

The sociology of deviance



How important and relevant are Merton's Strain theory and Becker's labelling theory in our understanding of deviance?

In this essay I will analyse the importance and relevance of a structural functionalist view of deviance seen through the lens of strain theory and a symbolic interactionist perspective through the use of labelling theory. Strain Theory attempts to explain why crime is resolute amongst the lower classes who are subjected to the least opportunities for economic achievement (O' Connor 2007). It focuses on the positions that individuals occupy in a social system, not on the characteristics of the individual. Labeling theory explains why sustained delinquent behaviour stems from destructive social interactions and encounters (Siegel & Welsh 2008). These theories work in harmony as the former theory explains why deviance begins and the latter gives an explanation as to why deviance continues through the lifespan. I will be describing and evaluating these theories to further answer the question of: just how important are these two theories for the understanding deviance?

“ The sociology of deviance is the systematic study of social norm violation that is subject to social sanction” according to (Henry 2009 p. 1). Deviant behaviour is behaviour that does not follow common perceptions, when people are deviant they do not conform to expectations. It is difficult to give an exact definition of deviance as many major theorists have cast a vast variety of perspectives on what it really is. Some sociologists believe that deviance is the violation of any social rule, whereas other sociologists argue that deviance does not have to be a real behaviour for it to be labelled deviant (Thio, Calhoun & Conyers 2008).

Downes & Rock (2003) state that deviance is everywhere and not only that but it leaves traces everywhere. Theories of deviance are rarely catapulted into political settings to be accepted or rejected in their entirety; rather they 'trickle' in from many sources. The influence of ideas is always changing due to the instability of political circumstances (Downs & Rock 2003).

The increase in deviance may be due to the fact that people are confused about the correct values and morals to hold. As a result of this ever evolving world there are new variations of deviant behaviour occurring on a daily basis, ranging from minor violations of the law such as not paying a television licence to major deviance like abuse scandals in regard to the Catholic Church. These acts are considered to be deviant as they are acts which the rest of society deems as unacceptable (Tierney 2006). Traditional values such as religious views have been shattered to pieces because of ongoing scandals in the Catholic Church. Individual pursuits drive people; religion has no impact on the expected standards of people in today's materialist driven society, which in turn leads to an increase in deviant behaviours.

The Functionalist perspective stems from the work of Durkheim who believed that people's social roles or functions hold society together (Flynn 2009). In contrast to this is the Symbolic interaction approach where the emphasis is on the way people construct the meaning of others acts (Becker & McCall 1990). Durkheim believed that crime is not only functional but it is necessary, it only become dysfunctional if the rates are either too high or too low (Covington 1999). The functionalist analysis of deviance begins with society as a whole; it looks for the source of deviance in the nature of society

rather than in the psychological nature of the individual. Durkheim believes society is held together by shared values, and if these values are not constantly reaffirmed through the generations it may signify the collapse of society.

One may put forward the argument that shared values are not a fundamental part of society today. It proves difficult to reaffirm values through generations when the family when parents are working long hours. Parental influence over children has declined; due to this children seek values from available sources such as the television or internet, resulting in the promotion of materialistic values which are in turn the ' norms' today.

If the community collapsed, and the collective conscience failed the result was a state of anomie (Covington 1999). In essence anomie represents the problems in society caused by social deregulation. Merton developed an anomie theory based on Durkheim's earlier work which referred to a deinstitutionalization of norms that happens when there is a disjunction between the importance of cultural goals and institutional means (Featherstone & Deflem 2003).

Merton's strain theory argues that structures in society may encourage deviance and crime, it is a structural functionalist explanation. Functionalist theories offers the basis for policies that are wide-ranging in their scope (Downes & Rock 2003), however Gouldner (1970) believes that Functionalism thinks of systems as mutually interacting variables rather than in terms of cause and effect, thus one may infer that it is impossible to implement policy to stop a particular effect if the cause is not highlighted.

Theories of deviance are extremely important as Downes & Rock (2003) believe that all theories of deviance have implications for policy making. That said however the ease of implementation of policies may prove difficult. For example doing something about anomie would be far “ more difficult than tackling vandalism by technical means” (Downes & Rock p. 317 2003) However, Merton’s anomie theory is of great relevance to the realm of policy as it infers a definite cause and effect statement relating to the disjunction between goals and means (Downes & Rock 2003).

The main principle of Social Strain Theory is that “ some social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in society to engage in non-conforming rather than conforming conduct” (Thio, Calhoun & Conyers 2008 p. 33). This is not to say that certain social structures leave the individual with no other choice but to turn to crime, rather inadequate regulation leaves the individual with a different perspective on means to financial gain. I agree that this system is a great source of inequality and subsequent deviance in our society today that the less powerful groups are labelled so negatively and punished severely. Every crime should be treated in the same manner, regardless of whether they are from an underprivileged area or a high flying business person.

