

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Deviance and Social Control

Unit M1: Basic Concepts

Introduction

In this section of the course we will be exploring the nature of conformity to - and deviation from - social rules in both our own and other societies. In order to do this, we will initially need to understand a number of **basic concepts** that we can develop. In more detail at a later point. Before we start to do this, however, it might be useful to briefly map-out the various general areas covered by the syllabus.

1. The Social Distribution of Crime and Deviance:

In this respect, we will be looking at a major aspect of deviant behaviour in our society (crime) and the way such behaviour is associated with various social categories such as:

Class
Age

Gender
Ethnicity

Region

2. Theories of Crime and Deviance:

In simple terms, we need to look at the various explanations of crime and deviance that have been produced by sociologists over the past 100 or so years.

3. Power, Deviance and Social Control:

The concept of **power** is a very significant one in relation to the way social rules are created and applied and, for this reason, we need to examine this concept as a means of understanding the nature of social conformity and deviance.

4. Social Reactions to Crime and Deviance:

A significant aspect of (deviant) behaviour is the **reaction** of others to that behaviour and, in this respect, we will be particularly concerned with an examination of the role of the **mass media** in the process of **Deviancy Amplification**.

5. The Role of the Police, Courts and Penal System:

The concern here will be to outline the role of "official" agencies of social control in our society.

6. Youth Subcultures and Styles:

Over the past 20 - 30 years a number of "deviant sub-cultures" (Mods, Hippies, Punks and so forth) have surfaced in both our own and other cultures and the concern here will be to both examine the nature and purpose of such subcultural groupings and their relationship to deviant behaviour in general.

7. Sociological Explanations of Suicide:

Suicide is an interesting example of a form of deviant behaviour that has been studied in a great deal of depth by various sociologists over the years. In this part of the course we will look not only at some sociological explanations of this behaviour but also at the way in which we can use this area of social behaviour to highlight methodological differences of approach to the study of human behaviour.

Theories of Deviance: A Note or two...

In terms of the course as a whole, this section on Deviance and Social Control is useful in relation to the idea of examining **sociological perspectives** (or High-Level Theories if you prefer) in more detail.

In this respect, it should be possible to look at various theoretical explanations of deviance in terms of the way various writers (working in related, but theoretically-distinctive, perspectives) have approached the study of deviant behaviour from the stand-point of a relatively clear conception about the general nature of the social world (and, by extension, the nature of such ideas as social order, social control, power and so forth).

In this sense, the study of deviance not only allows us to look in detail at a particular aspect of human behaviour; it also allows us to:

1. Firm-up a number of basic concepts introduced at the start of the course (social control, social norm, rules, values and so forth).
2. Elaborate a number of fairly distinctive sociological perspectives (which are sometimes referred-to as "ideological frameworks" or "paradigms").
3. Locate the study of one particular aspect of social life (crime and deviance) within a general consideration of the way in which various sociologists have theorised the nature of the social world generally.

For this reason, the discussion of "theories of deviance" has been quite rigidly structured in terms of "sociological perspectives", whereby I have attempted to show that different sociologists working within different theoretical perspectives have formulated quite different explanations of deviance. This should, I trust, become a little clearer when we discuss theories of deviance.

Having noted this, the next thing we need to do is to start to look at some basic concepts in relation to this area of the course...

The Concept of Deviance

"Deviance" is a wide-ranging term used by sociologists to refer to behaviour that varies, in some way, from a social norm. In this respect, it is evident that the concept of deviance refers to some form of "rule-breaking" behaviour.

In relation to deviance, therefore, the concept relates to all forms of rule-breaking (whether this involves such things as murder, theft or arson - the breaking of formal social rules - or such things as wearing inappropriate clothing for a given social situation, failing to produce homework at school or being cheeky to a parent, teacher and so forth - more-or-less the breaking of relatively informal social rules).

As should be apparent, criminal behaviour is a form of deviance (one that is defined as the breaking of legal rules) and, whilst we will be concentrating upon this area of deviance, it needs to be remembered that it is only one aspect - albeit a very significant one - in relation to the concept of deviant behaviour in any society.

