

# Examining theories on deviance and deviant behavior criminology essay



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The conditions under which deviant behavior exists have presented an enduring question for researchers. Within the literature the majority of definitions of deviance share one commonality: that social norms and values subjectively label behaviors as deviant. Similar to the number of theories of deviance there exist a number of motivations why individuals choose to engage in deviant behavior. Existing theories-general strain, anomie, labeling, control, and learning-examine these factors and attempt to clarify the hows and whys of deviant behavior. The most common factors which facilitate individual deviance include personal strain, social disorganization, a lack of self-control, and the perception that the benefits for engaging in deviance outweighing the potential costs. Because of these variations there is currently no universally-accepted theory of deviance.

## Introduction

An urgent question in contemporary social sciences is “ how and why certain behaviors, attributes, or classes of individuals come to be defined as deviant.”[1]Since social groups make the rules, deviant behavior results from individuals who fail to adhere to said rules. When behaviors are defined as deviant it is assumed that they will either promote or inhibit individual motivation to engage in such acts and will evoke certain social responses which serve to influence subsequent behavior by those within said society. [2]A number of theorists attempt to identify a commonality to the different types of deviant behavior. The underlying theme is that this type of behavior offends society’s normative order and deviance becomes a theoretical construct of this consensus. There exist a number of theories which seek to define how individuals and their behavior are identified as deviant.

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## Definitions of and Motivations for Deviant Behavior

Despite a wide variety of definitions of deviance there is consensus that deviance refers to “ behaviors or attributes manifested by specified kinds of people in specified circumstances that are judged to violate the normative expectations of a specified group.”[3]This consensus perspective serves to promote collective agreement as to what core values, norms, and goals should be. Behavior that falls outside of the specified parameters are deemed deviant. The degree of deviance is directly correlated to the perceived seriousness of the punitive response it elicits.

Many questions abound as to individual motivations to engage in deviant behavior. Fundamentally, if one anticipates that satisfaction will ensue from engaging in the behavior then he will do so. Hirschi (1969) asserts that the motivation for deviance is always present and that research should examine the circumstances which permit individuals to act on these motivations.[4]In another view, Merton (1938) argues that societal strain increases motivation for deviance in order to achieve certain unattainable culturally-sanctioned goals.[5]Where the majority of individuals will embrace conformity as a response to strain others resort to deviance. Similarly, Tittle’s (1995) control balance theory assumes that individuals have a strong need to exercise control over themselves and to escape having control exerted over them by others while Katz (1988) argues that the motivation to deviance occurs to “ protect one’s self esteem, encourage a desired reputation, establish autonomy, [or] demonstrate competence”, for example.[6]

These theories all share the presumption that deviance is motivated by the need to adapt to psychological distress which results from the failure to achieve desired goals through conventional means. Accordingly, when “pushes”, or psychological impulses which compel an individual to engage in deviant behavior, and “pulls”, or the “attraction of deviant opportunities”, interact then motivation for deviance increases.[7] Deviance results from individuals’ motive to engage in deviant behavior being stronger than the motive not to amidst the existence of the opportunity to do so.

### Theoretical Foundations

There are two primary types of theories to explain deviance: structural and processual. Structural theories are labeled sociological theories while processual ones are termed social psychological theories due to the differences in goals and scope.[8] Structural theories emphasize the relationship of deviant behavior to particular structural conditions within society and attempt to explain why deviance is higher in certain areas, such as those with lower socioeconomic status.[9] On the other hand, processual theories seek to describe the processes by which people engage in deviant behavior by attempting to explain the conditions which lead to the commission of deviant acts.[10] With respect to scope, structural theories address the epidemiology, or “distribution in time and space” of deviance and processual theories focus upon the etiology, or specific causes, of deviance.[11]

### Specific Theories of Deviance

#### General Strain Theory (GST)

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GST addresses the interrelatedness of strain and its emotional response, individual coping mechanisms, and deviance.[12]As a theory it focuses not upon strain itself but upon individual responses to strain and seeks to identify those characteristics which enable non-deviant responses amid strain. Sharp, Brewster & Love (2005) argue that certain types of strain create certain actions which influence delinquent behaviors. Anger, for example is an emotional response which has a high likelihood of encouraging deviant behavior. Therefore, where there is a strain-particularly one perceived as unfair-low social control creates pressure which, in turn, causes deviant behavior.[13]Research indicates that gender is a strong predictor of strain-induced deviance with males more overt in their responses than females who tend to internalize strain.

GST has been used considerably in the study of juvenile deviance. Repeated exposure to stressful life experiences has been found to both escalate and accelerate juvenile delinquency and depending upon when during one's life-course trajectory the strain occurs different implications ensue. The literature suggests that involvement in delinquency begins to increase during early adolescence, peaking around age 16 and 17, and followed by a decline in such behavior.[14]Agnew (1997, 2006) claims that this life-course trajectory highlights that adolescence is a period of high transitions, that adolescents perceive their environment as negative more so than adults, and that there is an increased propensity for juveniles to react to adversity through deviant behavior.[15]The lack of useful coping mechanisms in juveniles makes it difficult to react to strain more effectively.