An impact of cycle of deficient regulation may also be seen in Becker’s Labelling theory. This theory was greatly influenced by the symbolic interaction approach as it is people who determine and give meaning to labels. The justice system operates on behalf of powerful groups in society; hence one has to ask the question what behaviours are criminal?

The two strands of this theory are a concern to address how a particular behaviour comes to be labelled as deviant and secondly what is the impact of this label. (Becker p. 9 1963) states that “ The deviant is one whom that label has been successfully applied: deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label”. In relation to deviance Labelling theory places the importance on the reaction to behaviour not the behaviour itself (Macionis & Plummer 2007). It was this belief that leads Becker to place labels on types of behaviour, but who are the people labelled as deviant in society. To put it simply, labelling theory is concerned with what happens to criminals after they have been labelled, also suggesting that actual crime rates may be heightened by criminal sanctions.

Unlike the Functionalist perspective, Symbolic Interaction is concerned with the process that underline social life and consequently the mechanisms by which meanings are given to those processes. It centres on the creativity capacity of humans and their ability to share interactions with others (Walklate 2007). In relation to deviance it is concerned with how certain behaviours come to be understood as deviant.

Becker argued that behaviours of less powerful groups for example the poor, or disadvantaged are more likely to be criminalized than those who are privileged such as the white and wealthy. This happens because there is an assumption that crime is a social label – along with the creation of law which are made by people in positions of power and enforced on people without power (Hopkins Burke 2002). The judicial system criminalizes less dominant and less powerful member of society, thus Becker argues that some rules “

may be cynically designed to keep the less powerful in their place” (Hopkins Burke p. 137 2002).

Becker (1963) disagreed with the notion that those who break the law will be labelled as a criminal. He brought our attention to the fact that in many cases the innocent are accused, along with this only some of those who break the law are punished and brought through the system (Hopkins Burke 2002). Becker used a concept developed by Merton called the ‘ self fulfilling prophecy’ which is what labelling theory is most widely known for. When a situation is given a false definition it evokes a new behaviour in the person which as a result makes the false assumption comes through (Hopkins Burke p. 142 2002). Becker felt that most criminals were in the first place falsely defined as a criminal, not only are their actions defined by society as deviant, the label is then extended to them as a person (Hopkins Burke 2002).

Merton’s concept of strain refers to pressure the lower economic classes feel when they try to achieve society’s goals of monetary success (Flynn 2009). Merton felt that in society, people were focused on achieving high financial success which although exceptionally productive on one hand, on the other was a direct source of stress and strain for the individual (Cohen 1966). In effect there is a distortion between culturally induced aspirations for economic success and structurally distributed possibilities of achievement. This is in accordance with labeling theory view where the people who commit deviant acts are probably under strain from society to achieve monetary success. An example of this would be in relation to higher education, people without the means or cultural knowledge to aspire to respected professions

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are more likely to engage in deviant behaviour than those with access to achieving their goals (Flynn 2009).

Within labelling theory there are two important concepts, those of primary deviance and secondary deviance. Merton thinks that the sense of strain that men feel is an accumulation of frustration, despair and injustice (Cohen 1966). Structural and Individual strain are the two main types of strain in society that promote deviance and crime. The former refers to the cycle of deficient regulation in society that has a negative impact on how an individual evaluates their needs, means and opportunities (Flynn 2009). The latter concept is defined by O'Connor (2007) as frictions and pains experienced by the individual as they look for ways to meet their needs.

Primary deviance in labeling theory involves acts committed by someone without a criminal identity such as an underage drinker. This act provokes little reaction from others around us, therefore it does not have any impact on the persons self concept (Macionis & Plummer 2007). Secondary deviance develops through peoples' actions towards the person committing the deviant act they may be pushed away and stigmatized making the crime worse, it is caused by the criminal label (Hopkins Burke 2002). It evolves from primary deviance being labelled, which is more likely to happen if you are from a less powerful group (Macionis & Plummer 2007), thus mirrors Merton's argument about distortion between economic success and possibility of achievement (Flynn 2009).

