

PART II



Theories of Deviance

Deviance is especially intriguing to scholars of theory. Given its pervasive nature in society, its enigmatic conditions, and its generic appeal, even the earliest sociologists attempted to explain how and why deviance occurs. Especially considering people's inclination to conformity, the pressing question for scholars has dealt with *why* individuals engage in norm-violating behavior. Explanations for deviant behavior are as diverse as the acts they explain—ranging from acts of delinquency to professional theft, from acts of integrity to a search for kicks, from acts of desperation to those of bravado and daring. Below, we outline some of the major attempts at understanding deviant behavior.

THE STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Structural functionalism, the dominant theory in sociology for the first half of the twentieth century, also commanded the greatest amount of sway in explaining deviant behavior. Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist generally regarded as the founding father of sociology, advanced the theory that society is made up of the morals (norms, values, and laws) that individuals are taught to constrain their behavior. Durkheim believed that youngsters are taught the rights and wrongs of

society early in life, with most people conforming to these expectations throughout adulthood. These moral beliefs, in large measure, determine how people behave, what they want, and who they are. Durkheim suggested that societies with high degrees of social integration (bonding, community involvement) would increase the conformity of its members. However, and this is what concerned Durkheim, in the modern French society in which he was living, more and more people were becoming distanced from one another; people were losing their sense of belonging to their communities, and the norms and expectations of their groups were becoming less clearly defined. He believed that this condition, which he referred to as *anomie*, was producing concomitant social disintegration, leading to greater degrees of deviance. Thus, for Durkheim, although norms still existed on the societal level, the lack of social integration created a situation where they were no longer as significant to each individual.

Despite his concerns about increasing deviance in society, Durkheim also subscribed to the idea that deviance is functional for society. Curiously, Durkheim felt that deviance produces some positive benefits as well as its obvious negative effects. At a time when people are worrying about the moral breakdown and social disintegration of society, deviance serves to remind us of society's moral boundaries. Each time a deviant act is committed and publicly announced, society is united in indignation against the perpetrator. This serves to bring people together, rather than tearing them apart. At the same time, society is reminded about what is right and wrong, and, for those who conform, greater social integration ensues. These ideas were perhaps best illustrated by Yale sociologist Kai Erikson who, in his 1966 book *Wayward Puritans* (excerpted earlier), demonstrated the role of deviance in defining morality and bringing people together. Erikson examined Puritan patterns of isolating and treating offenders. For Erikson, deviance serves as a means to promote a *contrast* with the rest of the community, thus giving members of the larger society more strength in their moral convictions. Erikson's analysis focused on the transformation of the seventeenth century Bay Colony, as a group of revolutionaries tried to establish a new community in New England. These deviants, the revolutionaries, played an important role in the transformation of norms and values: Their behavior elicited societal reaction, which served to *clearly define* the new community's norms and values. In addition, punishing some people for norm violations reminded others of the rewards for conformity.

Our first selection in Part II, Durkheim's "The Normal and the Pathological," lays out his theory of the inevitability of deviance in all societies. Durkheim ironically argues that deviance is normal rather than pathological, serving a positive function in society. To achieve the maximum benefit, however, a society needs a manageable amount of deviance. When the numbers of people declared

deviant by current moral standards rises or falls too much, society alters its moral criteria to maintain the level of deviance in the optimal range. At different times, it may “define deviancy down,” as Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1993) has suggested, in looking at the way society adjusts the bar defining acceptable behavior, thereby normalizing the high levels of violence, divorce, and de-institutionalized mental patients inhabiting the streets. Or it may “define deviancy up,” as Charles Krauthammer (1993) has suggested, so that behavior formerly consider innocent has been negatively redefined, such as the way parents discipline their children (child abuse), casual sex (promiscuous and dangerous behavior), prejudice toward members of other ethnic groups (hate crime or intolerance). What deviance does for society is define the moral boundaries for everyone. Violation of norms reminds the masses about what is acceptable and what is not; in Durkheim’s words, it enforces the “collective conscience” of the group.* Perhaps it is difficult to imagine that disgusting, reviling, or even nauseating behavior can be beneficial to society at large because, as Durkheim’s theory suggests, the structural needs of the society as a whole, beyond the scope of its individual members, foster the continuing recurrence of deviance.