#### Anomie Theory

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According to anomie theory-much like GST-deviance results from social disorganization in that elements in society promote deviant behavior by making such behavior a feasible adjustment to society. Where the earliest form of this theory hypothesized that anomie results from a failure to achieve positively-valued goals Agnew (2001) expanded upon this theory by including that anomie can also result when positive stimuli are removed and when negative stimuli are applied.[16]One criticism of anomie theory is that it assumes universality in what should be defined as deviant and how most individuals should behave; however, in reality, deviance is a relative concept so this universality is erroneous.[17]

### Labeling Theory

Labeling theory presents an interactionist perspective to the study of deviant behavior by stressing the importance of the processes through which society labels a particular act as deviant and the subsequent negative social sanctions which influence the individual to engage in further deviance.

[18]Becker (1973) claims that deviance is “ a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender.”[19]Therefore, while the act or the person may not be inherently deviant, existing social controls create deviance by defining acts that the majority believes to be so and,

consequently, labeling individuals who engage in such acts as deviant. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy by “ amplifying the very phenomenon that it is intended to suppress.”[20]Of primary importance is that subsequent

events serve to reinforce the deviance because an individual internalizes the label attached to him by society’s stigmatizing and creates secondary, or

tertiary, deviance. The labeling itself serves to ensure that every society has  
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a percentage of deviants which is critical to maintain the majority consensus.

[21]

### Control Theory

Control theory is similar to anomie and social disorganization theories to the degree that deviance results from the lack of social controls on individual restraint to engage in deviant behavior.[22]Durkheim (1933) asked why people conform to social norms instead of why they engage in deviant behavior. Under this theory it is assumed that everyone would engage in deviant behavior if given the chance, that a small amount of social controls will increase deviance, and that there exists a central value system which defines deviance in society.[23]There are four components of an individual's societal bond which serve to prevent deviance: attachment to specific groups through affection, respect, and socialization; commitment to accepting conforming behavior; involvement in non-delinquent behavior; and a belief in the dominant value system of any particular group.[24]When social bonds are reestablished or strengthened then the deviant behavior ceases.

Accordingly, individuals who engage in deviant behavior do so due to low self-control. Under this theory low self-control is comprised of six personality traits: “ anger, impulsivity, preference for simple tasks, risk-seeking, being more physical than mental, and being self-centered.”[25]Gottfredson & Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory asserts that inadequate child-rearing results in lowered self-control which facilitates a predisposition to engage in

deviant behavior.[26]They also claim that individuals who engage in one type of deviant act will commit other deviant acts.

### Learning or Socialization Theory

These theories suggest that deviance is a learned behavior similar to how non-deviant individuals learn conforming behavior. By attempting to distinguish variations in behaviors theorists assume that differences in rates of deviance among various groups can be determined. One of the most widely-cited learning theories is Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory which postulates that deviant behavior results from "normative conflicts" in neighborhood structures, peer group relationships, and the organization of family in society.[27]The fundamental tenets of Sutherland's theory are that criminal behavior is learned, that learning is a result of personal interaction, that primary learning occurs in intimate group settings, that people learn that socially-normative attitudes are either favorable or not, that deviant behavior results when conditions favorable to deviance exceed those unfavorable to violating the law, and that deviant behavior cannot be explained by general needs and values.[28]Accordingly, an individual learns various motives which are favorable to engaging in deviant behaviors as well as rationalizations and techniques for achieving them. While the behavior may be defined as deviant to the rest of society, within a particular individual's in-group the behavior may adhere to the group's norms. Akers (1985, 1989) expanded upon Sutherland's work by adding that deviance results "when a person learns definitions that portray some conduct as a desirable, even though deviant, action."[29]If an individual is rewarded for a deviant act by his in-group then he becomes socialized to

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continue the behavior under the expectation of similar positive experiences for subsequent acts.

### Other Theories

Deterrence theory asks whether the “ expectation of certain, severe, and swift punishment” for engaging in deviant behavior would deter such behavior.[30]Rational choice theory addresses an individual’s anticipated cost-benefit ratio of acting on deviant impulses. A greater expected or perceived benefit increases the likelihood that the individual will commit the act. Finally, conflict theory asserts that the development of formal social controls and laws are legitimized by the more powerful societal groups.[31]

### Conclusion

The wide variation of social psychological theories of deviant behavior seeks to answer why individuals become motivated to engage in deviant behavior, how behaviors and attitudes are defined as deviant, what factors facilitate deviant behavior, why some deviant behavior is escalated, and what consequences exist.[32]Despite the number and variety of theories of deviance the commonality is that this concept is a socially-defined construct utilized to maintain a society’s normative values. The disparities in definitions of deviance among societies make it difficult to establish an all-encompassing theory to explain the existence of deviant behavior in contemporary society.