

Deviant behavior in the light of conflict theory

[Science](#), [Physics](#)



Conflict theory is based on the idea that the main causes of crime and deviance are the economic and social differences among members of a society, prompting the have-nots to act out, if not to rob the haves. According to this theory, criminal law and the entire criminal justice system tend to be favorable toward the wealthy and the powerful elites, while the governmental policies are aimed at controlling only the needy and poor members of society.

Moreover, the theory assumes that the entire criminal justice structure is aimed at compelling all members of society to accept the standards of good behavior and morality that are created by the rich and the powerful. There is a focus on separation between the haves and the have-nots, so as to protect the haves from physical attacks by the have-nots, and also to protect them from being robbed. In the process, however, the rights of the poor and needy people could be ignored. The middle class, on the other hand, enjoys the legal rights of the elites by siding with them.

These people believe that they might be able to rise in rank by backing up the status quo (" Conflict," 2005). The simplistic conflict theory has been explained further thus: ...[S]treet crimes, even minor monetary ones are routinely punished quite severely, while large scale financial and business crimes are treated much more leniently. Theft of a television might receive a longer sentence than stealing millions through illegal business practices. William Chambliss, in a classic essay " The Saints and the Roughnecks," compared the outcomes for two groups of adolescent misbehavers. The first, a lower class group of

boys, was hounded by the local police and labeled by teachers as delinquents and future criminals, while the upper-middle class boys were equally deviant, but their actions were Deviant Behavior in the Light of Conflict Theory 2 written off as youthful indiscretions and learning experiences (“ Conflict”). Although there is truth to the conflict theory, it is only partial. Of a certainty, there are countless people counted among the rich and the powerful who have engaged in deviant behaviors. What is more, they have not found the law to be lax toward them. As an example, both of President George W.

Bush’s daughters have been in trouble with the law (Montgomery, 2001). The daughter of the President’s brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, has also been arrested for deviant behavior (“ Jeb,” 2002). The conflict theory does not apply in their cases. Nor does it apply in the case of Enron and Worldcom – rich businesses that should have been untouched by the laws of the land if the conflict theory were entirely true. Although there may be instances where the conflict theory correctly explains deviant behavior, it is obvious that this theory cannot be applied to all places in the world at all times.

There are many nations in the world where corruption is the law of the land, and unfairness is the norm. In the developing regions of the world, in particular, the have-nots may rob the haves or simply act out because they are disturbed by the unfairness that is mete out to them. However, it is not correct to understand deviant behavior only in the light of the conflict theory. If we are to believe that it is conflict theory alone that explains deviant behavior in human beings, we would not have examples of the Bush

daughters and Enron to consider. There are many theories to explain deviant behavior.

The cultural transmission or the differential associations theory, for example, may compete with the conflict theory in explaining deviance. According to the cultural transmission theory, all kinds of behaviors, including deviant behavior, are learned. Furthermore, the young and therefore more impressionable Deviant Behavior in the Light of Conflict Theory 3 learners of deviance may have developed close relationships with their deviant teachers. With increasing contacts with deviant teachers, the young learners of deviance engage in increasingly deviant behaviors (“ Sociological Theories”).

The cultural transmission theory does not rule out the possibility that the children of the rich and the powerful may engage in deviant behaviors because they may have had deviant teachers. The conflict theory rules out this possibility entirely with its assumption that the societal norms are established by the rich and the powerful, so therefore they cannot possibly go against their own rules. As explained previously, this assumption of the conflict theory is not true, seeing that the rich and the powerful are also known to go against the societal norms, which they should have established for themselves and by themselves.

The conflict theory is also not true one hundred percent in places where laws are created on the basis of unfairness and corruption. Even in such places, it is known that there are always people that try to work hard and honestly, despite the unfairness that is dealt out to them. In short, all people in ‘ deviant’ places may not engage in deviant behaviors, even if the rich and

<https://assignbuster.com/deviant-behavior-in-the-light-of-conflict-theory/>

the powerful have corrupted the government with bribes, etc. Yet another theory that conflicts with the conflict theory is the social control theory that explains why people may not engage in deviant behaviors.

According to this theory, individuals may follow the societal norms because of their connecting social bonds (“ Sociological Theories”). In other words, they may refuse to engage in deviant behaviors for the following reasons: (1) attachment -- a measure of the connectedness between individuals; Deviant Behavior in the Light of Conflict Theory 4 (2) commitment -- a measure of the stake a person has in the community; (3) involvement -- a measure of the time/energy a person is spending on activities that are helpful to the community;

(4) belief -- a measure of the person's support for the morals and beliefs of the community (“ Sociological Theories”). If all poor and needy folks in an unfair society were to follow the societal norms because of their social contacts, the conflict theory would once again be rendered meaningless. It may be that some underprivileged folks with weak social bonds would engage in deviant behaviors in a corrupt society. In that case, however, the conflict theory would only apply to that small group of people. In actuality, such a group may be existent.

Theoretically, however, it is possible for that group never to exist. Thus, the conflict theory may actually apply only in the cases of disgruntled, underprivileged folks who truly believe in righting the wrongs with wrongs. It would not apply in a corrupt society where underprivileged folks would like to work hard and honestly. And, neither would it apply in societies where the rich and the powerful are not exempt from the law. Therefore, the conflict

theory is a naive theory, which, like most theories, does not explain reality in its entirety.

References

Conflict. (2005, Nov. 22). Florida State University. Retrieved Sep. 20, 2007, from

<http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/conflict.htm>.

Jeb Bush's Daughter Charged with Prescription Fraud. (2002, Jan. 29). CNN. Retrieved Sep. 20,

2007, from <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/01/29/jeb.bush.daughter.drugs/>.

Montgomery, A. (2001, Jun. 4). Jenna Bush may face jail on booze charge. Chicago Sun-Times.

Sociological Theories to Explain Deviance. Retrieved Sep. 20, 2007, from <http://www.valdosta.edu/~klowney/devtheories.htm>.