

## SOC 3290 Deviance

### **Lecture 3: Social Theory and Deviance: An Introduction:**

Today I will be providing you with a critical introduction to social theory in relation to deviance, something that we will be spending the next month reviewing in detail. I will first briefly review the basic elements of social theory outlined in the book. I will then consider a more radical approach to understanding social theory in the work of Stephen Pfohl.

#### **(1) The Components of Social Theory:**

Social theory, including theories of deviance, are made up of 3 elements: (1) an explanatory framework; (2) a strategy for checking whether observed facts fit the proposed explanation; and (3) policy recommendations setting out effective courses of action to respond to the type of deviance explained.

The first element, setting out an explanatory framework, generally involves identifying underlying mechanisms that either lie behind (i) the violation of social norms or (ii) the designation of certain behaviors as deviant or criminal. These may be either explicit or implicitly stated, and involve a wide variety of factors (e.g. who one associates with; class background, etc.) Once these precipitating factors are identified, theories must go on to describe how these either produce deviant behavior or result in certain behavior being identified as deviant (e.g. associating with a “bad crowd” already engaging in deviance fosters the acquisition of skills and rationalizations for deviant acts).

Next, turning to the second element of theory, if we stick with the idea of hanging with deviant associates resulting in nascent deviant behavior, researchers must check whether the friendship patterns of delinquents and non-delinquents to see if this idea holds water. If delinquents hang with delinquents - and non-delinquents don't, then the facts back up the theory.

Finally, social control policies rooted in this idea would probably involve reducing delinquents' associations with one another and promoting more activities with conventional peers. Similarly, correctional policies would do everything possible to avoid the “crime school” environment of prison in favor of community settings for minor offenders.

Now that we have briefly introduced the major elements of theory, we should elaborate a bit on each of these to lay the groundwork for the detailed review of sociological theories of deviance we will be conducting over the next month.

#### **Theory as Explanation:**

A consideration of theory as explanation emphasizes three points: (i) the differences between sociology and other approaches attempting to explain deviance; (ii) the tension between

theories emphasizing structure vs. process; and (iii) the significance of several foundational assumptions of sociological theories of deviance.

When considering *differences between sociology and other approaches*, we have to be aware that disciplines like biology and psychology provide explanations for deviance distinct from sociology in two ways. First, both concentrate solely on the conduct of individuals, while sociology emphasizes both the individual and group levels. Secondly, biological and psychological explanations view deviance exclusively as the violation of social norms, while sociology considers both “objective” norm violation and subjective social definition in their perspectives on deviance (e.g. how knowledge and power intersect to more readily designate the less powerful deviant).

To illustrate biological and psychological explanations, let’s consider serial killers. Biological explanations focus on incriminating physiological traits (e.g. genetics, brain disorders, injuries, chemical imbalances in the brain, etc.) Psychological interpretations zero in on personality deficiency, psychopathology or psychosis. Psychologists locate the background for these disorders in childhood deprivation, behavioral conditioning, or Freudian ideas like the Oedipus complex. These largely operate at the micro-level.

Sociologists, on the other hand, distinguish three levels of analysis: micro (individual), meso (groups), and macro (characteristics of an entire population). These operate like a continuum along which behavior varies in breadth and detail. Micro theories look at social learning and interaction, focusing on the processes through which people learn to deviate and develop self concepts (e.g. learning the “tricks of the trade” and rationalizations to protect one’s self concept). Meso level theories provide explanations emphasizing subcultural groups as the unit of analysis. The reasons why groups engage in deviant activities and the ways in which they are organized in these actions are the focus of meso-level investigation (e.g. gangs, nudist camps, etc.) Macro level theories, finally, focus on the distribution of actions and attitudes across very large aggregates of individuals who, while sharing some characteristics, may not interact, communicate, or work together. They may simply share attributes like class, race and gender. Such explanations concentrate on explaining large scale social, temporal, and geographical patterns in the distribution of deviance and crime (e.g. male dominance in most types of crime, class differences in offending patterns, etc.)