It was Robert Merton, a mid-twentieth century sociologist from Columbia University, who actually extended Durkheim’s ideas and built them into a specific structural theory of deviant behavior. In a wide-sweeping and influential article, “Social Structure and Anomie,” he claimed that contradictions are implicit in a stratified system in which the culture dictates success goals for all citizens, whereas institutional access is limited to just the middle and upper strata. In other words, despite the American dream of rags to riches, some people, most often lower-class individuals, are systematically excluded from the competition. Instead of merely going through the motions while knowing that their legitimate path to success (measured in American society by financial wealth) is blocked, some members of the lower-class retaliate by choosing a deviant alternative. Merton believed that these people have accepted society’s goals (to be comfortable, to get rich), but they have insufficient access to the approved means of attaining these goals (deferred gratification, education, hard work). The problem lies in the social structure in society, where even if people follow the approved means, there are roadblocks prohibiting them from rising through the stratification system. Deviant behavior occurs when socially sanctioned means are not available for the realization of highly desirable goals. The only way to achieve these goals is to detour around them, to bypass the approved means in order to get at the approved goals. For example, for young men raised in urban ghettos with poor housing facilities, dilapidated schools, and inconsistent

*The public outcry after the revelations of Clinton’s sex scandal offers a good illustration of this collective conscience.

family lives, their road to success is more likely to be through dealing drugs, pimping, or robbing than it is through the normative route of school and hard work. According to Merton, then, *anomie* results from the lack of access to culturally prescribed goals and the lack of availability of legitimate means for attaining those goals. Deviance (or, more specifically, crime) is the obvious alternative. Once again, structural opportunities or their lack are seen as the root cause of deviance, rather than some psychological or individual pathology.

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, in *Delinquency and Opportunity* (1960), thought that Merton was correct in directing us toward the notion that the lower-class has less opportunity for achieving success in a legitimate manner, but they thought that Merton wrongly assumed that the lower classes, when confronted with the problem of differential opportunity, could automatically choose deviance and crime. Cloward and Ohlin suggested that all lower-class people have some lack of opportunity for legitimate pursuits, but they do not have the same opportunity for participating in illegitimate practices. What Cloward and Ohlin believed was that deviant behavior depends on people's access to illegitimate opportunities. They found that three types of deviant opportunities are present: (1) criminal—similar to the type Merton described, these arise from access to deviant subcultures, though not all lower-class youth enjoy these avenues; (2) conflict—these attract people who have a propensity for violence and fighting; and (3) retreatist—these attract people who are not inclined toward illegitimate means or violent actions but who want to withdraw from society, such as drug users. Thus, Cloward and Ohlin extended Merton's theory by specifying the existence of differential illegitimate opportunities available to members of the lower class. It is in this opportunity structure, rather than individual motivation, they argue, that the explanation for deviance can be found.

Our third selection, "Conflict Theory of Crime" by Richard Quinney, offers an explanation that is not functionalist but is still structural. Conflict theorists see society differently from functionalists in their view of society as pluralistic, heterogeneous, and conflictual, rather than unified and consensual. Social conflict arises out of the incompatible interests of diverse groups in society, such as businesses versus their workers, conservatives versus liberals, Whites versus people of color, and the rich versus the poor. These groups have a structural conflict of interest with each other that stands above and beyond the individual members, framing the way they come to recognize their interests and act in the world. Not only is conflict a natural outcome of this arrangement, but crime is as well. In a succinct summation of conflict theory's major tenets, Quinney describes how crime exists because some behaviors conflict with the interests of the dominant class. These powerful members of society create legal definitions of human conduct, casting as criminal those behaviors that threaten their interests. Then, the dominant class