As a general rule, therefore, we can say that there is a distinction between crime and deviance in terms of:

"All crime is, by definition, deviant behaviour, but not all forms of deviance are criminal".

Generally, the study of "crime" tends to be seen as the preserve of the criminologist, whereas sociologists tend to focus their attention and interest upon the wider social implications of all forms of rule-breaking (and, of course, rule creating) behaviour in any given society. However, as we shall see, this does include the analysis of crime and criminal behaviour considered as forms of deviance.

In passing, it might be useful to note that we will necessarily have to look at various other concepts surrounding the issue of deviance (such as those of ideology, power, social control and so forth) if we are to understand the concept sociologically. A discussion of such concepts will form part of the general theme of this series of notes, but for the moment it is probably sufficient just to draw your attention to the need to understand the concept of deviance in terms of the ways in which different societies develop different conceptual frameworks regarding deviance ("ideology") and the way in which different social groups may be able to create and impose conceptions of deviant behaviour upon others ("power" and "social control").

Types of Deviance

In starting to look more closely at the concept of deviance, it tends to be assumed that "deviant behaviour" is somehow always behaviour that is generally frowned upon by people in a society (the very name seems to imply that such behaviour is, at best, "not very nice" and, at worst, downright criminal). That this is not necessarily the case can be shown by looking briefly at the way in which we can categorise various basic forms of rule-breaking behaviour in terms of three basic ideas:

1. Admired behaviour:

An example of deviance that might be considered as "good" or "admirable" behaviour (whilst also breaking social norms) might be something like heroism - the saving of the life of another person whilst putting your own life in great danger, for example.

2. Odd behaviour:

Many forms of behaviour - whilst not being criminal - are frequently considered to be somehow "odd" or "different" to normal behaviour. These forms of deviance range from such things as outlandish modes of dress, through mildly eccentric forms of behaviour (the person who shares their house with 50 cats, for example), to outright madness.

3. Bad behaviour:

Deviant behaviour in this category tends to be restricted to law-breaking or criminal behaviour - behaviour that in some way is seen as being something more than simply outlandish or eccentric. Depending upon the time and place, forms of behaviour in this category might include crimes of violence, crimes against property and so forth.

As I've noted, the above represent very broad categories of deviant behaviour, and it's not uncommon for behaviour to cut-across these various categories (behaviour that is considered both "odd" and "bad", for example).

Identify different examples of deviant behaviour for each of the above categories:

Identify examples of behaviour that may cut-across the categories noted above.

When you've done these exercises, two major methodological points should, I hope, become apparent:

1. Firstly, that categorisations of this sort are not particularly useful, sociologically, for the understanding of deviant and conforming behaviour. The problem, in this respect, is that once we have defined our relatively rigid categories it becomes a process of trying to squeeze tremendous varieties of human behaviour into our predefined little boxes - and human behaviour (as I hope you are by now aware) has an infuriating tendency not to always fit neatly into our nicely defined categories...

2. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for our present purpose, it's likely you will have found yourself thinking that, for any given example of deviance, you will have considered it from two different points of view. That is, behaviour that you have defined as deviant may not be considered deviant from someone else's point of view. This should be readily apparent in relation to the first two categories, since definitions of deviance here tend to rely upon relatively informal (or perhaps "subjective") conceptions of behaviour.

In the third category you will probably have found it easier to define examples of deviance because there exists a generally-agreed yardstick against which to measure deviant and non-deviant behaviour (namely, a set of formal, legal, rules governing the definition of criminal deviance and non-deviance). This is not, of course, to say that formalised definitions are somehow "more objective" than more informal definitions.

Rather, it is simply easier to define behaviour as deviant if you have some form of commonly-agreed standard against which to compare forms of behaviour...