In addition to differing from biological and psychological theories in terms of the additional levels of analysis utilized, sociological theory differs in that it doesn’t necessarily view deviance as the violation of existing, agreed-upon norms. For example, constructionist and conflict theorists view designations of deviance as social constructions, the latter adding that certain groups in society have more power than others to influence the design, implementation and enforcement of rules that transform some people into deviants - generally in a discriminatory fashion. Sociological theories don’t necessarily accept the common sense views of the status quo (e.g. double standards for vandalism vs. pollution; workplace injury vs. assault; alcohol vs. marijuana; “one man’s terrorist = another’s freedom fighter”; prostitution vs. marriage; etc). The

more critical sociological approaches noted attempt to explain why relatively minor actions glean the full weight of the law while other, often less harmful activities are fairly likely to go unpunished. The answer generally has to do with the power of those who are dominant in class, race and gender terms.

Moving on now to the tension between *theories emphasizing structure vs. process*, it is important to note that explanations of deviance vary in their relative emphasis on the determinative impact of social structure as opposed to the various processes by which people are designated, and learn to internalize, deviant identities. Structural explanations focus on the impacts of external social and economic factors over which the individual has little or no control (e.g. age, sex, income, family and work status, education, employment opportunities, and power). Structure oriented theories argue that variations in these factors determine whether attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors conform or deviate from social expectations. Process centered theories, in contrast, focus on the process of becoming deviant and developing a deviant self-concept. For example, they look at how people learn to define their particular situation and how their cultures socialize them to develop deviant identities facilitating long term involvement in deviant careers. In this regard, negative responses to individuals from their personal associates and the powerful justice system play a key role.

A recent trend has involved attempts to bridge the structure-process divide by constructing integrated theoretical models comprising aspects of both. It is argued that an individual's position in the social structure affects his/her involvement in certain subcultural groups. This, in turn, influences the development of definitions of the situation that affect self-concept and either support or undermine participation in deviant activity (e.g. "Latchkey kids" from lower class, minority backgrounds and broken homes having less supervision, being more likely to associate with negative peer groups holding values supporting delinquency, followed by the development of deviant identity and action).

Finally in this respect, it is important to consider the three basic assumptions of sociological theory in relation to deviance: (i) human nature; (ii) order in society; and (iii) the relationship between the individual and society.

Sociological theories tend to view human nature as either intrinsically good or inherently bad. In the former view, people deviate either because structural forces outside of their control compel them to, or because more powerful groups unjustly define them as deviant. The opposing view holds that people would generally deviate if they could, but are held in check by some combination of informal and formal controlling forces.

Next, in relation to the question of order vs. disorder, some sociological approaches view society as being held together by a series of norms, values, and beliefs around which there is much consensus - deviance being simply a violation of these consensual norms. In contrast, other approaches conceive of society as containing competing groups, each with different conceptions of conformity. Given such a diversity of views, and that the dominant perspective may change

over time, behavioral norms easily become unclear and unstable. Deviance becomes a matter of definition, and some behaviors of the relatively powerless will eventually become violations. Such conflict approaches emphasize the source of the rules, the ways in which they are differentially applied, and the ways in which some become rule breakers by definition.

Finally, different theories have a different take on the relationship between the individual and society. Some approaches view people as largely passive, with forces in the environment beyond their control shaping their conduct. Others pay more attention to peoples' capacity for action, choice, and agency - largely related to their interpretation, reaction, and actions intended to change the social environment.

### **Empirical Assessment of Sociological Theory:**

In addition to their primary goal of providing explanations for deviance, sociological theories typically contain an empirical component that makes systematic evaluation on the basis of evidence possible. Evidence must be something that can be observed and measured (e.g. whether unemployment is statistically associated with theft, not whether one's id is insufficiently constrained by the superego). Comparing the rates of theft for the employed and unemployed would permit the conformation or rejection of the hypothesis that theft is caused by the economic deprivations of unemployment. This could also be examined by looking at rates of theft in high vs. low unemployment cities or regions. If this did not support the hypothesis, then theorists would have to either reject the hypothesis, or modify the theory to account for this discrepancy.

