a very unrealistic fashion in the mass media. Criminals are often portrayed as “evil” beings, and, on the other hand, as “dark heroes” who are forced into Deviant behavior to “right” some identified “wrong”. This ambivalence toward crime reflects the popular attitude that criminals are far removed from “normal” society. Criminals are those who do not share the beliefs and experience of most citizens. Many do not like to believe it, but crime has become a part of everyday life. Criminals are part of people’s lives and families. Research continues to support the basic proposition that “criminals” are not that different from the majority of “law-abiding” society.

## Conclusion

The Epidemiology of Deviance can basically be summed up as any examination of the possible causes of, and identifying of contributing factors to, the spread of Deviance or Deviant behavior in a society. There are inherent structural dimensions to Deviance. Its distribution can be viewed from temporal as well as spatial perspectives. It can take on many different forms, but must have two elements to exist. First, there must be an “actor” to commit the act, and second, an “observer” who sees the act, makes a judgment, and then labels the act as “Deviant” or “non-Deviant.”

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