For example, when the Soviet Union still existed, it's Communist rulers actively discouraged the dissemination of religious literature (the Christian Bible, for example). At various times, Christian Fundamentalist groups (especially in America) attempted to smuggle Bibles into the Soviet Union, at great personal risk (since, if they were caught, they would have faced imprisonment). In relation to Soviet society, such activity was clearly defined as deviant behaviour. From the point of view of Western Christian society, however, such behaviour may be viewed as an admirable form of deviance (since it is probable that we would view the lack of religious freedom as itself being a deviant act).

What this example (and, no-doubt many others) serves to suggest is the methodological point that, effectively, "**Deviance is in the eye of the beholder**". In other words, that which is deviant to me may not be considered deviant by you.

This idea, simple as it may seem, is an important insight in to the way we are able to theorise the nature of the concept of deviance and, by extension, how we are able to study the "causes" of deviant behaviour...

Deviance: Absolute or Relative?

As I've suggested above, the question of whether or not deviance (and by extension, crime) is an absolute or a relative concept is significant in this context.

If, for example, we can define deviance in an **absolute** way it would mean that in all societies and at all times certain forms of behaviour will be considered deviant. If valid, this idea is significant in two ways:

Firstly, it would mean that all societies would, for some reason or other, develop rules that proscribed certain forms of behaviour (or “acts”, to use the jargon). If this were the case, by understanding the reasons for such proscriptions we would be able to understand the essential nature of deviance and social control.

Secondly, it would mean that the study of deviance should concentrate on why people break certain rules. That is, it would necessarily focus on the deviant (or criminal) and, by so doing, would focus on a variety of factors, both psychological (deviants as “damaged personalities, for example) or social (family and educational background, class, gender and age, etc.).

In **methodological** terms, therefore, we would be able to accept the proscription of certain forms of behaviour as “given” (that is, there would be no question that such behaviour was wrong) and focus our efforts on explaining the qualities possessed or not possessed by different people as “causes” of deviance.

However, if we can define deviance in a **relative** way it would mean that different societies at different times develop different ways of seeing the same form of behaviour. Thus, in effect, someone could commit an act in one society that would be seen as deviant while they could commit the same act in a different society and be seen as non-deviant.

This idea is also significant in two main ways:

Firstly, because different societies define the same behaviour in different ways it would mean that, as sociologists, the focus of our studies should be on an understanding of the way rules are created in any society (by whom and for what reasons).

Secondly, it would mean that it is pointless to look for the “causes” of deviance in the social and psychological qualities of the people “breaking the rules”, since if the rules themselves are relative (that is, changeable from one moment to the next) there can be no constant “causes” of deviance to be found “within the individual”.

Note:

Having said this, of course, once we understand the nature of the rule-creation process in any society it would be useful to look at the social / psychological qualities of people who do – and do not – break these rules (which we could similarly consider, as sociologists, in terms of family and educational background, peer group influence and so forth).

In **methodological** terms, therefore, we would **not** be able to accept the proscription of certain forms of behaviour as “given” (that is, there would always be questions surrounding the idea that such behaviour was wrong) and we would need, therefore, to focus our efforts on explaining how and why societies create rules that, logically, lead to the proscription of certain forms of behaviour.

Cross-Cultural and Historical Comparisons

A simple way of illustrating the idea that deviance is actually a relative rather than an absolute concept is to consider how the same form of behaviour can be considered deviant or non-deviant in different societies (cross-cultural comparison) and in the same society at different times (historical comparison).

Draw a table headed by these two ideas and consider (either individually or with a group of class friends) how the following forms of behaviour are considered deviant / non-deviant in different societies and deviant / non-deviant in the same (or different) societies at different times:

Homosexuality
Suicide
Drinking alcohol
Being married to more than one person at the same time.
Women wearing trousers.
Killing someone

The above should get you started and you should be able to supply further examples from your own discussions...

Note: This type of relatively simple cross-cultural and historical comparison is a very useful technique for students at A-level. In many situations the application of these ideas to various forms of behaviour will generate a great deal of critical insight into social processes right across the syllabus (think about things like family life, education, work, politics, religion and so forth).

