Chapter Eight: Deviance and Social Control

Chapter Summary

Sociologists use the term *deviance* to refer to any violation of rules and norms. From a sociological perspective, deviance is relative. Definitions of "what is deviant" vary across societies and from one group to another within the same society. Howard S. Becker described the interpretation of deviance as, "…not the act itself, but the reaction to the act that makes something deviant." This coincides with the symbolic interactionist view. In some cases, an individual need not do anything to be labeled a deviant. He or she may be falsely accused or discredited because of a birth defect, race, or disease. Even crime is relative when interpreting the deviance of the actor.

Deviance is based on adherence to and violation of norms. Human groups need norms to exist. By making behavior predictable, norms make social life possible. Consequently, all human groups develop a system of social control, which involves formal and informal means of enforcing norms. Those who violate these norms face the danger of being labeled "deviant." Violators can expect to experience negative sanctions for the violation of norms. Members of society who conform to societal norms, especially those who go above and beyond what is commonly expected, receive positive sanctions. In some societies, such as the Amish, shaming is a common negative sanction that acts strongly as a means of social control, minimizing deviance.

Biologists, psychologists, and sociologists have different perspectives on why people violate norms. Biological explanations focus on genetic predispositions, psychologists concentrate on abnormalities *within* the individual (commonly known as personality disorders), and sociologists look at social factors *outside* the individual.

Symbolic interactionists interpret deviance through the following social theories: differential association theory (people learn deviance from the groups with whom they associate), control theory (people generally avoid deviance because of an effective system of inner and outer controls), and labeling theory (people are directed toward or away from deviance by the labels others pin on them).

Functionalists contend that deviance is functional for society; it contributes to the social order by clarifying moral boundaries, promoting social unity, and initiating social change. Furthermore, according to "strain theory," people are likely to experience strain, which, in turn, can lead some people to chose deviant and/or criminal behavior rather than conforming to cultural goals and/or engaging in legitimate institutional means. In addition to strain theory, functionalists stress theories addressing illegitimate opportunity structure in society.

Conflict theorists note that power plays a central role in defining and punishing deviance. The group in power imposes its definitions of deviance on other groups, then uses the law and criminal justice system to maintain its power and privilege over those other groups.

Reactions to deviance in the United States include everything from mild sanctions to capital punishment. Since the 1980s, the United States has adopted a "get tough" policy on crime that has imprisoned millions of people. Prisoners are generally much younger than the average American, nearly 94 percent male, and disproportionately African American.

Because crime statistics are produced within a specific social and political context for particular purposes, they must be interpreted with caution. Power plays a central role in determining which behaviors are defined as crimes, as well as in how actively "criminal behaviors" are prosecuted and/or punished. For example, although street crime is given the greatest attention by the media because of the violence associated with it, white-collar crime actually costs the American taxpayers more. Even cases of gross negligence that cause death are funneled into administrative hearings that, at times, result in little more than a fine for the corporation. The definition of crime is subject to change, however, and the ways various acts are treated by society changes with shifts in power and public priority.

Since the early twentieth century, there has been a growing tendency toward the medicalization of deviance, viewing deviance, including crime, as mental illness. Thomas Szasz offers another perspective, claiming that mental illnesses are neither mental nor illness. Rather, they are problem behaviors that are related to people's particular experiences in life. For example, disruptive and unruly behaviors that disrespect authority and deviate from social norms are now a treatable mental illness recognized as Attention-Deficit disorder (ADD).

As deviance is inevitable, the larger issues include: finding ways to protect people from those forms of deviance that harm themselves and/or others, tolerating deviant behaviors that are not harmful, and developing systems of fairer treatment for deviants.