enforces those laws onto the less powerful groups in society—through the police, the legal system, and the criminal justice system—ensuring that their interests are protected. Members of subordinate classes are compelled to commit those actions that have been defined as crimes because their poverty presses them to do so. The dominant group can then create and disseminate their ideology of crime, which is that the most dangerous criminal elements in society can be found in the subordinate classes and that these groups deserve arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment. Through class struggle and class conflict, crime is constructed, formulated, and applied so that less powerful groups are subdued and more powerful groups are strengthened. These processes are illustrated by the diagram in Quinney's selection. This approach shows how larger social forces, such as group and class interests, shape the behavior of individual members, leading some to use their advantage to dominate whereas others react to their structural subordination by engaging in those behaviors already defined as deviant and deserving of punishment. All of these structural theories place the cause for the incidence of deviance on the structures of society, rather than on individuals and their problems.

THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Although structuralist theories had enormous impact on sociologists' thinking about deviance, others emerged who felt that these were not all-encompassing explanations. These theorists believed that deviance was a collective act, driven and carried out by groups of people. Building on conflict theory's view that multiple groups with different interests exist in society, the subcultural theorists examined the implications of membership in these groups. Groups with conflicting interests include not only dominant and subordinate groups but a variety of social, religious, political, ethnic, and economic factions. Membership in each of these groups places people in distinct subcultures, each of which contains its own set of distinct norms and values. A pluralistic nation that was once thought of as the world's melting pot, we have become, instead, a nation of many different groups, each with its own distinct subculture. Thorsten Sellin, in "The Conflict of Conduct Norms," our fourth selection, suggests that to some extent the norms and values of these subcultures incorporates and meshes with the norms and values of the overarching American culture; at the same time, to some extent they are different and in conflict. The disparities and different cultural codes between subcultural groups becomes apparent when people from one culture cross over into the territory of another culture, or when the laws of one cultural group are extended to apply to another. In these cases, people may find themselves torn between the norms and values of competing group memberships. Following the

norms and values of their subcultural group may produce behavior that becomes defined as deviant by the standards of the broader culture. Yet, from their subcultural perspective, their behavior may be viewed as representing the acts of good soldiers fighting for a cause against the encroachments of a larger, more impersonal society. Sellin was particularly thinking about the deviance of children belonging to immigrant ethnic or racial groups in the United States, caught in the struggle between two cultures, but his theory applies equally well to the large number of diverse subcultural groups in our country. He extended his model to apply to all conflicts among cultural groups that share a close geographic area, especially where there is normative and value domination by one culture over another.

Building on this idea, Albert Cohen, in *Delinquent Boys* (1955), showed that working-class adolescent males make up a subculture with a different value system from the dominant American culture. These boys, Cohen asserted, have the greatest degree of difficulty in achieving success because the establishment's standards are so different from their own. Exposed to middle-class aspirations and judgments they cannot reasonably fulfill, they develop a conflict (or strain) that leads them to experience "status frustration." What occurs from this frustration is the formation of a subculture that allows them to achieve status based on nonutilitarian, malicious, and negativistic behavior. These boys, in reaction to society's unfairness toward them, substitute norms that reverse those of the larger society. Cohen claimed that delinquent boys turned the society's norms "upside down," rejecting middle-class standards and adopting values in direct opposition to those of the majority.

Walter Miller (1958), writing just after Cohen, further delineated the importance of subcultural values for the development of deviant behavior. He believed that the values of the lower-class culture produce deviance because they are "naturally" in discord with middle-class values. Young people who conform to the lower-class culture in which they were born almost automatically become deviant. The culture of the lower class, by which members attain status in the eyes of their peers, is characterized by several "focal concerns": trouble, toughness, autonomy, street-smartness, and excitement. When individuals follow the norms of their culture, they become deviant according to the predominantly middle-class societal norms and values.