One thing this exercise should have told you is that, in basic terms, deviance is a **relative** concept. In **Becker's** words:

“Societies create deviants by making the rules that lead to their infraction”.

(or, in other words, if societies didn't create rules there would no such thing as deviance – not an astounding revelation but one which is, nevertheless, valid).

The Social Construction of Deviance

One reason for arguing that deviance is a relative concept is to sensitise you to the idea that concepts of deviant / non-deviant behaviour are social constructions. That is, each society or culture creates rules of behaviour by which its members are governed and, of necessity, controlled.

When we understand this idea it leads us to consider a number of further ideas about the nature of deviant – and conforming – behaviour.

Firstly, it leads us to consider the way ideas about what constitutes deviant behaviour are socially constructed (that is, the concept of **ideology** becomes significant in terms of our understanding and explaining deviance).

Thus, ideology is an important aspect of the sociology of deviance, since it seems evident that one of the crucial variables involved in defining behaviour as deviant / non-deviant is the basic values people in any society (or social group) hold.

However, while this is clearly important, ideology alone is not a sufficient form of explanation since it is clear that people can, in effect, think what they like about their own and other people's behaviour (you are free, for example, to believe that it's not deviant to wear your underpants on your head and wander around singing “I'm a little pixie”). What matters is your ability (or inability) to impose your ideas about normality on others.

Secondly, therefore, we must build the concept of **power** into any explanation of deviant / non-deviant behaviour. In this respect, we could argue that certain acts are considered deviant **not** because they are “inherently wrong” (as I've suggested, no form of human behaviour, however extreme or disgusting we might believe it to be, is “always and everywhere” wrong) but because powerful groups in any society say they are deviant and have the ability to impose their definition of normality on others.

Thirdly, if this is the case, it becomes clear that deviance is not so much a question of what you do but more a question of whether or not others object to what you do (and what they are able to do to you in order to try to stop you doing it).

An easy test of this idea is to think of the worst swearword you know.

Say it aloud in the classroom, in the presence of your fellow students and teacher.

Say it aloud in front of your family.

Say it aloud in front of your friends.

Say it aloud when you're alone.

Assess the reactions you got from these different people...

Howard **Becker** expressed the above idea neatly when he argued:

“Deviance is not a quality of what people do [the act]. Rather, it is a quality of how people react to what you do”.

You might like to express the above quotation in your own words (what does it mean?).

Societal and Situational Deviance

The above represents an opportunity to briefly consider what **Plummer** has argued is the difference between **societal** (that is, society-wide) and **situational** (that is, localised) deviance, since this distinction helps to reinforce the idea that behaviour considered deviant in one situation may be considered non-deviant in another.

By “societal deviance” Plummer means the various categories of behaviour that are either illegal or which are “commonly sensed” by people to be deviant (such as swearing at your teacher).

“Situational deviance”, on the other hand, refers to the way different sub-cultural (or situational) groups develop norms of behaviour that may be at odds with those of “society as a whole”. In such situations, behaviour that might be considered societally deviant (theft, homosexuality and so forth) may be perfectly acceptable.

To illustrate this distinction more clearly, consider the following example:

In our society, killing someone is considered deviant. To not go around killing people is, therefore, non-deviant.

However, for a soldier, fighting in a war, the reverse is true. To not kill the enemy is considered deviant.

Thus, in the latter situation the basic values and norms of “society” are inverted by the demands of the “situation”.

Culpable and Non-Culpable Deviance

A further distinction we can between different types of deviant behaviour is one that recognises the idea that there is a qualitative difference between people who commit deviant acts consciously (and with a full understanding of the fact they are behaving

deviantly) and those whose deviant behaviour may, for example, be accidental or no fault of their own.

Culpable deviance refers to acts for which the individual perpetrator can be held personally accountable. They are, in short, acts of deviance committed by people in the knowledge that such acts are deviant. Examples here might include crimes such as murder, theft or violence, as well as a wide variety of non-criminal deviance.