Chapter Outline

I.   What is Deviance?
   A.   Sociologists use the term deviance to refer to a violation of norms.
      1.   According to sociologist Howard S. Becker, it is not the act itself that makes an action deviant, but rather how society reacts to it.
      2.   Because different groups have different norms, what is deviant to some is not deviant to others. This is true even for criminal deviance, the violation of rules that have been written into law.
      3.   Deviants are people who violate rules, whether the infraction is minor (jaywalking) or serious (murder). When sociologists study deviance they are nonjudgmental; they are not judging whether the behavior is good or bad, just that it is viewed negatively by people within the social group. To sociologists, all people are deviants because everyone violates rules from time to time.
      4.   Erving Goffman used "stigma" to refer to attributes that discredit one's claim to a "normal" identity; a stigma (e.g., blindness, mental handicaps, facial birthmarks) defines a person's master status, superceding all other statuses the person occupies.
   B.   Norms make social life possible by making behavior predictable. Without norms, social chaos would exist. The reason deviance is seen as threatening is because it undermines predictability. Thus, social control (the formal and informal means of enforcing norms) is necessary for social life.
   C.   When a norm is violated, sanctions are imposed.
      1.   Sanctions can be either negative or positive.
      2.   Negative sanctions, which reflect disapproval of a particular behavior, range from frowns and gossip for breaking a folkway to imprisonment and capital punishment for breaking a more.
      3.   Positive sanctions, from smiles to formal awards, are used to reward conformity.
      4.   Most sanctions are informal.
   D.   Shaming is another sanction. It is particularly effective when used by members of a primary group or in a small community.
      1.   Shaming can be the centerpiece of public ritual, marking the violator as deviant for the entire world to see.
      2.   Harold Garfinkel used the term *degradation ceremony* to describe formal attempts to label someone as an outsider.
   E.   Comparisons can be made between biological, psychological, and sociological explanations of deviance.
      1.   Psychologists and sociobiologists explain deviance by looking within individuals; sociologists look outside the individual.
      2.   Biological explanations focus on genetic predisposition, including factors such as intelligence; the "XYY" theory (an extra Y chromosome in men leads to crime); or body type (squarish, muscular persons more likely to commit street crimes).
      3.   Psychological explanations focus on personality disorders (e.g., "bad toilet training," "suffocating mothers," and so on). Yet these do not necessarily result in the presence or absence of specific forms of deviance in a person.

4. Sociological explanations search outside the individual: crime is a violation of norms written into law, and each society has its own laws against certain types of behavior, but social influences such as socialization, subcultural group memberships, or social class (people's relative standing in terms of education, occupation, income and wealth) may "recruit" some people to break norms.

II. The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

A. Differential association is Edwin Sutherland's term to indicate that those who associate with groups oriented toward deviant activities learn an "excess of definitions" of deviance and thus are more likely to engage in deviant activities.
   1. The key to differential association is the learning of ideas and attitudes favorable to following the law or breaking it. Some groups teach members to violate norms (e.g., families involved in crime may set their children on a lawbreaking path; some friends and neighborhoods tend to encourage deviant behavior; even subcultures contain particular attitudes about deviance and conformity that are learned by their members).
   2. Symbolic interactionists stress that people are not mere pawns, because individuals help produce their own orientation to life and their choice of association helps shape the self.

B. According to control theory, everyone is propelled towards deviance, but a system of controls work against these motivations to deviate.
   1. Walter Reckless described two complementary systems of controls. Inner controls are our capacity to withstand temptations toward deviance and internalized morality, integrity, fear of punishment, and desire to be good. Outer controls involve groups (e.g. family, friends, the police) that influence us not to deviate.
   2. Travis Hirschi noted that strong bonds to society, based on attachments, commitments, involvements, and beliefs, lead to more effective inner controls.

C. Labeling theory is the view that the labels people are given affect their own and others' perceptions of them, thus channeling their behavior either into deviance or into conformity.
   1. Gresham Sykes and David Matza use the term "techniques of neutralization" to describe the strategies deviants employ to resist society's label. These are: (1) denial of responsibility ("I didn't do it"); (2) denial of injury ("Who really got hurt?"); (3) denial of a victim ("She deserved it"); (4) condemnation of the condemners ("Who are you to talk?"); and (5) appeal to higher loyalty ("I had to help my friends").
   2. Sometimes an individual's deviant acts begin casually, and he or she gradually slides into more serious deviance.
   3. Most people resist being labeled deviant, but some revel in a deviant identity (e.g., motorcycle gangs who are proud of getting in trouble, laughing at death, and so on).
   4. William J. Chambliss's study of the Saints (troubled boys from respectable middle class families) and the Roughnecks (boys from working class families who hang out on the streets) provides an excellent illustration of labeling theory, which is how labels given to people affect how others perceive them and how

they perceive themselves, thus channeling their behavior into deviance or conformity. The study showed how labels open and close doors of opportunity for the individuals involved.