The lasting impact of subcultural theories has been to suggest that conflicting values may exist in society. When one part of society can impose its definitions on other parts, the dominant group has the ability to label minority group's norms, values, and behavior as deviant. Thus, any act can be considered deviant if it is so defined. These theories are suited to illustrating the motivations of people from minority or disadvantaged subcultures that are not well-aligned with the domi-

nant culture. They locate the explanation for deviance not in the structures that shape society but in the flesh of the norms and values that compose different sub-cultural groups. Through cultural transmission, groups pass down their norms and values from one generation to the next, ensuring their survival, social placement, and continuing cultural conflict.

THE INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Although the previous theories gave insight into some explanations for deviance, there are interactional forces that inevitably intervene between the larger causes they propose and the way deviant behavior takes shape. Many people are exposed to the same structural conditions and cultural conflicts and pressures that could account for deviance but still resist engaging in deviant behaviors. Interactionist theories fill this void by looking more closely at people's everyday behavior to try to understand why some people engage in deviance and others do not. They deal with real people in specific times and places. They look at how people actually encounter specific others and the influence of these others. They seek to understand not only *why* deviance occurs but *how* it happens. Many of these theories look at specific social-psychological and interactional dynamics, such as peer pressure, the influence of role models, and the role of peer groups. When people confront the problems, pressures, excitements, and allures of the world, they most often do so in conjunction with their peer groups. It is within peer groups that people make decisions about what they will do and how they will do it. Their core feelings about themselves develop and become rooted in such groups. People's actions and reactions are thus guided by the collective perceptions, interpretations, and actions of their peer groups.

Edwin Sutherland and Donald Cressey recognized this point when they proposed "Differential Association" theory of deviance, our fifth selection in Part II. The key feature of this view is the belief that deviant behavior is socially learned, and not from just anyone but from people's most intimate friends and family members. People may be exposed to a variety of deviant and nondeviant ideas and contacts without it necessarily leading them to engage in deviance. But as their circle of contacts shifts from being primarily composed of people who hold nondeviant ideas to more of those holding deviant ideas and favorable definitions of deviant acts, they become more likely to engage in deviance. The more their friends hold deviant attitudes and engage in deviant behavior, the more likely they are to follow suit.

Sutherland (1934) further suggests that people learn a variety of elements critical to deviance from their associates: the norms and values of the deviant

subculture, the rationalizations for legitimizing deviant behavior, the techniques necessary to commit the deviant acts, and the status system of the subculture, by which members evaluate themselves and others. Thus, people do not decide, at a fixed point in time, to become deviant but move toward these attitudes and behaviors as they shift their circle of associates from more normative friends to more deviant friends. The authors argue that people rarely stumble onto deviance through their own devising or by seeing acts of deviance in the mass media (as many would suggest), but rather by having the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, traditions, and motives passed on to them through interpersonal (not impersonal) means. The age at which people encounter this deviance is significant (earlier in life is likely to be more influential), as well as the intimacy of the deviant relationships (closer friends will have greater sway).

Also looking at deviance from the interactionist perspective, David Matza (1964) noted that this movement into deviant subcultures occurs through a process of “drift,” as people gradually leave their old crowd and become enmeshed in a circle of deviant associates. It rarely happens that they turn to deviance overnight but rather take smaller steps—gradually making deviant acquaintances, becoming familiar with deviant ideology, thinking about engaging in deviant acts, trying some out, and then expanding their frequency and range of deviance. They may drift between deviance and legitimacy, keeping one foot in each world without having to make a commitment to either for quite some time. At some point they may decide to align more firmly with one side, or this may be forced on them by outside events (getting caught, moving away, becoming sick). Quitting deviance is a similarly gradual and difficult process, requiring the abandonment of the group of deviant friends and reintegration in conventional circles before normative behavior becomes thoroughly ingrained.