Non-culpable deviance, on the other hand, refers to acts for which the individual perpetrator is not held personally accountable. Examples of this type of non-culpable deviant behaviour might include deviant acts committed by:

1. People classified as “mentally ill”. In our society we recognise that the “mentally-ill” (however this is defined) cannot be held culpable for deviant actions since they are not considered to understand the values and norms of “normal” society.

This, in effect, means that the mentally-ill are not punished, as such, for their deviance, although they may be required to undergo treatment for their “illness”.

2. Children. In our society, for example, the age of criminal responsibility varies for different forms of crime. It is, however, a general rule that children under the age of 10 cannot be held responsible for any criminal acts they commit.

In terms of deviant behaviour, on the other hand, there are acts for which even very young children can be held responsible (for example, hitting another child).

3. Another category of non-culpable deviance might be people who fall into various categories of “behaviour” that are considered deviant because they do not conform to the norm in society. In this respect, the disabled are frequently treated as “deviant” even though, through no fault of their own, they are unable to participate fully in the social life and activities enjoyed by the able-bodied. Similarly, those with long-term illnesses or who have been “disfigured” in some way are often also included within this type of non-culpable categorisation.

As an activity, brainstorm further examples of non-culpable deviance.

For each example, clearly explain why the deviant should not be held personally culpable for their deviance.

Operationalizing The Concept of Deviance

Although the above raises all kinds of other questions (such as who has the power to create and enforce concepts of deviance, how such ideological concepts arise and so forth), the main point to note in this introduction is the idea that deviance, as a concept, is a peculiarly difficult one with which to get to grips - it is a concept, in effect, that is very easy to define but a lot more difficult to operationalize (that is, to measure in any meaningful way).

One reason for wanting to operationalise the concept of deviance is that we need to think clearly about how people actually arrive at the criteria used to classify various forms of deviance:

As an initial exercise you might like to consider the following:

Why (and under what circumstances) is murder generally seen to be a very serious form of deviance while speeding in a car is generally seen as less serious?

Why is bunking-off lessons at school seen to be more deviant than arriving late for a class?

What we have to do next, therefore, is explore the basis of such beliefs. For example, why do we, in contemporary Britain, define murder as a serious form of deviance while the "murder of a commoner" was seen as a less serious form of deviance in the past (in our society at least)?

In order to explore the way in which we assess forms of deviance in our society, it would be useful to use some kind of "**evaluative framework**" as an aid to understanding. As luck would have it, **Hagan** ("The Disreputable Pleasures", 1984) has developed just such a framework...

Hagan suggests that there are **three main ways** to measure the **seriousness** of deviant behaviour (when we consider conceptions of deviance in terms of "society as a whole", rather than from the viewpoint of any particular social group).

1. The degree of agreement about the wrongfulness of the act:

In this respect, there might exist a range of possible levels of agreement which go from almost total disagreement to high levels of agreement.

2. The societal evaluation of the harm inflicted by the act:

In this respect, what is significant is a general social assessment of both personal and, most importantly, wider social, harm caused by the act of deviance.

3. The degree of severity of the social response to the act:

In all cases of possible deviance, the "social reaction" to behaviour is going to be significant and, as you might expect, the range of responses goes from fairly minor, highly-localised, responses (telling someone to go away, sending them to Coventry and so forth), through such "personal" responses as physical violence to more society-wide responses such as imprisonment and even Capital Punishment.

It's important to note that, in the general evaluation of levels of seriousness, the three categories noted by Hagan are interconnected.

That is, in order to arrive at an **overall assessment** of the level of **seriousness** of a form of deviance we have to consider a **combination of all three categories**.

As an exercise, you might like to try using Hagan's framework to try and assess both the level of seriousness afforded to the following "acts of deviance" in our society and, by extension, the likely overall social response to such behaviour in terms of the likelihood of them becoming seen as a criminal form of deviance.