In studying deviance, there are a variety of sources of evidence or empirical data. Sometimes these are quantitative (e.g. surveys, experiments, official records); other times qualitative (e.g. participant observation studies, intensive interview, historical analysis). But, one way or the other, sociological theory should be testable. Simple logical consistency is insufficient for explanation: evidence is needed. Otherwise, some theorists argue, one is merely dealing with ideology.

### **Social Policy and Sociological Theory:**

In providing explanations for deviance backed up by evidence, theory also provides ideas, even advice for policymakers. For example, it sheds light on the kinds of actions that can be taken to alleviate the problems in question. For example, social policy may recommend either taking steps to change the behavior of perpetrators or changing the social structure in ways that will reduce or eliminate the deviant or criminal activity in question. What the process of policy formulation amounts to is the identification of crucial precipitating conditions and the subsequent altering of those conditions to produce the desired positive result.

For theories defining deviance as a matter of norm violation, policies are usually directed at the punishment, treatment, and rehabilitation of individual offenders (e.g. punishment for violent crime rather than whipping or execution; chemicals vs. straightjackets for the mentally ill;

and educational/vocational programs for inmates rather than simply being locked away). On the other hand, when theories define deviance primarily in terms of social definition, policy recommendations typically involve modifying laws and enforcement practices, or doing away with them altogether. Some in this vein recommend stiffer penalties for corporate crime, the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and the decriminalization of morality offences.

While most theories offer policy suggestions, many factors stand in the way of their implementation. These include societal values, technology, and the distribution of power across social groups. For example, it may not be feasible to socially engineer closer ties between individuals and the community as suggested by control theory, and the actions that would need to be taken would likely violate not only social values of freedom and democracy, but human rights as well. Finally, despite the fact that material and social inequality contributes greatly to crime, it is no surprise that proposals to share material resources equally among all members of society is likely to be met with considerable resistance by the wealthy and powerful. Hence, despite what theory and evidence suggests, it is not necessarily the case that it will be translated into practice in social policy. Indeed, at times social policy is put forth without a sound basis in theory and research.

## **(2) Stephen Pfohl: A Critical Approach to Deviance Theory**

Over the next month, we will be telling an historical and sociological story about the invention and use of various theoretical perspectives on deviance. Each perspective guides the way we think about and act towards deviance. We will examine the dominant theoretical imagery, research strategies, and practical control policies associated with various perspectives, which, at one time or another, have captured the imagination of Western society.

All theoretical perspectives represent historically specific standpoints. They embody the perspectives of particular authors within contradictory and often politically charged social contexts. In this respect, two issues become particularly relevant: (1) the disciplinary character of various perspectives; and (2) the relationship between each perspective and social power.

### **Disciplinary Images:**

Today there are many specialists in the study and control of deviance, but not all view it in the same way. Psychiatrists, sociologists, criminologists, medical researchers, and others frequently exhibit divergent and even contradictory images of deviance. In this respect, images of deviance are commonly organized - or refracted - according to the selective vision of their disciplines. The images of deviance that one is trained to see in a police academy are far different than those we are trained to see in the sociology classroom, an historical archive, or psychology lab. Each type of training may literally discipline the perceptions, moral judgements and controlling outlooks of those who study deviance.