A third theory under the interactionist perspective is labeling theory, the subject of our sixth selection. This approach suggests that many people dabble to greater or lesser degrees in various forms of deviance. Studies of juvenile delinquency suggest that rates of youthful participation are extremely widespread, nearly universal. How many people can claim to have reached adulthood without experimenting in illicit drinking, drug use, stealing, or vandalism? Yet, do all of these people consider themselves deviants? Most do not. Many people retire out of deviance as they mature, thereby avoiding the deviant identity altogether. Others go on to engage in what Howard Becker (1963) has called “secret deviance”—conducting their acts of norm violation without ever seriously encountering the deviant label. Yet others, many no more experienced in the ways of deviance than the youthful delinquent or the secret deviant, become identified and identify themselves as deviants. What causes this difference? One critical difference, label-

ing theory suggests, lies in who gets caught. Getting caught sets off a chain of events that leads to profound social and self-conceptual consequences. Frank Tannenbaum (1938) has described how individuals are publicly identified as norm violators and branded with that tag. They may go through official or unofficial social sanctioning where people identify and treat them as deviant. Becker (1963: 9) noted that “the deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.” Deviance exists at the macro societal level of social norms and definitions through the collective attitudes we assign to certain acts and conditions. But it also emerges at the micro everyday-life level when the deviant label is applied to someone. The thrust of labeling theory is twofold, focusing on diverse levels and forces. As Edwin Schur (1979: 160) summarized its complexity,

The twin emphases in such an approach are on *definition* and *process* at all the levels that are involved in the production of deviant situations and outcomes. Thus, the perspective is concerned not only with what happens to specific individuals when they are branded with deviantness (“labeling,” in the narrow sense) but also with the wider domains and processes of social definitions and collective rule-making that frequently lie behind such concrete applications of negative labels. (*Italics in original.*)

In our labeling theory selection, Becker emphasizes that deviance lies in the eye of the beholder. In so doing, he integrates some of the arguments of conflict theory with the interactionist everyday-life perspective by starting with the power struggle between dominant and subordinate groups and following through with the interactional consequences. There is nothing inherently deviant in any particular act, he claims, until some powerful group defines the act as deviant. Taking the onus off of the individual, Becker emphasizes the importance of looking at the process by which people are labeled deviant and of understanding that deviance is a consequence of others’ reactions. This approach forces us to look, then, at how people are defined as deviant, why some acts are labeled and others ignored, and the circumstances that surround the commission of the act. Thus, deviance only exists when it is created by society. The key emphasis of the labeling theory approach to deviance lies in the importance of peer interaction in understanding the root cause of human behavior.

Rooted at the micro level but looking less at the specific dynamic of interaction and more at the relationship between individuals and society is Travis Hirschi’s “Control Theory of Delinquency,” the subject of our last selection in this part. Like labeling theory, which assumed that people readily engage in acts of deviance but focused its explanation on the process of identity change that occurs when individuals are caught and labeled, control theory finds it unnecessary

to seek the causes of deviant behavior. These are obvious, these theorists assert, as deviance and crime are not only fun, but they offer shortcuts and yield immediate, tangible benefits (albeit, with a risk). What we should seek to understand, instead, is what holds people back from committing these acts, what forces constrain and control deviance. Hirschi's answer is that social control lies in the extent to which people develop a stake in conformity, a *bond to society*. People who have a greater investment in society will be less likely to risk losing this through norm or law violations and will follow the rules more willingly. They may have such a stake through their job, relationships to friends and family, or their reputation in the community. Their stake may be fostered by any of the four components discussed in this selection: attachment to conventional others, commitment to conventional institutions, involvement in conventional activities, and deep beliefs in conventional norms. The extent to which society is able to foster greater bonds between itself and its potentially deviant members, by giving them a greater stake in achieving success, will affect the constraint or spread of its deviance, particularly Hirschi notes, of the delinquent variety. It is these ties, interactionally forged and maintained, that influence individuals in their choice between deviant or nondeviant pathways.

Although these overarching perspectives and the theories nested within them differ in the level at which they place their explanations, they all locate them squarely in the social domain. In this they renounce the prevailing tendency toward unidimensional psychological explanation that roots causation in pathology, compulsion, neurosis, or maladjustment—explanations whose oversimplicity and inadequacy in a modern, complex world cannot be overstated.