Merton noted that there were five possible responses or adaptations to strain that happen when people are not in a position to legally “ attain internalised

social goals” (Hopkins Burke p. 107 2002). This is a perfect example of how labels are the cause of further deviant behaviour. Durkheim and Merton are one in believing that strain results in deviant behaviour, however Durkheim felt the main causes of strain were changes in society. Adapting through conformity is a self explanatory explanation whereby people both the cultural goals of society and the means of achieving them (Burke 2002), this ensures the continuity and stability of society (Thio, Calhoun & Conyers 2008), people do not break laws when achieving their means. Retreatism is considered the most uncommon adaptation by Merton, they reject social goals and the means to attain them (Hopkins Burke 2002), their behaviour is not normal and are considered “ true aliens” (Thio, Calhoun & Conyers p. 37 2008).

Ritualism is similar to conforming behaviour; they adhere to rules for their own sake with an emphasis on means of achievement rather than outcome goals (Hopkins Burke 2002). Innovation is a response to the pressure placed on the individual for success. The innovator embarks on novel routes to achieve success due to barriers for them to achieve success by socially approved means. They have the potential to be seen as deviant (Hopkins Burke 2002), as they engage in illegal means to achieve success. The final response is rebellion, whereby people not only reject but also want to change the existing social system and its goals (Hopkins Burke 2002). The very word ‘ rebellion’ connotes negative meaning thus showing the existence of labeling and stigma as used by Merton. People are stereotyped as being incapable of following normal behaviour and the general population treats them differently, resulting in discrimination in employment, and in many

other areas of social life The internalization of labels by offenders may very well produce a career in criminality because of the negative reactions they receive (Hopkins Burke 2002). However, in contrast as Merton argued & Cohen agreed that the root cause of the original emergence of delinquent behaviour was the economic pursuit of ' money success' (Downes & Rock 2003).

A lot of labels come about through the stigmatization of a particular behaviour. ' Stigma' is powerful negative label that has the potential to radically change a persons' self concept (Macionis & Plummer 2007), thus it is an influential force in the field of labelling. Slattery (2003) notes that a stigma can either be ascribed or achieved, you can be born with one or earn one. Similar to this is strain theories focus on negative relations between people, focusing on how the individual is not treated as they would like to be treated (Agnew 2002).

Labelling theory has several limitations; firstly because labelling is very relative it does not take into account some behaviour like murder which is condemned virtually everywhere. Consequently it is most useful to apply to less serious behaviours like youth vandalism. Secondly, labelling may be seen in two ways- it could encourage more criminal behaviour or it could curb it because of people do not like to have a stigma attached to them. (Macionis & Plummer 2007). Finally another limitation of labelling theory is that it does not tell us what are the root causes of primary deviance so how do these people become deviant in the first place? They cannot be labelled deviant if they have not engaged in that type of behaviour. Both labeling and strain theory emphasize the role society has to play in crime. Deviance is

shaped in its transactions with events and people around it. Labelling theorists in particular have occupied themselves with the workings of the social reaction to deviance (Downes & Rock 2003). Dissimilar to this is Durkheim's perspective of deviance as performing functions that are essential to society through, encouraging social change, promoting social unity by responding to deviance, clarifying moral boundaries and affirming cultural norms and values (Macionis & Plummer 2007).

Sumner (1994) argued that deviance is not applicable to sociology today. He believes that the sociology of deviance 'died' in 1975. Similarly Miller, Wright and Dannels (2001) claim to find empirical support for it and signify the "death of deviance" in respect to the world today. However, on the other hand Goode (2002) claims that at a certain stage in its history, the sociology of deviance developed a large number of ideas, concepts, and theories that influenced related fields. These ideas included: stigma which influenced disability and transgender studies, anomie in social theory, labelling in ethnic studies and the sociology of the underdog in queer theory. Regardless of the fact that sociology of deviance did not create these concepts, the field did help project them onto the intellectual map.

Goode concludes that "The social construction of deviance is once again controversial, relevant, central to our lives, and fundamental to our understanding of today's world" (Goode 2002). I must agree with this statement as not a day goes by without some type of crime or deviant behaviour brought to our attention.

Cohen (1966) believes that rules in everyday life provide a blueprint for every human gesture; consequently every rule then creates potentiality for deviance. However, as mentioned previously- are we really all aware of societal norms and values? I believe that society today has failed to provide a 'blueprint' or clear rules for people to live by, hence leading to the unprecedented rates of crime and social deviance. Strain theory and labelling theory do not pay much attention to psychological factors involved in deviant behaviour, this is a limitation to both I feel. I would question the generalizability of strain theory as it emphasises the focus of materialism for society today. However, much crime is committed by people who simply want to get by in life, to survive. They feel they have no other option but to commit crime to put food on the table. Crime may not necessarily be about reaching the top in society, it may just be about getting by. Labeling theory is a lot more individual in its focus; it is more concerned with people's reactions when placed in a designated role by society.

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