This overspecialized division of theoretical images between competing disciplines is

unfortunate, as some of the most important insights are generated on the fringes between disciplines. Interdisciplinary work forces us to confront the rich and complex relationships between the economy and culture, past and present, the body, mind, and social environment, or between our society and others. Hence, we will attempt in discussing particular theoretical images to pay attention to not only criminological theory, but to the concerns of a variety of disciplines (e.g. sociology, history, psychiatry, law, social work, anthropology, medicine, theology, etc.) We will also move from materials considered “scientific” to those more “artistic” in nature. By pointing to parallels between the images of deviance produced by both, I’m suggesting that both types of imagery arise out of a pool of common experience - that of people in historical situations trying to make sense of the long human struggle for control over ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

### **Social Power:**

Along with interdisciplinary concerns, much of what we will be discussing will be guided by the *power-reflexive perspective*. This is a critical approach to deviance, rooted in the recognition that every act of naming, theorizing, or translating peoples’ experience into writing is, by its very nature, also an act of exclusion, displacement or sacrifice (i.e. “what you see necessarily limits what you don’t see”). In other words, when one relates a theoretical story about an experience, certain aspects of that experience are singled out while others are marginalized, silenced, or made unthinkable.

The ability to differentiate between different interpretations of the same event is part of the constructive power of any theoretical approach. Theories inevitably frame what we perceive in certain ways but not others. What makes a power-reflexive perspective deconstructive is its attempt to situate its own claims of knowledge as themselves contingent upon their theorists’ own personal and historical relations to power. This is to act upon the recognition that all theoretical constructions, including power-reflexive ones, are never separated from the complex and contradictory scenes of power in which they are materialized in one way but not others. In this way, a power-reflexive viewpoint attempts to work with, rather than avoid, the awareness that the observer (or theorist) always plays an active role in the selective framing of meaningful knowledge.

Using this approach involves inquiring not only about the dynamics of deviance and social control, but also about how theorists’ own social positioning may influence the kind of questions they ask and the range of answers they envision as possible. Does it make a difference that the most influential theories of deviance have been formulated by economically advantaged, selectively educated, straight white men working in prestigious academic settings? If theories about nonconformity were constructed by the alleged deviants themselves, how different might the theoretical understandings be?

As we can see, theoretical perspectives on deviance are never neutral scientific matters. They are always political as well as scientific concerns, connected to the historical organization of both power and knowledge. Who gains and who loses as certain perspectives become accepted

by the powerful? To ask such a question is to begin theorizing, to recognize that deviance may in some ways challenge existing power relations - whether economic, sexual, racial, cultural, etc. At all times it is political - affecting the ways that power is socially organized and used.

The recognition that all theories of deviance are also political theories means that certain segments of society are likely to prefer some theoretical perspectives over others. Those who believe in the desirability of a particular social order may view deviance in a way that those in power favor, seek to explain it in a way to more efficiently control people, and be awarded large research grants and prestigious jobs. Those, however, who are less comfortable with the ways things are, and focus on deviance as a symptom of social inequality, may find their theoretical viewpoints less professionally profitable.

So important questions to ask up front include (1) how it is that you view our society? (2) How do your professors and fellow students see the socio-political order? These questions are undoubtably complex, but also suggestive of the simplest of all sociological truths: how each of us construct ideas about deviance is contingent upon the scenes of power in which we find ourselves in history. In our society such scenes are typically hierarchical, dramatized by social inequality between classes, genders, and races.

It is within such contradictory social scenes that we may come to partially theorize problems posed by deviance and social control. This partiality is in two senses: (1) all forms of knowledge are incomplete, haunted by the shadows of what they leave out. We can strive for objectivity, but not by pretending that we can ever become fully detached from our backgrounds, but by systematically exploring the ways that our inevitable political attachments filter how we perceive deviance. In searching for objectivity, we thus must also consider the ways that “objective standards” are themselves partially shaped by the changing historical contexts in which they are produced. (2) Our investigations are also partial because they cannot escape being political. By directing attention to some things and not others, all theories empower certain viewpoints over others. To work with, rather than deny, the partiality of theory is a challenge for all who study deviance and social control. To accept this challenge means that we must remain vigilant about how our views are shaped, to revise our viewpoints, etc. Otherwise, the endpoint of our investigations will merely lead us back to the beginning.

