

The functionalist position on crime and deviance



The functionalist approach to analysing deviance and the causes of crime looks at society as a whole. It explains crime and deviance by saying that the source of deviance lies in the nature of society itself rather than in psychology or biology. It should be noted that functionalists see deviance as an inevitable and necessary part of society. Some also consider deviance to have positive aspects for society. Functionalists argue that in order to achieve this solidarity, society has two key mechanisms: Socialisation which instils the shared culture into its members which helps to ensure that individuals internalise the same norms and values.

Second key mechanism they propose is social control which includes rewards for conformity and punishments for deviance. These help to ensure that individuals behave in the way society expects. Durkheim (1897) argues that crime and deviance are useful and necessary in society. It helps to reinforce the consensus of values, norms and behavior of the majority non-deviant population, through the idea of outrage at crime which strengthens social solidarity. It also acts as a social dynamic which allows for social changes to occur and for social boundaries to be tested, ensuring that a society, its norms and values and its laws stay in line with the social consensus.

Durkheim also sees Crime and Deviance as a provider of employment for law enforcement. Durkheim's idea behind deviance as a force for social change is supported by the gradual legalization of behavior once seen as deviant (abortion, homosexuality) over time as social attitudes and consensus changed.

However, Durkheim's view of crime has some flaws. Other theorists, including Erikson (1966) argue that powerful groups within any society are able to

impose their views upon the majority by a process of ideological manipulation. Marxist theorists including Mannheim and Chambliss criticize the idea that the concepts of crime and deviance are defined by consensus, and instead argue that the capitalist ruling class decides what constitutes crime and deviance. Other functionalist theories, including Merton's Strain Theory and Parsons' ideas of "Bad Socialization" contradict Durkheim's claim of crime and deviance occurring to create employment as they see other factors being the principal cause of crime. Merton argued that capitalist societies suffer from anomie - a strain/conflict between the goals set by society and the legitimate (law abiding) means of achieving them. Merton claimed that this strain was a product of an unequal social class structure that blocked many people's legitimate opportunities to reach the goals set by society. Merton claimed individuals will respond to a situation of anomie in one of 5 different ways: Conformity (the individual continues to try and get to the goals, however they realise the unlikelihood of success), Innovation (the individual accepts the goals that society has left for them but uses crime to get there), Ritualism (the means of getting to the goals are correct but the sight of the actual goal is wrong), Retreatism (the individual rejects both goals and the means of getting the goals) and rebellion (the goals and means are rejected and different ones substituted). Merton has been criticised for assuming that there is a value consensus in society and that people only deviate as a result of structural strain; his theory has come across as being too deterministic because it fails to explain why some people who experience the effects of anomie don't become criminals or deviants.

Furthermore, some critics believe that Merton's theory over-predicts and exaggerates working-class crime, and under-predicts and underestimates middle class or white collar crime. Parsons views crime and deviance as a product of faulty or "bad" socialization. He views the family as the key building block of society.

Crime therefore occurs when families fail to instill the correct norms and values into their offspring. Others have developed Durkheim's idea that deviance can have positive functions. For example, Kingsley Davis (1937; 1961) argues that prostitution acts as a safety valve for the release of men's sexual frustrations without threatening the monogamous nuclear family. Albert Cohen identifies another function of deviance: a warning that an institution is not functioning properly. For example high levels of truancy may tell us that there are problems with the education system and that appropriate changes need to be made to it by policy makers.

Another criticism of the functionalist view is that crime doesn't always promote solidarity. It may have an opposite effect, leading to people becoming more isolated for example forcing women to stay indoors for fear of attack. Overall, this is a valid approach to crime and deviance as it explains the various functions that crime and deviance has in society with each key mechanism explained by theorists who have looked at what key mechanisms shapes the behavior of certain individuals and how individuals respond to situations of anomie.