Studying deviance from a socio-cultural stance

Law, Crime

Robert K. Merton describes deviance as a unaccepted means of attaining socially importantgoals. His term innovation requires the person to obtain such goals (wealth, power, etc...) in socially unacceptable means, therefore placing the person in the category of a deviant. The strengths of looking at deviance in criminology are the boundless resources of sociologists and other social scientists such as Merton, Emile Durkheim, and George Herbert Mead.

Their works are timeless and to the point as they do not need to reflect the current state of societies and instead only the underlying conflict theories from that school of thought that they represent. They are complimentary to current studies, but herein lies the weakness and that is the ever-changing actors and states in societies that need to be studied. The most important factor is the socio-cultural root of socially important goals that deviancy holds many times for the criminal.

Those born intopovertyand those whose ethnicity or other minority status puts them into societal disadvantage may innovate ways to achieve simple survival when economies fail them. These socio-cultural roots need to be further explored. The past decade has shown more minority arrests on the part of women and black men, for example. A research study done by the National Institute of Justice suggests that rates of violent crimes by women is on the increase and the term " marginalized" is used to possibly explain that the most vulnerable women (those who are victims of crimes perpetuated by others) are most likely to commit crimes themselves.

But the weakness is the absence of explanation as to why now this is a growing problem as women have always held minority status, but have not shown this level of deviancy. Black men are another group that is disproportionately incarcerated in relation to whites. The question may be of what is the rate of arrest vs. conviction? Is it that these minority populations are being arrested at higher rates and inevitably convicted due to the financial strain of defense and, in fact deviancy has not changed, arresting attitudes have changed?

Research is of the utmost importance in revealing these answers. At any rate these are socio-cultural issues, as is the issue of the images and glamorization of crime in some groups. Pierce and Singleton (1995) suggest that in young African American youth achieving is related to a sense of competence and that that competence represents a sense of control over their possibly out-of-control environments.

Innovation then is transformed into deviancy when control and competence is the desired outcome. Looking at conflict theory and economics is the key to understanding this, but it does make it difficult for the Criminologist, as he or she must look to the current state of affairs in a society and look back to theories; sometimes in other disciplines to comprehend deviancy. Studies must be done onmotivationand perception, which are highly psychological.

Organizational Behavior offers insight into, such deviant topics as gangs and recruitment, etc...PoliticalSciencemay be utilized to look at other comparable societies to one's own and the crime rate in relation to regime/regime change and other political factors. Theology (and the Protestant Ethic, for example) may offer insight into deviancy of past and present, as well. But,

most importantly a Criminologist must understand the socio-cultural roots, stereotypes, and cultural bias that exists in his/her own community of interest to understand deviancy as innovation and the roots of all this.

References

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