III. The Functionalist Perspective
A. Emile Durkheim stated that deviance, including crime, is functional, for it contributes to social order.
   1. Deviance clarifies moral boundaries (a group's ideas about how people should act and think) and affirms norms.
   2. Deviance promotes social unity (by reacting to deviants, group members develop a "we" feeling and collectively affirm the rightness of their own ways).
   3. Deviance promotes social change (if boundary violations gain enough support, they become new, acceptable behaviors).
B. Robert Merton developed strain theory to analyze what happens when people are socialized to desire cultural goals but denied the institutionalized means to reach them.
   1. Merton used "anomie" (Durkheim's term) to refer to the strain people experience when they are blocked in their attempts to achieve those goals.
   2. The most common reaction to cultural goals and institutionalized means is conformity (using lawful means to seek goals society sets).
   3. He identified four types of deviant responses to anomie: innovation (using illegitimate means to achieve them); ritualism (giving up on achieving cultural goals but clinging to conventional rules of conduct); retreatism (rejecting cultural goals, dropping out); and rebellion (seeking to replace society's goals).
   4. According to strain theory, deviants are not pathogenic individuals but the products of society.
C. Sociologists Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin developed illegitimate opportunity theory to explain why social classes have distinct styles of crime.
   1. They suggest that these differences are due to differential access to institutionalized means.
   2. Illegitimate opportunity structures are opportunities for crimes such as robbery, burglary, drug dealing that are woven into the texture of life. These structures may result when legitimate structures fail.
   3. For the urban poor, there are opportunities to make money through "hustles" such as robbery, burglary, drug dealing, prostitution, pimping, gambling, and other crimes. The "hustler" is a role model because he or she is one of the few who comes close to the cultural goals of success.
   4. White-collar crime (crimes that people of respectable and high social status commit in the course of their occupations) results from an illegitimate opportunity structure among higher classes. Such crimes exist in greater numbers than commonly perceived, and can be very costly, possibly totaling several hundred billion dollars a year. They can involve physical harm and sometimes death; for instance, unsafe working conditions kill about 100,000 Americans each year, or about five times the number of people killed by street crime.

D. There have been some recent changes in the nature of crime. A major change is the growing ranks of female offenders. As women have become more involved in the professions and the corporate world, they too have been enticed by illegitimate opportunities.

IV. The Conflict Perspective
A. The state's machinery of social control represents the interests of the wealthy and powerful; this group determines the laws whose enforcement is essential for maintaining its power.
B. The criminal justice system directs its energies against violations by the working class; while it tends to overlook the harm done by the owners of corporations, flagrant violations are prosecuted. The publicity given to this level of white-collar crime helps stabilize the system by providing evidence of fairness.
C. The law is an instrument of oppression, a tool designed to maintain the powerful in privileged positions and keep the powerless from rebelling and overthrowing the social order. When members of the working class get out of line, they are arrested, tried and imprisoned in the criminal justice system.

V. Reactions to Deviance
A. Imprisonment, which follows the degradation ceremony (public trial/pronouncement that the person is unfit to live among law-abiding people), is an increasingly popular reaction to crime but fails to teach inmates to stay away from crime.
   1. The United States has the dubious distinction of having not only more prisoners than any other nation, but also a larger percentage of its population in prison.
   2. African Americans are disproportionately represented among the prison population.
   3. For about the past twenty years, the United States has followed a "get tough" policy. The "three strikes and you're out" laws have become common. Unfortunately, these laws have had some unintended consequences.
   4. The recidivism rate (the proportion of persons who are rearrested) in the United States is high. For those sentenced to prison for crimes of violence, within just three years of their release, 62 percent are rearrested, and 52 percent are back in prison.
B. The death penalty is the most extreme and controversial measure the state can take. Many argue that there are biases in the use of the death penalty. These reflect regional, gender, social class, as well as racial and ethnic biases.
C. The definition of behavior as deviant varies across societies, groups, and time periods. The emergence of hate crime legislation in the United States is an example of this.
D. Caution is needed in interpreting official crime statistics because the reactions of authorities are influenced by social class of the offender.
   1. Crime statistics are a human creation, produced within a specific social and political context for some particular purpose.
   2. Police discretion—deciding whether to arrest someone or to ignore a situation—is a routine part of police work. Crime statistics reflect this and many other biases.

E. Medicalization of deviance is the view of deviance as a symptom of some underlying illness that needs to be treated by physicians.
   1. Thomas Szasz argues that mental illness is simply problem behaviors: some forms of "mental" illnesses have organic causes (e.g., depression caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain); while others are responses to troubles with various coping devices.
   2. Szasz's analysis suggests that social experiences, and not some illness of the mind, underlie bizarre behaviors.
   3. Being mentally ill can sometimes lead to other problems like homelessness; but being homeless can lead to unusual and unacceptable ways of thinking that are defined by the wider society as mental illness.
F. With deviance inevitable, one measure of society is how it treats its deviants.
   1. The larger issues are how to protect people from deviant behaviors that are harmful to their welfare, to tolerate those that are not, and to develop systems of fairer treatment for deviants.