- 1. Bunking-off lessons at school.**
- 2. Homosexuality.**
- 3. Armed robbery using a replica gun.**
- 4. Armed robbery using a real gun.**
- 5. Heroin abuse**
- 6. Drunk driving**

According to Hagan's framework, therefore, the **most serious acts of deviance** in any society are those that:

1. Involve broad levels of agreement about the wrongfulness of the act.
2. Involve high levels of social (as opposed to personal) harm.
3. Involve a very strong social reaction to the act across society as a whole.

Drawing on the above, Hagan makes a distinction between both "crime" and "deviance" and the varieties of likely social response to each in the following way:

1. **Crime:**

a. **Consensus** (for example, murder, theft, etc.).

Crimes about whose seriousness there is general agreement. For Hagan, crimes in this category are seen as being most serious precisely because there is some form of general agreement about their seriousness.

b. **Conflict** (for example, public demonstrations, drug offences, illegal abortion etc.).

Crimes over which "public opinion" is divided. For Hagan, crimes in this category are seen to be treated less seriously, precisely because arguments and conflicts surround them. For example, "drug abuse" may be defined as a "medical problem" and therefore one where the drug user is in need of help rather than punishment (these kinds of crimes are sometimes referred-to as "crimes without victims", since no person other than the drug abuser is directly "injured" by the behaviour - other forms of such crime might be things like tax evasion, illegal parking, etc.).

2. **Deviance** (non-criminal deviance):

a. **Social deviations** (for example, insanity, betrayal of trust, juvenile pranks etc.). These types of behaviour will be viewed as deviant (because they will, in some way, break social norms) but they are not viewed as criminal because, for example, they are:

Highly localised (a betrayal of trust may only involve a couple of people).

Something the individual has no control over and therefore no responsibility for (insanity).

Not particularly serious in relation to the social harm they do.

b. **Social diversions** (for example, styles of dress, mannerisms etc.).

Behaviour in this category tends to be used more as an indication of likely forms of potential deviance (although, in many cases they may be mildly deviant forms of behaviour) than anything else.

For example, dressing as a "hippy" may indicate to people that here is someone who is likely to be involved in some form of drug abuse (which, if you're interested, represents a form of stereotyping).

In general, we can note that behaviour that falls into the criminal category is behaviour that is regulated by some form of formal social process of attempted regulation (police, legal system and so forth), whilst behaviour that falls into the deviance category is likely to be regulated by informal control agencies (parents, peer groups and so forth).

Evaluation

Evaluating Hagan's framework is not particularly difficult, since there are a number of areas of concern about which it is possible to raise serious questions. For example,

1. The framework is based upon notions of "public concern", yet it is not at all clear how this concern is either measured or defined.
2. The concept of consensus is a fairly dubious one, since it is evident that there are powerful groups in any society (for example, people who own and control the mass media) who may be able to manipulate, in some way, an apparent consensus about various issues. Again, how we measure "degrees of consensus" is not clear and the problem of how any consensus might be manufactured by powerful groups is not really addressed.
3. In many social situations, the concept of power is a crucial one. For example, within the classroom there may be a general consensus that "doing homework" is a deviant act and that anyone who produces homework is a deviant. The teacher, however, may have other ideas and, since the teacher has a higher level of power than his / her students, he / she may take steps to exercise their power over students...
4. Finally, it is evident that not all potentially serious forms of deviance may be defined as crimes (again, an oblique reference to the significance of the power to define behaviour as deviant). In particular, the very powerful in our society may be able to:
 - a. Prevent deviance becoming criminalised (for example, "polluting the environment", whilst a potentially serious form of deviance in relation to the effects it may have on people's lives, remains a relatively minor form of criminal behaviour - punishable by a fine, rather than imprisonment).
 - b. Hide their crimes, such that the "general public" has no idea that a "crime" has actually taken-place.

In this series of notes we have looked at some basic definitions of crime and deviance, in addition to ways in which we might begin to understand the process whereby behaviour becomes seen as both deviant and / or criminal.

The next stage in the process of "understanding deviance" is to look at various sociological theories of deviance (how and why people commit deviant acts). Before we do this - and as a means of helping to understand the extent of criminal forms of deviance - it would be helpful to look at the social distribution of crime in Britain...