### **Substantive and Personal Concerns:**

There is little escape from the above issues. No matter what the situation (e.g. a family crisis, a difficult roommate, becoming the victim of a crime, etc.) we are often confronted with questions of deviance and the often harsh realities of social control. Such issues are never easy. Indeed, they are uneasy in two senses. First, because questions about what causes deviance and its control are difficult to answer (i.e. is it a matter of free choice? Is it biologically or psychologically determined? Is deviance learned? Or is it a matter of overzealous social control?). Which of these views is correct? Are any? By what standards is correctness measured? To even begin the analysis requires that we dig deeply into the social, political and economic

landscape out of which images of deviance are born and upon which they implant their vision of social control.

It is important to recognize that the major perspectives used to make sense of deviance and develop strategies of social control are produced at certain moments of history. Put into practice, they then create history as well. It is important to examine how well both the theories and the strategies they suggest have stood the tests of time, experience, and systematic research

Questions about deviance and social control are uneasy at a second level as well - that of our own personal choices, feelings and political commitments. Here, we are challenged to delve beneath our surface thoughts and feelings, to become reflective and critical about things we have come to take for granted as acceptable or repulsive (e.g. the often cited term “Islamic extremism”). How is it that we have come to accept or reject certain ways of thinking, feeling and acting? How have our attitudes been influenced - subtly, almost imperceptibly - by the powers that be? What are the consequences for us and for others in our present social, economic and political reality? How do we benefit? How do others lose? Could we do better? Should we try to do something about it? Would we be considered deviants if we did? Such questions will not and should not make us feel comfortable. They ask us not only about who we are but about whom we could become as well.

The uneasy nature of our questions about deviance and social control is quite real. Some find this disturbing, upsetting, or disquieting. Some feel that they have lost their innocence, others experience feelings of guilt. Yet, in the long run, such difficult questions challenge us to examine critically the simultaneous formation of both deviant and normal realities - including our own. By enabling us to piece together a critical, well-rounded understanding of how our own personal realities have been shaped by the ever-present processes of social control, the experience can be quite exhilarating.

For example, our worlds can become wider and deeper. We may delve behind and below the ordinary, taken-for-granted surface of everyday social life by taking a hard look at deviants - who they are and what they do - and at control processes - who or what gets controlled, how, and why. This can provide us with the freedom of greater personal and social movement - crossing previously taken for granted boundaries. It may also present us with new senses of personal responsibility for our actions and the actions of our fellow deviants and controllers alike.

### **Conceiving and Controlling Deviance:**

A fundamentally important issue is how any given image of deviance determines one's actions in concrete situations (e.g. like the patient in the N.S. on whom I had to serve court guardianship documents). Theoretical perspectives are, at bottom, ways of naming, ways of conceptually ordering our senses of the world. They are tools with which we decide what we experience, why something is the way that it is, and how we might act or react. Having defined the patient as unpredictable and violent on the basis of others' stories, and assuming that serving



guardianship papers would provoke a similar outburst, I directed my action cautiously - making sure that a psychiatrist and orderlies were with me. Upon discovering that the patient was merely a sweet old woman with a failing memory, I redefined the situation and my actions toward her changed. The person didn't change, but my perspective. That made all the difference.

Theoretical images give us an image of what something is and how we might best act toward it. They name something as this type of thing and not that. They provide us with a sense of being in a world of relatively fixed forms and content - transforming a mass of raw sensory data into understanding, explanations, and recipes for appropriate action. Without them, we would be lost, have no control over what we experience, and not know what to do. Without the guidance of theoretical perspectives, we are unable to define, explain, or know how to act towards the objects of our experience.