KEY TERMS

After studying the chapter, review the definition for each of the following terms.

capital punishment: the death penalty (218)
control theory: the idea that two control systems—inner and outer controls—work against our tendencies to deviate (203)
corporate crime: crimes committed by executives in order to benefit their corporation (210)
crime: the violation of norms written into law (198)
criminal justice system: the system of police, courts, and prisons set up to deal with people who are accused of having committed a crime (213)
cultural goals: the objectives held out as legitimate or desirable for the members of a society to achieve (209)
degradation ceremony: a term coined by Harold Garfinkel to refer to a ritual whose goal is to reshape someone's self by stripping away that individual's self-identity and stamping a new identity in its place (205)
deviance: the violation of norms (or rules or expectations) (198)
differential association: Edwin Sutherland's term to indicate that people who associate with some groups learn an "excess of definitions" of deviance, increasing the likelihood that they will become deviant (201)
genetic predisposition: inborn tendencies (for example, a tendency to commit deviant acts) (200)
hate crime: a crime that is punished more severely because it is motivated by hatred (dislike, hostility, animosity) of someone's race–ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or national origin (222)
illegitimate opportunity structure: opportunities for crimes that are woven into the texture of life (210)
institutionalized means: approved ways of reaching cultural goals (209)
labeling theory: the view that the labels people are given affect their own and others' perceptions of them, thus channeling their behavior into either deviance or conformity (205)

medicalization of deviance: to make deviance a medical matter; a symptom of some underlying illness that needs to be treated by physicians (222)

negative sanction: an expression of disapproval for breaking a norm, ranging from a mild, informal reaction such as a frown to a formal reaction such as a prison sentence or an execution (200)

personality disorders: the view that a personality disturbance of some sort causes an individual to violate social norms (200)

police discretion: the practice of the police, in the normal course of their duties, to either arrest or ticket someone for an offense or to overlook the matter (222)

positive sanction: a reward or positive reaction for following norms, ranging from a smile to a material award (200)

recidivism rate: the proportion of released convicts who are rearrested (218)

serial murder: the killing of several victims in three or more separate events (222)

social control: a group's formal and informal means of enforcing its norms (199)

social order: a group's usual and customary social arrangements, on which its members depend and on which they base their lives (199)

stigma: "blemishes" that discredit a person's claim to a "normal" identity (198)

strain theory: Robert Merton's term for the strain engendered when a society socializes large numbers of people to desire a cultural goal (such as success) but withholds from some the approved means of reaching that goal; one adaptation to the strain is crime, the choice of an innovative means (one outside the approved system) to attain the cultural goal (209)

street crime: crimes such as mugging, rape, and burglary (200)

techniques of neutralization: ways of thinking or rationalizing that help people deflect (or neutralize) society's norms (205)

white-collar crime: Edwin Sutherland's term for crimes committed by people of respectable and high social status in the course of their occupations; for example, bribery of public officials, securities violations, embezzlement, false advertising, and price fixing (210)

KEY PEOPLE
Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.

Howard S. Becker: Becker observed that an act is not deviant in and of itself, but only when there is a reaction to it. (198)

William Chambliss: Chambliss demonstrated the power of the label in his study of two youth gangs—the Saints and the Roughnecks. (201, 206-207)

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin: These sociologists identified the illegitimate opportunity structures that are woven into the texture of life in urban slums and provide an alternative set of opportunities for slum residents when legitimate ones are blocked. (209-210)

Emile Durkheim: Durkheim noted that deviance is functional for society. (207, 225)

Robert Edgerton: This anthropologist's studies document how different human groups react to similar behaviors, demonstrating that what is deviant in one context is not in another. (199)

Harold Garfinkel: Garfinkel used the term degradation ceremonies to describe formal attempts to mark an individual with the status of an outsider. (204)

Erving Goffman: Goffman wrote about the role of stigma in the definition of who and what is deviant. (198)

Travis Hirschi: Hirschi studied the strength of the bonds an individual has to society in order to understand the effectiveness of inner controls. (203)

Ruth Horowitz: This sociologist conducted participant observation in a Chicano neighborhood in Chicago. She found that attitudes about honor, which were common among residents, helped to propel young men into deviance. (202)

Robert Merton: Merton developed strain theory to explain patterns of deviance within a society. (209)

Donald Partington: This lawyer examined executions for rape and attempted rape in Virginia between 1908 and 1963 and found that only Black men were executed for these crimes during those years. (219)

Walter Reckless: Reckless developed control theory, suggesting that our behavior is controlled by two different systems, one external (outer controls like the police, family and friends) and the other internal (inner controls like our conscience, religious principles, and ideas of right and wrong). (203)

Edwin Sutherland: Sutherland not only developed differential association theory, but was the first to study and give a name to crimes that occur among the middle class in the course of their work—white collar crime. (201-202, 210)

Gresham Sykes and David Matza: These sociologists studied the different strategies delinquent boys use to deflect society's norms—techniques of neutralization. (205-206)

Thomas Szasz: Szasz argued that mental illness represents the medicalization of deviance. (223-224)

Mark Watson: Watson studied motorcycle gangs and found that these people actively embraced the deviant label. (206)