

## Soc/Anth 3290: Deviance

### Lecture 1: What is Deviant Behavior?

- \* There is much disagreement about what - or who - is deviant (both in society and among sociologists)
- \* Some sociologists view deviance as something real & distinguishable:
  - the violation of social rules/norms
  - something requiring indignation or harm
  - something that can occur without rule violation/causing upset
  - not necessarily a negative thing
- \* Others deny that deviance has to be real in order for labeling to occur (e.g. wrongfully accused)
- \* Still others focus on deviance and its relation to power
- \* Ultimately 2 broad opposing perspectives emerge:
  - (1) *Positivism* (hard science): deviance is intrinsically real
  - (2) *Social constructionism* (humanities): deviance is imputed by society to behavior
- \* Each broad philosophy defines deviance, suggests what to study, the methods & theory to make sense of data

#### **(1) The Positivist Perspective:**

- \* 3 Basic assumptions: *Absolutism, Objectivism & Determinism*

\* *Absolutism*: Deviance is absolutely real & distinguishable (e.g. deviant individuals possess certain biological, psychological, behavioral or social traits)

\* *Objectivism*: The assumption that deviance can be studied in the same unbiased fashion as natural scientists study physical phenomena (i.e. “Value free” measurement of observable characteristics subject to replication)

\* *Determinism*: Deviance is caused by forces beyond the individual’s control (or choices are made subject to various prior causes).

## **(2) The Constructionist Perspective:**

\* 3 Basic assumptions: *Relativism, Subjectivism, & Voluntarism*

\* *Relativism*: Deviance has no intrinsic characteristics: “Acts only appear deviant because some people think so.” The existence of deviant behavior depends on a social label

\* *Subjectivism*: Distinction between thinking, feeling humans and inert objects. Questioning of “objective” knowledge. Need to consider the subject’s own perspective through qualitative methods.

\* *Voluntarism*: “Deviant” behavior is voluntary, an expression of volition, will or choice.

## **(3) An Integrated View:**

\* To understand deviance, we need to consider both positivist & constructionist perspectives: apparent contradictions are largely differences in emphasis (e.g. an act is necessary for a label & vice-versa)

\* The two perspectives are not equally applicable to all types of behavior  
\*The positivist perspective to some seems more relevant to serious types of crime (e.g. murder, armed robbery, etc) because:

- (1) They more often enter official statistics, elicit wide consensus, & are easily distinguishable from conventional behavior;
- (2) It is easier for researchers to remain aloof from such offenders;
- (3) It is easier for researchers to study such offenders as objects.

\* The constructionist perspective seems better suited to analyzing less serious types of deviance (i.e. those that don't gravely harm other people) because:

- (1) They elicit a relative lack of social consensus about whether they are really deviant;
- (2) Researchers can more easily empathize with these supposed deviants and consider their subjective experiences;
- (3) Due to empathy, it is natural for researchers to consider subjects active subjects who engage in voluntary actions.

\* Ultimately we may attempt to integrate these two perspectives by defining deviant behavior as "any behavior considered deviant by public consensus, which may range from the maximum to the minimum." This:

- avoids rigid distinctions between deviance and conformity
- posits a "grey area" of being more or less deviant between two ends of a continuum: deviance as a matter of degree
- Distinguishes 2 types of deviance:

- (1) high consensus deviance (often studied by positivist sociologists)
- (2) Lower consensus deviance (often studied by constructionists)

\* This distinction is useful, but far from watertight