This link between theoretical perspectives and the sense of having control over a world of ordered experience is important. To name something in a certain fashion is the first step in gaining control over it. To cast something into a theoretical perspective is to restrict it to being a certain type of thing (e.g. a dangerous lunatic). For the moment, she could practically be nothing else - caught in a web of names, frozen in a perspective. While this ultimately proved illusory, it was nonetheless a powerful illusion that influenced my actions and those of control agents. It was capable of exerting control over what it named.

This is merely one example. Throughout history so-called deviants have been subject to various namings emanating from various theoretical perspectives. Each provided explanatory images regarding why people deviate and images of control - images suggesting strategies for restoring conventionality. Some, those that were relatively simple, unreflected upon, and taken for granted, may be called commonsense perspectives.

Today there are a variety of competing commonsense perspectives on deviance (e.g. as sickness, immorality, statistical rarity, trouble-making, etc.) Each sheds light on some aspects of deviance while casting a shadow on others. Moreover, most people think and act on the basis of different perspectives in concrete situations (e.g. alcoholics as having a disease, the promiscuous as immoral, the troublesome co-worker as a "shit disturber," and so on).

While commonsense theoretical perspectives are important, we are concerned in this course with more formal theoretical perspectives. These are generally more elaborate, more explicitly stated, and subject to a continuous process of refinement and validation. It is upon these formal theories that society erects its public policies for dealing with deviance. Nevertheless, we shouldn't exaggerate the difference between formal and commonsense theories, since these are frequently interrelated socially, economically, politically and spiritually in specific historical contexts.

### **Formal Theories of Deviance in the West:**

Any one human act can be conceptualized in terms of literally hundreds of theoretical perspectives. Each names the act in a particular way, directing attention to certain of its aspects while selectively ignoring others (e.g. waving one's hand: as a greeting, a salute, urging one to stop, as a dismissive gesture, in some cultures as an insult, a sign of submission, as sign language, etc.) The same can be said of perspectives on deviance and social control.

In this class (and next) we will be taking an in-depth look at Western society's most important theoretical perspectives on deviance and social control. Each offers a distinctive theoretical image of what deviance is, how it can best be studied, and how it should be controlled. Several overlap with one another in certain respects; others contain a variety of sub-themes or subsidiary perspectives. We are generally going to move from the oldest perspectives forward in time, studying these perspectives in a chronological order. While ordered in terms of the general time periods in which each emerged as influential or dominant, each remains alive and important in today's world.

In dealing with each theoretical perspective, we will do three things: (1) describe its basic theoretical imagery, research strategies, and suggested social control policies; (2) locate the perspective within a general socio-historical framework; and (3) outline a critique of the perspective's strengths and weaknesses.

Taking the first matter first, we must recognize that the imagery underlying each perspective is merely one way to look at the phenomena of deviance. How we conceive of deviance influences our methods of research and our ideas about appropriate strategies of social control. Each of the perspectives we will be dealing with is aligned with a particular research methodology as well as a unique vision of appropriate social control policies. That is why we will begin discussion of each perspective with a detailed description of the theory, methods, and control policies associated with it.

Secondly, since different perspectives have dominated different periods in history, to adequately understand the development and acceptance of any, we must locate its emergence, use and acceptance within a particular social-historical landscape.

Finally, we must recognize that the competing theoretical perspectives on deviance are not all equal. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, its theoretical, methodological and practical advantages and disadvantages. While I cannot suggest which is best, throughout our course I will make every effort to illustrate the merits and drawbacks of each perspective.

Ultimately, I'm not going to tell you what to think, feel and act in relation to matters of deviance and social control. That's for you to figure out as we go along. But these are ultimately practical matters: think, feel, and act we must. We have to make decisions about these matters, or others will do it for us. Thus, I'm hoping, again, to instill a critical approach to such decision making. As we go through these various perspectives together, this task of evaluating the ideas

will be a shared one. We may agree, or we may not, but ultimately I hope to encourage you to thoughtfully arrive at your conclusions in an informed, logical, responsible and articulate fashion.

In the next class, we will begin with the earliest theoretical approach to deviance: the demonic perspective.